Chicago artist Jackie Kazarian stands before her painting, "Armenia," which stands 11.5-by-26-feet tall. The painting was created to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. Photo by James Prinz
Jackie Kazarian painted this image, titled "Armenia," in the exact same dimensions as Pablo Picasso's "Guernica," 11.5 feet by 26 feet. Photo by James Prinz
"Forgiveness 5" by Jackie Kazarian. Photo by Tom Van Eynde
"Forgiveness 6" by Jackie Kazarian. Photo by Tom Van Eynde
"Cross Lace 1" by Jackie Kazarian. Photo by James Prinz
Detail of "Armenia" painting by Jackie Kazarian. Photo by James Prinz
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CHICAGO, April 17 (UPI) -- One hundred years after the start of a genocide that killed an estimated 1.5 million Armenians, artist Jackie Kazarian has created a painting memorializing the event that's so big it can't be ignored.

The Chicago-based artist is unveiling her mural-size painting titled "Armenia" (pronounced "Hayasdan" in Armenian) on Friday at her studio. It will be on view to the public for the first time one week before
April 24, the date widely regarded as the anniversary of the 1915 genocide.

Kazarian is herself Armenian; her grandparents fled their homeland before World War I, before the mass killings and deportation of Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Turks.

She grew up hearing the stories of the atrocities Armenians suffered beginning in 1915 through the 1920s and knew she wanted to create something powerful to acknowledge the centennial of the event. She saw it as an opportunity to do something monumental not only in scope, but also in size.

"I had been toying with the idea of trying to make a gigantic painting for four years," Kazarian told UPI, saying the centennial seemed like the perfect opportunity to do so.

And gigantic is what it is. "Armenia" is comprised of three canvases that together stand at 11.5 tall by 26 feet across.

Those dimensions are no mere happenstance, either. They are the exact same as Spanish artist Pablo Picasso's famed "Guernica" painting depicting the 1937 bombing of civilians in a Basque Country village in northern Spain.

Kazarian said she wanted to mimic the size of the famed Picasso painting to draw attention to commonalities between the two events they depict.

Both paintings reference human tragedies, both firsts of their kind. The bombing of Guernica is often considered to be the first air raid on a civilian population, while the mass killings of Armenians in 1915 is thought to be the first instance the term "genocide" was used.
Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin coined the term genocide, which means the killing of a people based on ethnicity or race, in the early 1940s. He used it to describe the massacre of Armenians and the Jewish Holocaust during World War II.

"There was nothing strategic about it other than to terrorize people," Kazarian said of the bombing of Guernica. "I think what happened in 1915 was similar; [there was] no real reason to exterminate the people. It was really something else."

But the similar, tragic subject matter isn't the only reason to borrow from the scale of "Guernica." The sheer size of the painting draws attention and lends importance to an event that to this day the Turkish government denies even happened.

"I knew that Guernica was something that people don't really talk about very much," Kazarian said, "but people do know about Guernica primarily because of Picasso's painting."

Todd Bartel, teacher at The Cambridge School of Weston high school in Massachusetts, told UPI that Kazarian's painting is the "physical equivalent to the magnitude and scale of the events of 1915."

Bartel, as director of the school's art gallery, the Thompson Gallery, curated a yearlong series of exhibits called "Kiss the Ground," featuring contemporary Armenian artists from around the globe. He said the topic of genocide was perfect for the school, one of the first in the United States to require students to obtain credits in social justice.

The second exhibition in the series included paintings by Kazarian, which acted as studies for her final, larger work, "Armenia." "You as a human are dwarfed by the size of this thing," Bartel said of the larger-than-life painting. "The irony here is Armenians have endured 100 years of denial around what occurred in 1915."
"Picasso was responding to the incredulity of the first air raid. The world had never seen anything like the horror," Bartel added. "He had no other recourse but to make this large work. Where could you put those feelings?"

Kazarian, like Picasso, couldn't just paint a small painting.

But while "Armenia" gives a nod to "Guernica" in size and topic, Kazarian says that's really the only way the two paintings overlap. Neither of the two artists use a particularly realistic style, but Kazarian is far more expressionistic, with large swaths of paint showing brush work and other areas where color has been splashed onto the canvas.

She plays more with color in "Armenia" compared to the monochromatic "Guernica." Brown, neutral colors at the bottom of her canvas give way to bright jewel tones of blue, gold and red up top.

Bartel says this use of color is typical of Armenian art, as is the collage-like effect Kazarian creates with overlapping images. He says many Armenian artists often "pluck out an image and juxtapose it with another one."

"The predisposition can be traced back to earliest records of art about 3,000 years old," he said, explaining this can be explained by a melding of cultures and religions historically seen in Armenia.

Kazarian's images focus on culture and creation -- Armenian words, sections of lace based on her own grandmother's work, floor plans for churches lost to war -- while Picasso's are of death and destruction.

"I didn't want to only depict the sadness of the losses. I wanted to present something positive. I wanted to celebrate the culture that survived," Kazarian said.
Bartel said he was particularly intrigued by the tone of forgiveness the painting offers. He displayed one watercolor study Kazarian created called "Forgiveness" in one of his exhibits. In large block letters is the word "FORGIVE" in English, surrounded by some of the scrolling, lace-like imagery and church floor plans seen in the final painting.

Like the open hands at the bottom of "Armenia," it's uplifting, Bartel says.

"By not focusing on the horror and by posing the question of forgiveness, she activates the content and makes it alive," he said. "You walk away with the potential to transform. It's not that typical anger; it's hopeful.

"She may be paying homage to Picasso, but she is clearly creating a new dialogue ... forgiveness," Bartel said of Kazarian.

He said that's particularly surprising given the fact that the very perpetrators of the mass killings of 1915 have yet to even use the word genocide.

Last year, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan did offer condolences to the families of Armenians killed during World War I. His comments, on the eve of the 99th anniversary referred to the incident as "our shared pain ... having experienced events which had inhumane consequences, such as relocation, during the first world war should not prevent Turks and Armenians from establishing compassion and mutually humane attitudes.

But the government staunchly stood by its decision not to recognize the deaths as a genocide earlier this week after the European Union and Pope Francis both made statements using the term.
"In the past century, our human family has lived through three massive and unprecedented tragedies," the Pope said at a Mass at St. Peter's Basilica on Sunday. "The first, which is widely considered the first genocide of the 20th century, struck your own Armenian people." The statement upset the Turkish government, which immediately pulled its ambassador from the Vatican.

Turkey's foreign minister tweeted that the Pope's remarks were based on "unfounded allegations."

Then members of the European Parliament on Wednesday passed a resolution stressing the need for Turkey to recognize the Armenian genocide so that it may then lead to "genuine reconciliation" between the two nations.

The EU encouraged the two countries to "use examples of successful reconciliation between European nations" to establish diplomatic relations and opening the border.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu issued a statement after the vote accusing the EU of attempting "to rewrite history." "We do not take seriously those who adopted this resolution by mutilating history and law," he said. "The participation of the EU citizens with a rate of 42 percent in 2014 elections already implies the place that this parliament occupies in the political culture of the EU."

Meanwhile, U.S. President Barack Obama is expected to recognize the centennial on April 24 with a statement, though White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest indicated Thursday the president won't use the term "genocide."

"The president and other senior administration officials have repeatedly acknowledged as historical fact that 1.5 million Armenians were massacred or marched to their deaths in the finals days of the Ottoman
Empire," Earnest said.

"We've further stated that we mourn those deaths and that a full, frank, and just acknowledgement of the facts is in the interest of everybody, including Turkey, Armenia and the United States," he added.

Earnest said the White House's longstanding position to avoid using the term likely won't change in next week's statement, despite the fact that Obama made a promise to change that stance during his campaign in 2008.

"The Armenian Genocide is not an allegation, a personal opinion, or a point of view, but rather a widely documented fact supported by an overwhelming body of historical evidence," Obama said in 2008. "As president I will recognize the Armenian genocide."

For her part, Kazarian plans to travel with "Armenia" in order to expose people to a part of history that is often not discussed. She specifically designed her painting so that it can be broken down and shipped by air in a box.

"I wanted the making of this painting to be something that could create a dialogue about genocide because it still happens," she said. "Even though we've said 'never again,' they continue to happen.

"I was hoping this painting will be an impetus to start conversations about what leads to genocide -- what do we do or what don't we do to stop it."