

August 2010

## **Book Review: Kim S. Theriault, Rethinking Arshile Gorky**

Sara Cohan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

---

### **Recommended Citation**

Cohan, Sara (2010) "Book Review: Kim S. Theriault, Rethinking Arshile Gorky," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2: Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol5/iss2/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

---

## Book Review

**Kim S. Theriault, *Rethinking Arshile Gorky*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2009. Pp. 288, cloth. \$90.00 US.**

Reviewed by Sara Cohan, Education Director, The Genocide Education Project

---

I was twenty-eight years old when I visited the Whitney Museum for the first time. I immediately dashed to see the beloved painting *The Artist and His Mother* by Arshile Gorky. As I stood in awe in front of the painting, my eyes wandered to the museum placard. It read “Arshile Gorky, American Artist.” My heart stopped. It felt like as if the wave of genocide denial so often experienced by those of Armenian descent had crashed against that wall of the Whitney—erasing not only Gorky’s heritage but my own. A scholar in the field would have known what to expect. At the time, I was young and unprepared for this experience. How could Gorky be just an “American” in the eyes of the Whitney, without the slightest hint of his origins or experiences?

*The Artist and His Mother* cannot be understood without understanding that Gorky was a survivor of genocide—a displaced person who had lost his mother and his homeland. Negating the context of the artist’s life left a sterile painting representing only an aspect of Modernist art. Since this time, the Whitney has created a slightly more appropriate placard for the work, but attaching Gorky’s identity to his work on museum grounds is still a battle mirrored in the political arena of genocide denial. In April 2010, this was clearly at issue when the Tate Modern Museum in London hosted the current exhibit of Gorky’s work and indicated in the brochure that labeling Gorky as a survivor of genocide is a contested point.

In her recent book *Rethinking Arshile Gorky*, Kim Severt Theriault, associate professor of art history, theory, and criticism at Dominican University, eloquently reveals the impact of the Armenian Genocide on Gorky’s paintings and life. She provides a new lens through which to understand the artist and how the trauma he experienced led him to become a visionary artist. Theriault’s analysis makes it impossible for serious scholars to ignore the fact that Gorky’s work reflects the experiences of a man traumatized by genocide.

Theriault’s work accomplishes two tasks. First, she provides a brilliant analysis of Gorky as a cutting-edge artist of the 1930s and 1940s, applying art theory and criticism to the full range of his works. Second, she places Gorky in the context of his experiences as a survivor of genocide, aptly articulating the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder on his art and life.

Theriault uncovers the aspects of Gorky’s life that have remained in the shadows in the world of art criticism. Gorky’s art—not just *The Artist and His Mother*—is explained from the perspective of an artist traumatized by genocide and trying to exist in exile. In the field of genocide studies, artworks created by various survivors have been a part of the academic canon; the art of Armenian Genocide survivors has remained on the margins for lack of serious intellectual evaluation. *Rethinking Gorky* fills this void.

Gorky's art chronicles not the events of the Armenian Genocide but the psychological devastation that infects the survivors of genocide. Theriault illustrates Gorky's struggle to reinvent himself constantly by moving to America, changing his name, marrying, and studying Western Art. Despite his efforts at concealment, his identity and experiences seep through his paintings. On canvas, the nightmare he endured is revealed. As part of his attempt to adapt to his new home, he tried to paint in a European tradition, but his early studies in Van inspired his style as well. His studies and experiences laid the foundation for his pioneering work as an abstract expressionist. His work was applauded in the art world, and he took the stage as a great American painter; the fact that his Armenian heritage greatly influenced his work was effectively masked. It would take decades for art historians to begin to truly evaluate Gorky's work and acknowledge all the aspects of his life and training that influenced his art.

*Rethinking Gorky* is truly a breakthrough publication. It firmly places Gorky as both an artist of note and a sage who tells us, in vivid images, about the brutal impact of genocide on the survivor. Theriault's book offers scholars of art history and genocide studies a foundation for understanding both Gorky and his art in the right context—as a survivor of the Armenian Genocide. Theriault has unveiled his abstract images and rebuilt his memory, constructing a new view of one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century.