Charles Garabedian

Taking on Homer, as in the recent "Studies for the Iliad" series, is nothing new for Los Angeles painter Charles Garabedian. Scouring the iconography of both East and West, and spanning the timetables of world culture, his art is a monumental attempt at reinventing history and myth in a flamboyantly modernist context.

Garabedian's work owes much of its potency to his own heritage as an Armenian. Born in Detroit in 1923 and raised in an orphanage until age nine, he first encountered the art of his ancestral land well after his career was underway. Stumbling upon an Armenian rug at the shop of a relative, Garabedian noticed an obvious affinity between a figure woven on the rug and his own compositional technique. The revelation led him to a frenzied research of Armenian illuminated manuscripts. His ultimate discovery of a whimsical, rather irreverent style in Armenian manuscript illumination, much like his own, prompted him to ponder the possibility of a collective unconscious.

phantasmagorical terms. Here the bloodshed, though graphically manifested in the form of decapitated heads and headless bodies spewing blood, makes the absurdity of war so strikingly evident that pain, the warrior ethic, fatalism and humor become aspects of one and the same thing.

Upon earning a master's degree from the University of California, Garabedian joined with a group of classmates to form the core of the highly experimental Ceeje Gallery (1961-1970) in Los Angeles. The work of these artists consistently defied the mainstream and paid no heed to fashion or fad.

Garabedian explored abstraction early in his career, figure scaled to occupy most of the canvas. With her torso slanted diagonally and abdomen appearing to swirl, her limbs are manipulated like so many geometric elements to fit the square of the canvas. Yet the image is convincing, testifying to a highly focused esthetic.

In 1978, Marcia Tucket, who early on had hailed Garabedian as "wonderfully perverse," included some of his works in

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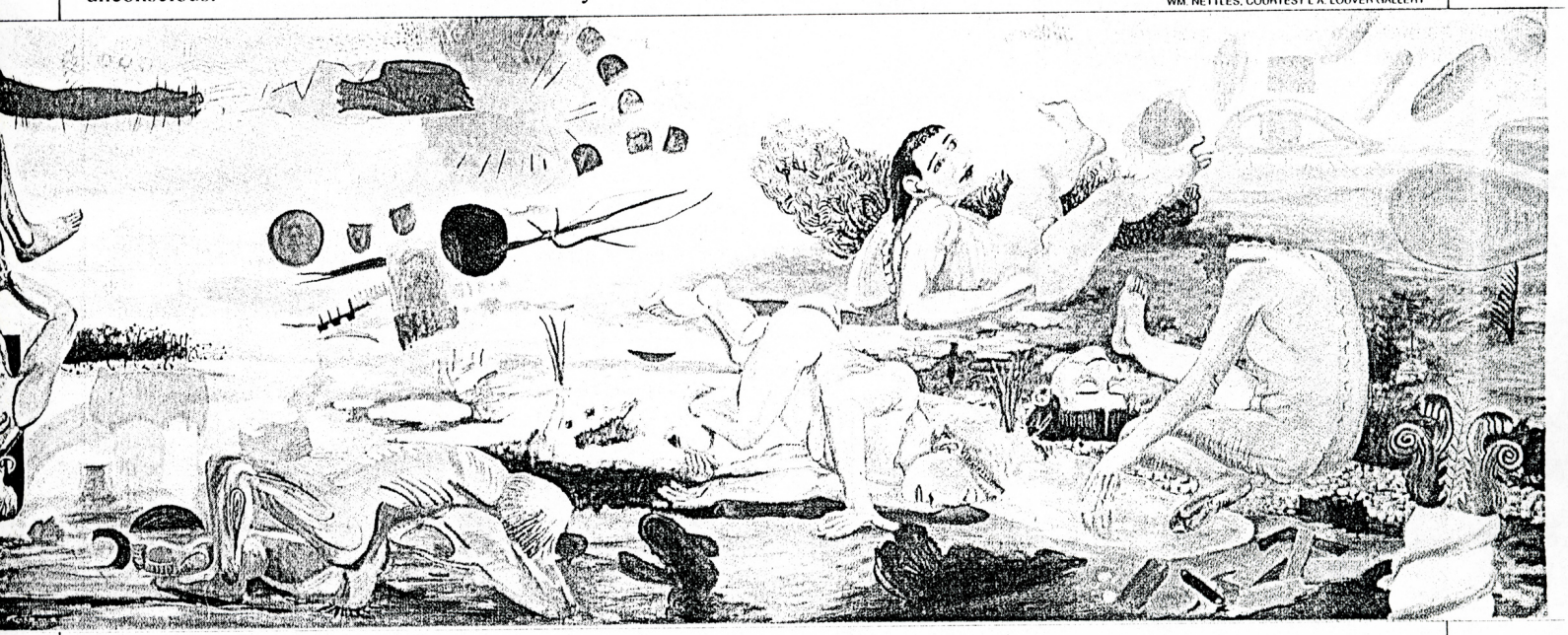

At least one piece in Garabedian's recent exhibition at the L.A. Louvre Gallery in Venice, California suggests that unique brand of irreverence, as expressed by the ironic androgyny of a human figure. Labeled "female" by the gallery, the piece stands apart, its richly colored curving bands evoking the pattern of 13th Century religious manuscripts.

Two elements across the base, however, accentuate the exhibition theme. Resembling dismembered arms, these are references to a unifying principle, the Trojan War, that marks most of the paintings. Garabedian retells the whole of the Iliad in his own and like members of L.A.'s "finish-fetish" community of the '60's, many of them studio neighbors and pool-room cronies, worked with resins. In turning to the figure, he came to challenge the university's rigorous life-drawing discipline, twisting, flattening, disproportioning and otherwise reshaping the human form. If his compositions appear flaccid at first glance, the impression is quickly dissipated by a subtext of sheer energy that informs his studied and ultimately graceful awkwardness.

Seated Nude-Miss Fisher, dedicated to his junior-high school music teacher, is a standout among the smaller paintings, the exhibition "Bad Painting," when she opened New York's New Museum. The recent L.A. Louver exhibition reaffirms Garabedian's command of that "perversion." Supplanting the rules of academe with those of his own resolve and renouncing literalness and the preconceived to redefine beauty with the imagery of his own vision, he invests his work with authenticity. And if anything can exceed that, it can only be the joy he finds in making it.

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