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Charles Garabedian's Quest for Self-Awareness

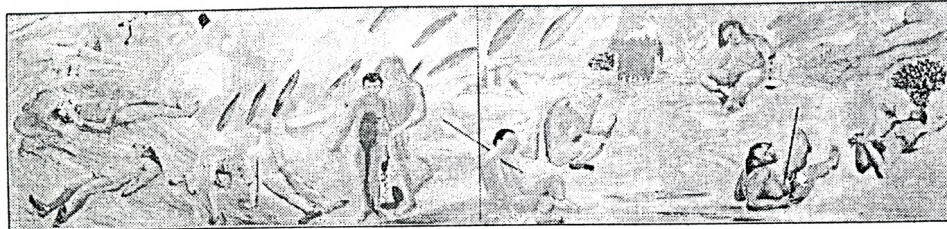
■ **Art:** 'My work is about self-psychoanalysis. I just want to know who I am. I don't think I'll ever find out,' the painter says.

By WILLIAM WILSON
TIMES ART CRITIC

In some quarters Los Angeles is thought of as the Capital of Quirk. Its main products seem to be social fads and eccentric characters. All the same, chroniclers have learned to watch the town's apparent silliness with a certain wary respect. They remember that the multibillion-dollar film industry started as a nickel-a-pop fad from Hollywood.

Charles Garabedian is 68 and has been exhibiting here since the '60s. In those days he showed with a bunch of other willfully offbeat artists at La Cienega's rather ad hoc Ceeje Gallery. The gallery closed when the owners figured out they could make more money by turning it into a restaurant. Most of the gang has long disappeared into reclusive academia or dime-store mysticism. One hasn't touched a brush since a Chinese fortuneteller predicted he'd do his best work after age 60. He's still waiting.

Garabedian carried on despite the fact that even his admirers were somewhat flummoxed by the work. What did he mean by a small self-portrait posing in front of a Victorian china cabinet like a Great Artist, while making himself look like one of the Three Stooges?



WILLIAM NETTLES

Charles Garabedian's "Study for the Iliad": Concerned about the wellsprings of civilization.

Today the artist admits he didn't quite get it himself and still doesn't. "My work is about self-psychoanalysis. I just want to know who I am. I don't think I'll ever find out."

In the '80s, the eccentric, primitive look of Garabedian's work was suddenly identified as a precursor of the Neo-Expressionists and Italian neo-naives like Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente and Enzo Cucchi. Emerging as a pioneer gives one's status a big leg up in the art world. Garabedian came to look like one of those quirkville characters who successfully foretells and shapes the future.

His current exhibition at the L.A. Louver gallery (through Saturday) consists of two large-scale paintings and a dozen studies based on the seminal literary classic, Homer's "The Iliad." The ensemble reveals a brace of Garabedian's characteristic preoccupations. He is concerned about the wellsprings of civilization and human character, the galumphing awkwardness of beginnings. His figures are ungainly. He never uses live models. He's on a quest to reveal his inner archetypes to himself. Observers occasionally think they see aspects

of both Picasso and Francis Bacon in them.

"They aren't artists who interest me," counters Garabedian. "Sometimes I notice resemblances that just happen as I'm painting. It depresses me. I can paint a figure in 25 minutes and spend six months changing it until it's right."

His favorite in the current crop is a 50" x 216" scene of a Homeric battlefield littered with maimed, half-dead warriors. There is nothing of classic noble nudity about them. They are as pottily naked as CPAs at an army induction center. One headless man holds out a hand to feel the blood spurting from his neck as if puzzled. Patroclus stands castrated supported by Achilles, whose leg is severed at the knee.

"They say that people don't really get together until they're hurt and truly need one another," says Garabedian. "Reading 'The Iliad,' I was struck by the idea that it's all about slaughter, poetically stated. Plunder, rape, murder and pillage are all real upbeat ideas in

Homer."

Despite all the gore, there is a sweetness about the picture with its deft and subtle in-painting and moments of raw surprise. A falling figure's head emits an enigmatic arabesque shape that could represent anything from puree of brains to a burning bush. The soft horizonless landscape suggests the warriors have already arrived in paradise, confused rather than agonized. Garabedian's philosophy seems to locate itself somewhere between Thomas Hobbes' realism and William Saroyan's shrugging acceptance of the human condition. Well, that's life.

While in the gallery chatting with a visitor, a string of ranking Venice artists drifts through to pay respect to their mate: Billy Al Bengston, Charles Arnoldi, DeWain Valentine. Robert Graham stops to congratulate the artist everybody calls "Chaz."

Back at his Washington Boulevard studio he talks about the work. The stark industrial space is still unmistakably Garabedian. The Victorian china cabinet of the 30-

HIGHLIGHTS



LARRY DAVIS / Los Angeles Times

OFFBEAT ARTIST: Charles Garabedian's current exhibition at the L.A. Louver gallery is based on Homer's "The Iliad." "My work is about self-psychoanalysis," said the painter, accompanied by his pet cockatiel, Ajax. "I just want to know who I am. I don't think I'll ever find out." F3

ñental Can. In a way, World War II saved him. Serving as a gunner in the Air Corps he flew 30 missions over Europe and saw a lot of combat. Back home he went to school on the G.I. Bill to avoid going to work. Eventually he married, had two daughters and bumbled into art when he met Ed Moses.

"Being an orphan leaves you with a great mistrust of society, culture and the world in general. Sometimes I think I'm too cute or irreverent but then I see Ajax acting cute and I realize he's just being himself. Somebody once called me 'the artful dodger.' Like [French philosopher] Henri Bergson, I want the tragic and the profound, but Jonathan Swift had those qualities and satire too. Sometimes I go for a purely mindless solution. I just try things until something works."

Garabedian's old sidekick Louis Lunetta drops in and pronounces that "Chaz's imagery comes by itself."

"I try to avoid mystical thinking but lately I see strange, mysterious connections to my own past," says Garabedian. "A distant relative who has a rug cleaning place showed me an Armenian rug that looked exactly like one of my paintings even down to the subject matter of a woman in some ruins."

"A friend showed me 12th-Century Armenian manuscript illuminations that had the playful, disrespectful character of the way I live, the same crudeness of drawing. I tracked them down and they were from the same place my family lived."

"Weird. For years I didn't even know I was Armenian."