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PHOTOGRAPHY

Diana Markosian's "Santa Barbara" Recreates a Unique American Coming-of-Age

The artist's first solo exhibit opens at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on July 3.

BY MADISON REID

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When **Diana Markosian** was growing up in post-Soviet Russia, she and her family adored the soap opera *Santa Barbara*, for its sun-soaked, prosperous depiction of the American dream. In 1996, Markosian's mother, **Svetlana**, packed up and left with her children so abruptly that they didn't even say goodbye to their father. When their plane landed, seven-year-old Markosian and her brother **David** were in America—and on their way to new lives in the real Santa Barbara.



Mom by the Pool, 2019. Courtesy of The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the artist. PHOTOGRAPH BY DIANA MARKOSIAN.

An older man named Eli met the family at the airport. Svetlana had placed an ad with an agency that read, "I am a young woman from Moscow. I want to see America, and meet a kind man who can show me the country." She would become his new bride, and he would be the children's new stepfather.

In her first American solo exhibition, "Santa Barbara," which opens at the **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art** on July 3, Markosian recreates her family's first experiences in America through still photographs, immersive sets, objects, and a single-channel video. She auditioned hundreds of actors to play her mother, brother, her younger self, and Eli in staged photos from her early memories. "My idea with this entire project was to create a world that you would believe in, and it would all be fictional, but it wouldn't be really fictional because it's based on my life," says Markosian. "For me, it feels like an extension of my documentary work because it feels the most honest." Images of Svetlana and Eli's wedding, family road trips, and quiet moments in their new home are imbued with hope and despair in equal measure.



Eli Alone, 2019. Courtesy of The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the artist. PHOTOGRAPH BY DIANA MARKOSIAN.

Markosian, a photographer who has spent more than a decade on assignment around the world, adopts a complex approach to visual storytelling in this personal project, deftly integrating the staged snapshots with archival family photos, Super 8 stills, and even documentation of the casting process. In the rich history of photographers picturing their families, “Santa Barbara” stands out for its ability to flex the boundaries of memory, photography, performance, fact, and fiction while relaying the emotional truth of her family’s story. “I always knew I had a very complicated family, and now I was interested in dissecting it. What does that even mean? What does family even look like? What is it supposed to look like or feel like?” Markosian says. “Just doing still images or just creating images of objects or locations didn’t feel like it was ever enough. I needed to really challenge myself to find the right concept to visualize this.”



Eli's House, 2019. Courtesy of The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the artist. PHOTOGRAPH BY DIANA MARKOSIAN.

Bringing “Santa Barbara” to life as an installation with curators **Erin O’Toole** at SFMOMA and **David Campany** at the International Center of Photography in New York, where it will also show this fall, was a natural progression for the project, and a joy for Markosian, she says. Ultimately, her family’s story “is all about decisions. One decision that changed the lives of everyone involved. And you bring all of us together in one room and we have a completely different version of what happened. That absolutely fascinates me.”