

A Note from the Artists:

The black background. It was an important conceptual choice for the artists. Posing the subject in front of the black background disassociates the survivor from his/her current environment, that is, it wipes out any context referring to when or where the photos were taken. The context we want to create for the exhibit is the Armenian Genocide and the survivor's personal testimony. There is an effort here to transform the survivor 90 years back to the time of the Genocide. We wipe-out the current-day in the photograph and the reader replaces that context with what is told in the oral history, adding to the emotional impact of the exhibit. The visuals and oral history work in a symbiotic way in attempting to achieve this. The black background also symbolizes the Genocide itself. It represents death and the obliteration of the survivor's former life, home, and in most cases, family. The single light that is cast onto their faces is the light of survival, the light of life, lifting them out of the darkness. They are survivors, rising above the Genocide and the death and darkness behind them. The word "survivor" comes from the French, *survivre*, literally meaning "to live above" or to "be alive atop." The light of survival and black of death - these two concepts give deeper meaning to the portraits. Though many viewers will not intellectually grasp this symbolic meaning in the work, they may respond to it emotionally, and that is the whole point.

The concentration on the eyes. Almost all the subjects are looking directly at the camera, that is, at the viewer. The "witnessing" of the Genocide was done with the eyes and we have concentrated our work on the "stare of the witness." The eyes are telling the story, because it was these eyes that saw it happen. They are staring at the viewer while re-telling their story, in a sense making the viewer a "witness to the witnessing" by the survivors.

The pairing of the faces with the hands. Just as the eyes tell the story, a person's hands also tell a story. We use these second images to expand the narrative not only by the presence of the hands themselves but by what the hands are actually doing. Sometimes the hands reflect an action that the survivor talks about in the oral history (for instance, Haig Baronian makes a cutting gesture to echo the way his grandmother was killed in front of his eyes). Sometimes, we show the tattoos (for instance, with Edward Racoubian) with which survivors were branded during the Genocide. Sometimes the hands will reflect something about the person in general (as in Arpiar Missakian, who holds military medals earned over his long service to the US).