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Profound Associations

Charles Garabedian at L.A. Louver

BY MILES BELLER

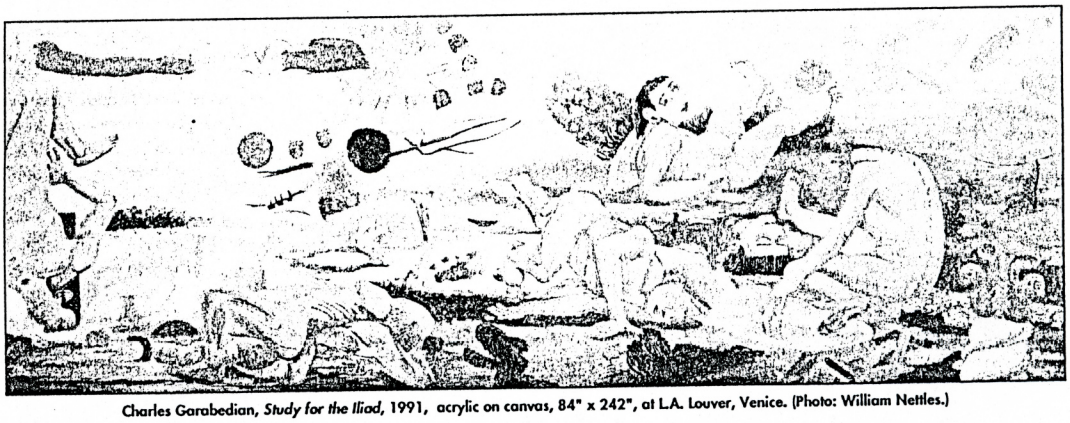
Sardonic "rediscovery" of the roots of Western culture has become a veritable industry in the "postmodern" biz, as artists as diverse as Anne and Patrick Poirier, Stephen McKenna, David Ligare, Martha Mayer Erlebacher, Claudio Bravo and Grant Drumheller produce arch icons chuck-a-block full of stylistic elements and design flourishes lifted straight from such venerables as the Acropolis and Pantheon. Indeed, confronted with a show of these *nouveau ancien* creations, we frequently feel as if we have stumbled onto an abandoned set of a D. W. Griffith film, one of those historical epics that campily reinvents the past rather than taking it trenchantly to task.

While such exercises can be good fun—kicky kitsch that prompts a sly grin and wily wink—much of this work ends up in a cerebral cul de sac, a trick without a point.

Not so the iconoclastic "classicism" of Charles Garabedian's latest exhibition, which featured fourteen pieces grouped under the heading *Studies for the Iliad*, recently at L.A. Louver's Market Street location. For Garabedian's acrylic paintings on paper and canvas are vital and explosive, a far cry from the Trojan horse delivered by too many of the Postmods currently rummaging through temple ruins and coliseum artifacts. For unlike the classical "retreads" of, say, Carlo Maria Mariani (cold, meticulous work fastidiously playing on museum notions and college survey art texts of ancient Greek and Roman figuration and form), the classicism of Garabedian's latest work lashes and slashes, and at moments evokes the hell-fire *Guernica* of Picasso or the scratchy, scrawly messages of street gang graffiti. But one also finds the edgy imagery of Francis Bacon and barely containable fury of Leon Golub.

This isn't to say that Garabedian's pictures function predominantly as a stylistic catchall for a clutch of modern masters. Rather, the work inspired by Garabedian's reading of the epic poem attributed to Homer serves as a commanding battleground on which the artist furiously fights with his own notions of painting, challenging and engaging such concerns as the value of "internal consistency" and the merit of an overall unified effect (e.g., competing textures, techniques and tones clash and vie for the eye and dominance over the total composition; dismembered figures, defiled by the wages of war, beatifically survey their bloody wounds while wandering uncertain landscapes of emerging and receding moods.

Ironically, the greatest strength of *Studies for the Iliad* is also its most telling weakness. Although Garabedian valiantly struggles with conflicting feelings about how to claim the picture plane (boldly launching numerous campaigns and attacks to discover new ways out of age-old problems), the willful abandonment of any one consistent approach ends up as empty chaos as opposed to compelling anarchy. In fact, the two central paintings on canvas featured at L.A. Louver appear in transition, still in search of resolution, the artist yet to have made the hard choices needed to pull countervailing pieces together and marshal the compositions into commanding visual victories. There is the underlying sense, as well, that by placing such a resonate title as *Studies for the Iliad* over the show, Garabedian becomes as automatic beneficiary of the profound associations elicited by this historic work of poetics, which chronicles in hexameter verse the feud between Greek warrior Achilles and King Agamemnon during the siege of Troy, which in turn resulted in the slaying of Hector, the Trojan warrior-prince.



Charles Garabedian, *Study for the Iliad*, 1991, acrylic on canvas, 84" x 242", at L.A. Louver, Venice. (Photo: William Nettles.)

Yet such comments are secondary in context of Garabedian's immense inventive powers and the overriding force of his gifts as a painter. In his work, we find protean experimentation, daring brush play and striking color combinations, the manifestation of a man whose heroic struggles with the process of painting become the very stuff of his intrepid art. ■

Charles Garabedian through April 18 at L.A. Louver, Venice.

Miles Beller is co-editor of *American Datelines* and consulting editor of the Jungian quarterly *Psychological Perspectives*.

A conversation with Charles Garabedian

BY R. J. MERRILL

Artweek *Could you talk about your goals as a painter?*

Charles Garabedian My goals are actually an investigation of myself. In my most honest moments I can say that the only thing I am really interested in is me, in finding out who I am, and I choose to find out through painting. I look at my work and wonder how things get the way they are, and what that represents in terms of me.

AW *I don't sense that your paintings are autobiographical, though.*

CG No. Autobiography implies that you are writing a book to communicate. I am just writing a book to myself. I am curious about who I am, what I am, as opposed to who everybody else is. I might add that there is no good reason to find out this information.

AW *Unless it can help one come to a deeper understanding of one's self.*

CG There is something to be said about that, but I don't think it works that way. You're implying that one can achieve a great satisfaction at some point. I don't think that can happen as you dig deeper and deeper.

AW *There's no epiphany?*

CG I've had a few minor epiphanies along the way.

AW *Are you saying that as one gets to one level of understanding, one arrives at another level that must be explored?*

CG I think so, yes.

AW *What is the experience for the viewer of your work? Do you have any expectations of what the viewer will take from your paintings?*

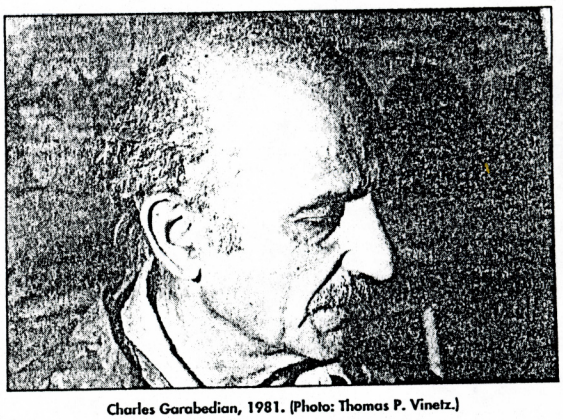
CG None at all. I'm not preaching. I have nothing to say in terms of communicating. I believe that any time you try to communicate, you're making bad painting.

AW *I assume that you're not enamored of the political work we see so much these days.*

CG I'm not. People try to read my work as political. They come in and apply a narrative to the work and I say no, no.

AW *Your work has been labeled as Postmodern and you are often grouped with other Postmodern artists. Many of these artists are consciously deconstructivist and some may read your work in the same manner.*

CG I have no problem with that. The world cannot help but filter in. When they talk about deconstruction, I think back to the paintings I did coming out of college and see that taking place.



Charles Garabedian, 1981. (Photo: Thomas P. Vinetz.)

AW *You said in 1989 that 'I have often thought that there are paintings and then there are pictures and that I make pictures.' Could you explain the difference between pictures and painting and how you see your work fitting in*

there?

CG I am not sure that that is properly stated. What I do is paint. The physical act of painting is what is interesting to me and the pictures are merely the residue of that act. The act of painting is the exciting thing.

AW *That makes me think of Harold Rosenberg's comments on Abstract Expressionism, where he describes the canvas as an arena in which the artist acts, the works as autobiographical, and the object made from this encounter as only the documentation of the creative experience.*

CG I look at it as even less than that. I look at the object as something of not much value. Simply because of its physical nature it cannot be of any real value. The real value was in the experience and the moving around of the paint. But, on the other hand, I've seen a lot of great paintings.

AW *I have a friend who talks about his work as a spiritual thing, that what he does is somehow connected with his spiritual nature. The way you talk of the act of painting made me think of him. That somehow there is more than the physical thing there, that it is connected to bigger things.*

CG I don't go for the spiritual. It's wonderful if it *is* there, but I don't go for it as a painter. That would be too hard. Yet, I think a lot about the collective unconscious. Would I be talking spiritual if I said I believed in the collective unconscious?

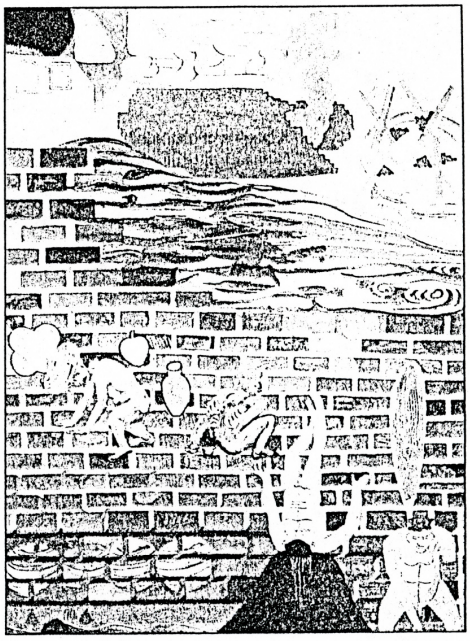
AW *I don't know the answer to that.*

CG I halfway believe in it simply because I entertain it in my work and it entertains me. I look at old Armenian manuscripts and I see similarities with my work; a similar handling of line, similarities in approach to subject matter, a great number of similarities that exist there. I don't know if I am consciously lifting them or whether they come from the collective unconscious.

Someone pointed out these similarities to me after looking at my work and before I had ever looked at Armenian manuscripts. He was an Armenian from the old country. He started sending me books of Armenian manuscript illumination. I tried to lift from them but it wouldn't work, yet there was something in my work that paralleled what I saw in these old manuscripts.

AW *I recently reread Peter Plagens's* The Academy of the Bad, *which was written around the time that Marcia Tucker included your work in the show entitled* Bad Painting. *In many ways your work does challenge preexisting aesthetic expectations of 'good' versus 'bad' painting.*

CG Let me tell you a little story about that *Bad Painting* show. Marcia called me and told me about the show she was doing and she told me the title and asked me what I thought of it. I answered that there was only one other title that I liked better and that was *Good Painting.*



Charles Garabedian, *Study for the Iliad,* 1991, acrylic on canvas, 109" x 80", at L.A. Louver, Venice. (Photo: William Nettles.)

AW *Plagens wrote that 'good' painting had become predictable and boring, clichéd, and that 'bad' painting suddenly seemed to revitalize painting in some way.*

CG I think it probably did. It helped. There where a lot of figurative painters at the time but this was a different kind of figurative painting. It had to do with contemporary times, a more modern kind of painting and attitude, a reaction to the more formal concerns of the time.

AW *In Marcia Tucker's essay in the catalog, you are quoted as saying, "I take an antagonistic stance when I paint. Either because it's the way I am or because I can't do any better. I am not interested in developing technique. This doesn't indicate intelligence on my part but impatience."*

CG That part is still true. In that sense, the antagonism is gone because I'm very comfortable now with the idea of 'bad' technique.

AW *For you the antagonistic stance was the acceptance of 'bad' painting?*

CG It was the result of setting up a figure and simply working it out in a very rough way.

AW *You were doing figurative work at a time when it wasn't altogether appreciated. Did the negative attitude toward figuration affect your work? Did it matter to you?*

CG I think I was doing what I wanted to do. I've flipped back and forth between figurative and nonfigurative work ever since 1966. In 1965 and '66, I did the first series of work that had a consistent and unique quality that was truly mine. At this point I realized that I had to reject painting because I had learned about art *through* painting. The painting I was doing was as much in response to what I had been taught as it was to what I felt. Every line I had made in school had been judged to be either good or bad, which reflected a teacher's preference. I disregarded everything that had been deemed bad. At one point I realized that the bad lines were mine, too.

I decided to go into sculpture because I had never had any instruction in it. I had no vocabulary about space, movement, the responsibilities of sculpture or what sculpture was or anything like that. I just made things. But I think that they were very interesting as sculpture. I eventually went back to painting after four years of making sculpture.

AW *When you went back to painting, did you have more freedom to do what you wanted to do, to be comfortable with the bad?*

CG The funny thing is, the paintings were no different.

AW *Marcia Tucker makes an interesting point in her catalog essay when she says that nonrepresentational painting can be figurative and that the painters in the* Bad Painting *show were not interested in figuration per se, as was, for example, Titian.*

CG I agree. I did a lot of back and forth between nonrepresentational and figurative work. I always looked at the nonrepresentational work as narrational. I didn't necessarily know exactly what the narration was, but there always was a sense of a story.

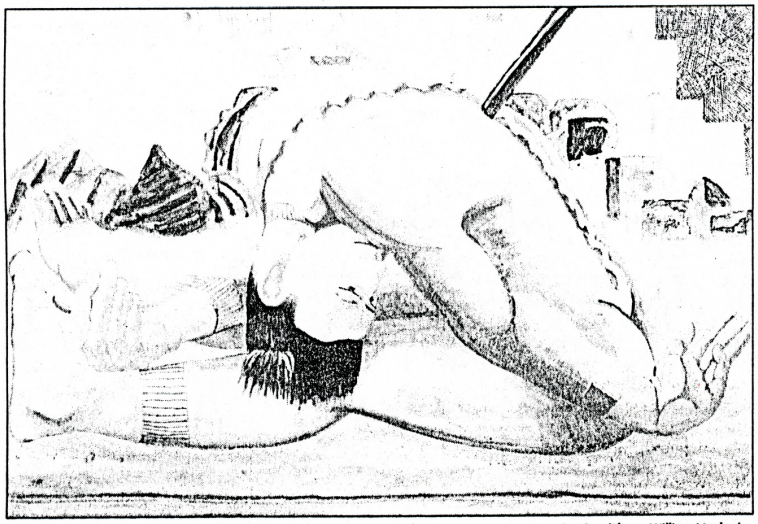
AW *Your most recent work is bloodier than usual.*

CG Well it's the *Iliad.* I hadn't read it before and I had to read it in relationship to some prints I was making. I was just coming off of a period of ten months where I couldn't paint because my studio was being renovated. It was time to get back to painting and I decided to do something really serious. Since I had just read the *Iliad,* I decided to do studies for it.

I saw it as a bloody, crazy thing in which the poetry is in praise of rape, murder, thievery, lying, cheating, plundering. There are no specifics, no real personages. I thought that battlefields and suffering was the thing.

AW *You mentioned that your paintings help you deal with yourself. What about the* Iliad *attracted you?*

CG The *Iliad* presented an immediate kind of image that I could deal with. I wanted to test myself in epic terms. When you deal with epic, it is incredible. I have always looked at the idea of scope and sweep and thought great, great.



Charles Garabedian, *Study for the Iliad,* 1991, acrylic on paper, 30-1/2" x 43 ", at L.A. Louver, Venice. (Photo: William Nettles.)

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