

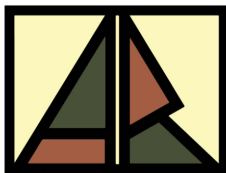
TAPESTRIES

Stephen Karakashian



Pleading, 2020

September 6 - October 25, 2020



**ARTREACH GALLERY
& ARTS LIBRARY**

at First Congregational UCC
1126 SW Park Av. Portland, OR
www.ArtReachGallery.org

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Stephen Karakashian

My tapestries are all intimately connected with my life story. The single tapestry, *The Tomb of the Pharaoh*, depicts a stylized version of a frieze from an Egyptian tomb. It is based on a hand-painted panel that was stitched around the hem of a coat that belonged to my mother. In the early 1930s she taught in Cairo, Egypt, where she bought a silk afternoon coat to wear to a reception at the palace. The tomb of the young Pharaoh Tutankhamen had been discovered only ten years before, and the tomb with its breath-taking array of furnishings stimulated an outpouring of creative work by Egyptian artisans. After my mother died, I had the panel professionally photographed, and these images became the cartoon for my tapestry. The coat is now in the collection of the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



The Tomb of the Pharaoh, 2015

The series of four figurative tapestries, called *Landscapes of the Mind: Refugees and Migrants*, reflects a different aspect of my family heritage. Each tapestry is based on a painting by my cousin Lucy Janjigian (lucyjanjigian.com). Lucy's mother and my father were twins and child survivors of the Armenian genocide perpetrated by Turkey prior to World War I. As the Turkish militias closed in, determined to kill the Armenian villagers or drive them into the nearby Mediterranean Sea, the villagers fled up a steep mountain called Musa Dagh ("Moses mountain"), carrying whatever belongings they could. On September 10, 1915, just as their supplies were running out, the refugees perched atop the mountain were spotted by a French warship docked offshore. Knowing the plight of the Armenians, the French immediately sent lifeboats ashore and the villagers, my twelve year old father included, scrambled down the mountain amid the danger that the Turkish militias would suddenly appear and slaughter them in the midst of their rescue. Hundreds of them were ferried to the waiting warship and taken to a refugee camp in Port Said, Egypt where my father along with his brothers and sisters spent the years of World War I as orphans, for both their parents had died prior to the onset of the genocide.

The tapestry, *The Tomb of the Pharaoh*, reflects a happy time in my mother's life, but the other four figurative tapestries that I call Landscapes of the Mind reference what is bleak, even terrifying. And yet, the frightening imagery is here redeemed by the rich colors and the warmth of the yarn used to create them, so they represent both despair and hope and the tension between these two emotional poles.

The three geometric tapestries belong to a series called Distant Memories. They were inspired by the experience of writing my memoir, and each expresses the truth that what is absent, unseen, or forgotten may be as determinative in shaping the present as that which is obvious and remembered.

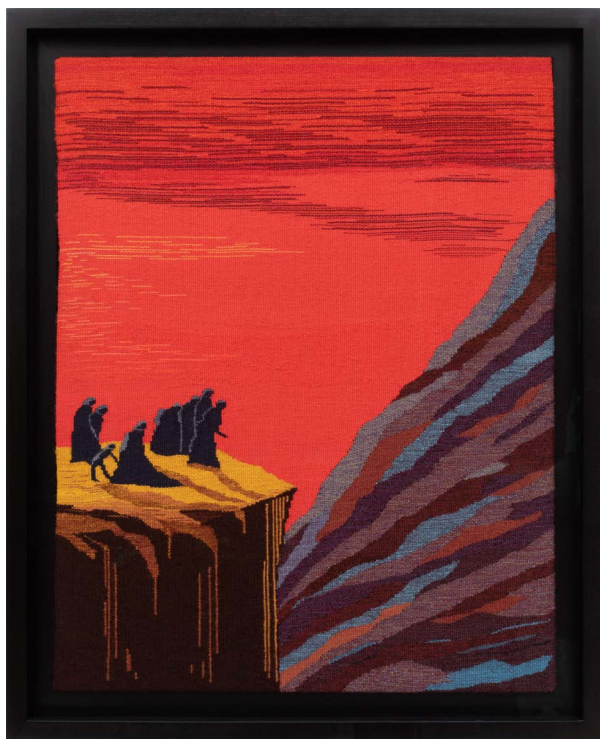
Tapestry weaving is a tactile and very deliberate art form. There is a warmth created by the texture of the yarn itself which especially in my refugee series creates a welcome counterpoint along with vivid colors to the starkness of the imagery. The weaver's whole body is also involved. This begins with the sturdy warp which has to be measured, precisely cut to length, spaced evenly, and stretched tightly on the loom. When the weaving begins, I love the soft feel of the yarn as it winds off the bobbin and through my fingers before being added to the image taking shape ever so slowly inch by inch on the loom before me. It is a meditative process. The weaver becomes intimate with every single pixel created by the weft as it winds over and under adjacent warp threads. It is a joy to see the image gradually emerging like magic from this intricate methodical process.

I began weaving more than 30 years ago when I was living in New York City. Inspired by a visit to the Navajo Nation, I took up rug weaving, which is an ideal form for the geometric shapes and colorful patterns that I loved. When I returned to Portland twenty years ago after a long absence, I found my way to Ruthie's Weaving Studio, which is where I polished my rug weaving technique after a very long lapse with the patient help of a friendly group of astonishingly skillful and creative weavers.

Motivated by my decision to give my mother's coat to the museum, I decided to recreate the image in tapestry form. I was fortunate to locate a master tapestry weaver, Pam Patrie, who lives in southeast Portland and agreed to mentor me. Pam has commissions placed in locations throughout the Pacific Northwest and the rest of the country. Images of her work can be found at Pam Patrie Studios, <http://www.pampatriestudios.com>. Patient and kind, she has taught me everything I know about tapestry weaving, and I am much in her debt.



Flight, 2017



Impasse, 2018



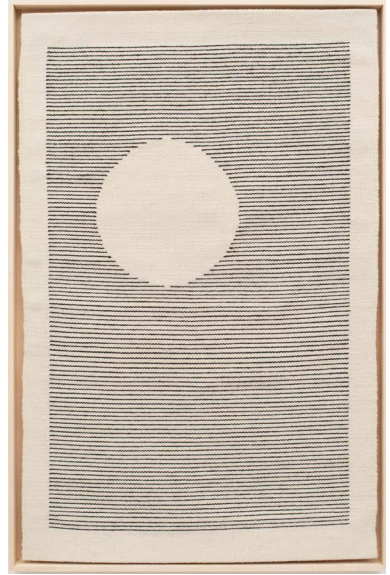
Pleading, 2020



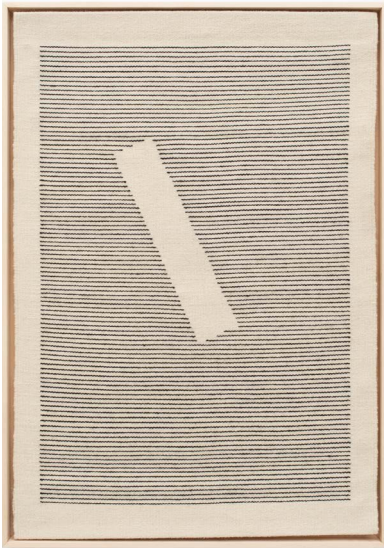
Desolation / Promise, 2020

ARTIST'S BIOGRAPHY

My varied professional background includes teaching biology in the 1960s, first at Reed College here in Portland and then at Rice University in Houston. In the 1970s I was part of a team of educators that created a new four-year college of the State University of New York at Old Westbury. Its entire curriculum was centered around themes of social justice, and I led the creation of a program in health sciences. After that, for two decades I held research positions first in cell biology and parasitology and later in animal behavior at The Rockefeller University in New York. I am a professionally certified psychotherapist, and for many years I had a private practice in New York simultaneous with my science research. In the 1980s before the advent of antiretrovirals I helped young gay men living with AIDS face their impending deaths.



Untitled-1, 2018 (Circle)

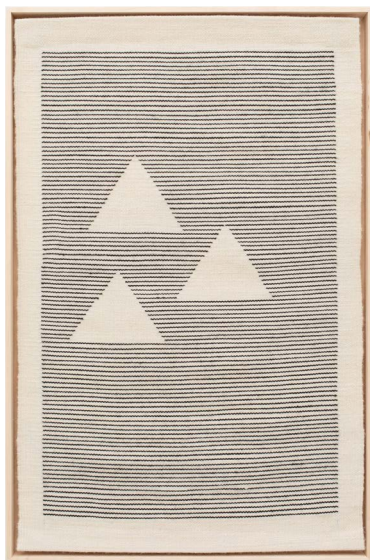


Untitled-2, 2018 (Slat)

The year 1990 marked the release of Nelson Mandela from twenty-seven years of imprisonment by South Africa's apartheid government, and for me it marked the beginning of two decades of human rights work. That year I was part of a fact-finding delegation to South Africa from New York's Riverside Church. In 1994 I represented Riverside as one of the international observers at the election that ushered in a nonracial democracy in South Africa. Subsequently I became the liaison between Riverside and the South African Council of Churches in support of a small trauma counseling center in a Black township that had been the scene of much violence. I subsequently worked with a South African organization called The Institute for Healing of Memories founded by

Father Michael Lapsley, a South African Anglican priest who was nearly killed by a letter bomb sent by the apartheid government. The Institute does healing work in South Africa and around the world helping people recover from the trauma of war and other forms of violence and oppression. During 2005, 2006, and 2007 I lived six months each year in Cape Town and worked at the offices of the Institute. I am the co-author of Fr. Michael's memoir, *Redeeming the Past, My Journey from Freedom Fighter to Healer*. In 2014 I was invited to be part of an official South African delegation to Rwanda for the ceremonies commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide.

I am also a gay man and the father of two adult sons, one of whom lives here in Portland with his husband, the other in Bellingham, Washington. I have just completed writing my memoir.



Untitled-3, 2019 (Triangles)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to gratefully acknowledge an arts residency at Willapa Bay AiR in 2017 and particularly the encouragement of its Founder and Director Cyndy Hayward.

CHECKLIST

TAPESTRIES

The Tomb of the Pharaoh, 2015

13 ½ X 54 ½ inches, framed

Landscapes of the Mind: Refugees and Migrants

Flight, 2017

26 x 22 ½ inches, framed

Impasse, 2018

30 ½ x 25 inches, framed

Pleading, 2020

30 x 23 ½ inches, framed

Desolation/Promise, 2020

(24 ½ x 27 ½ inches, framed)

Distant Memories

Untitled-1, 2018 (circle)

31 ½ x 21 inches, framed

Untitled-2, 2018 (slat)

30 x 21 inches, framed

Untitled-2, 2019 (triangles)

31 ½ x 20 ½ inches, framed

All tapestries are cotton warp and wool weft.