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Taking Grandma's Tale and Creating Something

By Rebecca Hartmann

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Artist Lusine Dzhanyan looks to her own family for inspiration in the exhibit “Ires,” at MMOMA until Sept. 28.

In the central room at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, several large pieces of silk fabric hang, each a different bright color; each with two photos painted in black and white on them.

"Each of them shows the story of one person, when they are young and when they are old," said artist Lusine Dzhanyan.

The exhibition, "Ires," looks at the question of identity and how you determine your place in the world. Dzhanyan explores this idea through looking at how we preserve our identity and our memory through photos of families and traditional customs.

In "Ires No. 6," the painting shows a photo of a bridal party on a wedding day, the other side shows the married couple in old age. The paintings are detailed, and the monotone colors

contrast beautifully with the bright fabric. "The fabrics are very old and come from family members. They were folded for many years, and I think the creases represent the lines running through someone's life," Dzhanyan said.

The exhibition is inspired by the life of Dzhanyan's grandmother, who fled Azerbaijan to Armenia and used blankets to hide food, photos and reminders of her family's life in Azerbaijan. The piece "Blankets" in particular reflects this history, consisting of several blankets folded on top of one another. Some of the blankets used in this piece are the same ones that were used by her grandmother to preserve her memories.

The final piece, "Yorhan," is a large painting of many different women sitting on the original blankets that were used as the base for all the other blankets. Dzhanyan said that she only used women for this painting because the whole exhibition is based on women: it was her grandmother who smuggled the photos, it would have been women who made the blankets, and it was women who raised the family.

"Ires" is a beautiful collection that reflects the passion with which some people fight to keep their customs, culture and memories alive.

This exhibit is far less political than Dzhanyan's previous work and likely to have fewer critics.

Dzhanyan has long been a vocal supporter of punk protest group Pussy Riot. In January she created posters of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, the then-imprisoned group members, that were displayed at the screening of the documentary film "Pussy Versus Putin." Dzhanyan also protested outside the Siberian prison camp where Tolokonnikova was jailed in September 2013.

Dzhanyan appeared with Alyokhina at an exhibit in Norway in May where her Mordovlag artwork, inspired as a protest against the treatment of Pussy Riot, was displayed.

Dzhanyan along with fellow artist Alexei Knedlyakovsky also wrote a protest letter against "Manifesta 10," an international contemporary art biennale held in St. Petersburg this year. Dzhanyan wrote that to hold the event and participate in cultural events in Russia was to "legitimize and consent to Russian aggression against the democratic nation of Ukraine."

"Ires" runs until Sept. 28 at MMOMA, 10 Gogolevsky Bulvar. Metro Kropotkinskaya. 495-231-3660.

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