

## Exile Painters

Cultural Nomads touch base in Virginia

By Chris Gilbert

I remember once in Cambridge, Mass., reading an account of the Harvard class of 1642. Eight of its nine members were upstanding models of good behavior and had gone on to careers in the ministry or trade. Yet one had met an especially bad end. According to the class secretary, the misguided youth had traveled to Virginia and “fallen into the hands of Episcopalians.”

For much of my youth, this anecdote stood for how widely religious world views could vary at different times in history (the idea of Episcopalians being dangerous!), but increasingly the story has led me to reflect on the mobility of life in Virginia — how Virginians as a group were even less rooted than the settlers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. As Episcopalians, they had no lasting reason for exile and no real ties to the region. They were often in Virginia for business reasons and likely to leave when these reasons were exhausted.

The theme of mobility also holds true for Virginia arts. Arshile Gorky and Siemon Allen, the painter and sculptor I'll discuss here, are just two of the many artists who have worked part time in Virginia after coming from elsewhere, and then, in most cases, leaving. The list includes B. Henry Latrobe, arguably America's first professional architect, who made a strong start in the Richmond area and then moved to Philadelphia, memorializing the event with a grim allegorical drawing showing *Imagination* taking flight for the north. Then there is Salvador Dali, perhaps the most famous surrealist, who lived for a month in Crosby and proposed a sculptural addition to Monument Avenue that was ultimately rejected.

While this kind of coming and going has occurred throughout history, it has a special relevance for modern art. Global diasporas — often the result of war or attempted genocides in the last hundred years — have left their mark on the modern aesthetic, tainting its cool internationalism with numerous hidden, more local, and ethnic currents. The two artists I'll focus on here are both products of this 20th-century circulation of peoples. The first, Arshile Gorky (born Vosdanig Manouk Adoian), was an Armenian immigrant who took part in the formative moments of American modernism while living in Hamilton, Va. The second, Siemon Allen, is a more contemporary talent whose sculpture seems to enter in modernism's closing acts. Each artist's work is doubly-coded, assuming both the abstract forms of modern art and concealing a second level of meaning that runs at cross purposes to the bland internationalism of the first.

A contemporary of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still, “New York School” painter Arshile Gorky spent many idyllic months at his parents-in-law's farm in Loudoun County. According to Michael Auping in his *Arshile Gorky: The Breakthrough Years*, it was during Gorky's stays in Virginia in the 1940s that the artist transformed his imagery through the frequent activity of out-of-doors drawing. Yet if Gorky's inspiration during these critical years did in fact come from the region's countryside, he simultaneously found that the pastoral imagery recalled his native and much-loved Armenia. In



Left to right: South African-born sculptor Siemon Allen; Allen's 1999 House, a cardboard model of his parents ranch-style house.

1944, Gorky wrote a jubilant letter to his sister, Vartoosh, declaring that he felt “an ancient Armenian spirit” moving in his hand as he worked on these images.

As many critics and historians have pointed out, the landscape drawings of this time are overtly joyful in appearance. Playful surrealist forms sport across the surface of such works as Gorky's *Study for The Liver is the Cock's Comb* (1943). They anticipate the free, dripping style of Pollock a few years later, even as they recall the musical quality of Kandinsky's paintings from three decades before. Yet Gorky was acutely aware that misunderstanding would follow on the reception of the paintings, which he seems also to have courted by contriving a second, personal level of reference to his work. In a letter from Lincoln, Va. dated July 1943, Gorky admitted that he had changed the name of the painting *Garden in Khorkom* to *Garden in Sochi* to make the series more familiar-sounding, just as he had changed his Armenian birth name to resemble that of the Russian writer Maxim Gorky. He also stated with regret how such distinctive forms as the Armenian slippers and his mother's butter churn in the paintings would go unnoticed or mistaken by an American audience.

Because of this second level of meaning, Gorky's work is really more complicated and tragic than the surrealist-inspired American painting it superficially resembles. Not far from these playful forms is

the troubled spirit of an artist who, like so many of his fellow painters, suffered repeated emotional crises and ended his life in extreme unhappiness.

**Allen's stock in trade for several years has been large panels of seamlessly woven video tape.**

Contemporary artist Siemon Allen's work is much cooler in appearance, but also has a tragic mechanism as part of its functioning. The South African sculptor originally came to Virginia in 1995 as part of an artist residency program and now teaches as an adjunct professor in Virginia Commonwealth University's sculpture department. The double nature of Allen's work loosely parallels Gorky's insofar as both artists covertly register the experience of living in two worlds.

Allen's stock in trade for several years has been large panels of seamlessly woven video tape. These black, reflective panels — which he showed at the Johannesburg Biennial of 1997 and more recently at the White Box gallery's “Translation/Seduction/Displacement” in New York City — could pass for minimalist pieces, but their immediate visual impact is belied by a second, hidden message electromagnetically encoded on the tape's surface. The exact content of the message has been a subject of much speculation. Allen once

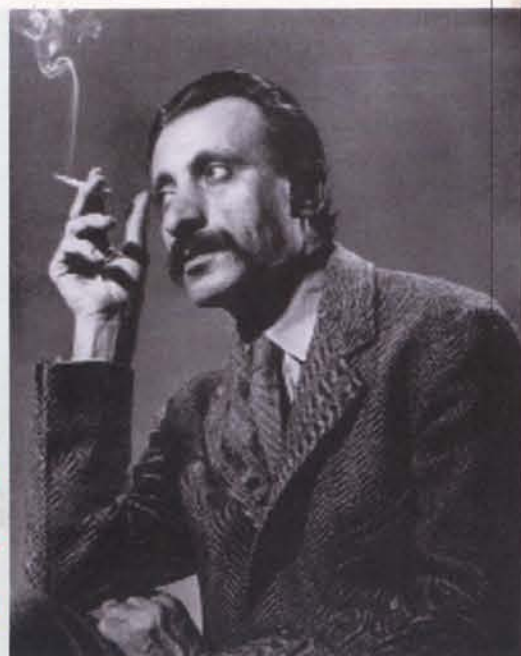
casually suggested that the tapes contained episodes of the prime time serial *Dallas* (1978–1991), as if the works were intended to criticize America's mass media dominance, but he almost immediately denied it. Allen's flip-flop on this point (his refusal to specify a second content) suggests that, for him, the fact of having a double message is more important than the exact substance of either. This, in turn, can be read as implying that the exiled artist's imperative to make work meaningful in two worlds supersedes any explicit claims made about either location.

The theme of the double home — which Allen touched on very obliquely in the woven tape works — is treated more directly in some of his most recent experiments. In Chicago's Gallery 400 this winter, he recreated a half-scale model of his parents' rambler-style house in Durban. As before, Allen's obscure reference lay concealed behind a cool, schematic (and modernist) rendering of the form. Because of its blank international look, the cardboard model he created could have stood for a suburban house anywhere.

How far can Allen's forms be removed from their biographical source and still be meaningful? He plans to take the procedure one step further by next exhibiting a smaller model of the model, which will leave his audience either totally unaware or sadly confused by the complexity of his project.

**Playful surrealist forms sport across the surface of such works as Gorky's Study for The Liver is the Cock's Comb.**

Top: Arshile Gorky's *Study for The Liver is the Cock's Comb*, 1943, pencil and crayon on paper.  
Bottom: Gorky in 1946.



**Because of this second level of meaning, Gorky's work is really more complicated and tragic than the surrealist-inspired American painting it superficially resembles.**

All of this brings us back to the theme of tragedy, which was explicit in Gorky's work and life but only implicit in Allen's. The tragedy of an exile is to fall into the hands of people (Episcopalians) who do not understand you (if you are a Calvinist). In modern times, numerous exiled artists, like Gorky and Allen, have brought specific local pasts to an international style which gave them form even as it rather tragically effaced their distinctiveness.

The acute spectator might have recognized a strange and highly indirect reference to tragedy in Allen's mention of *Dallas* (such melodramas being TV's cheapened version of the genre), but his work actually connects with a source in higher drama. For several years, the South African sculptor has been intrigued by certain passages in the play *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet*, characters act on mistaken assumptions, deaths follow false suppositions, but most importantly Claudius (who is the paradigm of a usurper-exile) fatally recognizes himself in "The Mouse-trap," the small drama the prince puts before him on the court stage. This play about the play, like Allen's sculpture about sculptures, is replete with double reflections and deep uncertainties. Is the king in the play Claudius or does the drama refer to some historical figure? Are the actions a distant allegory or do they allude to events in the larger play and, by extension, the deeds of an audience member? Such questions are fundamentally and tragically unanswerable. As such they resonate deeply with the art of Siemon Allen, at least insofar as that work evokes the theme of exile.

o