

Figurative Mythology



Tyler Tomczak

Scholars, historians, poets, artists and playwrights often utilize the universal and varied tradition of mythology to illustrate the components of human existence; this includes larger than life figures with extraordinary powers and enhanced features with heightened personality traits. Charles Garabedian, an artist of the human figure, constantly attempts to reinvent himself and hopes that each time he enters his studio he can enter as a different person, with a diverse perspective. As an artist, he creates his own mythological sensibility within an ordinary and humanistic persona.

Text Nare Garibyan | Photo Tigran Tovmasyan; Courtesy of L.A. Louver Gallery

Bubbles rise to the surface as a swimmer exhales in the water enjoying a swim near a canoe-like boat. An ordinary scene, but Charles Garabedian has transformed the piece by adding his own mythological elements, portraying the swimmer as a grand figure within the soft ebb and flow of the water. Garabedian's repertoire includes depictions of renowned Greek myths such as the story of Apollo and Daphne, a love that was thwarted by Cupid's arrow. Apollo, the god of music, prophecy, archery and light, was shot with the arrow of love; he fell in love with Daphne, a nymph. Apollo tried to profess his love to



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"Christ under the Cross", 1963
oil on canvas
83³/₄ x 70¹/₂ inches

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"Self-Portrait"
circa 1976
acyclic on canvas
24x18 inches

Daphne, but she rejected him and prayed to her father, the river god Peneus, asking for help. Apollo watched with shock and despair as Daphne transformed into a laurel tree. Apollo vowed to wear a laurel wreath in his hair in memory of his love, and the laurel became a symbol for Apollo. Charles Garabedian's piece titled "Apollo and Daphne" refreshingly captures this story. The storytelling quality of Armenian manuscripts achieved by the correct placement of image and color connects Garabedian to his heritage; his paintings reflect this sensibility. In the nine-panel series "Prehistoric Figures," the human figure is

at the forefront, a type of iconography with careful placement of a bright blue sky, bodies in motion and a landscape that does not overshadow the composition. The genius behind this series is that Garabedian has taken the elements of Armenian manuscripts and created his own expression.

Chaz, as his friends call him, often traveled to Mexico with fellow artists to explore the vibrant culture away from the routine of academia. One of these extraordinary trips was captured in an extensive black and white film by Louis Lunetta, one of Chaz's friends from UCLA's Art Department. In 2012, the Pasadena Museum of California Art screened an excerpt from the film as the culminating event of the L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles, 1945-1980, From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy exhibit. The selected scenes of the film feature Charles Garabedian running through the hustle and bustle of the Mexican marketplace, witnessing religious festivities in honor of



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"Prehistoric Figure"
1978-1980
acrylic on panel
40x30 inches

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"Prehistoric Figure"
1978-1980
acrylic on panel
40x30 inches



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"Prehistoric Figures"
1978-1980, 40x30 inches
acrylic on panel

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"Prehistoric Figure"
1978-1980
acrylic on panel
40x30 inches

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"Prehistoric Figure"
1978-1980
acrylic on panel
40x30 inches





Pasadena Museum of California Art

From January-May 2012, the Pasadena Museum of California Art (PMCA) hosted the L.A. RAW: Abject Expressionism in Los Angeles, 1945-1980, From Rico Lebrun to Paul McCarthy exhibition in L.A. Raw was part of the Getty Foundation's 2012 initiative Pacific Standard Time: Art in

LA, 1945-1980, aimed at introducing the postwar Los Angeles art heritage to the public across the city's various museums and art centers. Charles Garabedian was among the artists featured in the L.A. Raw exhibition, including two other Armenian artists, John Altoon and Jirayr Zorthian.

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"Five Figures in Landscape", 1983
acrylic on panel
36x96 inches

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"Apollo and Daphne"
2009
acrylic on panel
35 1/2 x 94 1/2 inches



“The painting is never finished. The painting finishes you, you don't finish the painting.”

saints and exploring the Mayan and Aztec ruins. He is in search of an inanimate doll that seems to always escape his grasp. Chaz reminisces with nostalgia, “When entering Mexico, I got a sense of release and a feel for the pace of life.” Garabedian was inspired by the impressive works of the great Mexican muralists such as Jose Clement Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros, who dared to portray the fervor of life among historical scenes of struggle and triumph.

Garabedian was born in 1923 in Detroit, Michigan. When he was two years old, his mother passed away. Soon after, his father was badly injured in an accident and could not take care

of his young children. Charles and his two sisters lived in an orphanage until Charles was nine years old when the family reunited and headed to Los Angeles to a chicken ranch. As the Depression took hold of California, the Garabedian family venture failed. In this atmosphere of instability, Charles found his love in middle school—music. However, after serving in WWII in the United States Air Force, his focus shifted. He decided to take advantage of the G.I. Bill and began his collegiate path at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he completed his bachelor's degree in history. Years later, Garabedian met artist Ed Moses, who invited him to

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 "Ulysses"
 1984
 acrylic on canvas
 90 1/4 x 66 inches



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 "Untitled (Self Portrait)", 2000
 acrylic on paper
 17 1/4 x 12 1/4 inches



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 "Channel Swimmer", 2006
 acrylic on paper, 48x12 1/4 inches

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 "September Song", 2001-2004
 acrylic on canvas, 156x300 inches

→
 "The Spring for Which I Longed",
 2001-2003
 acrylic on canvas
 144x288 inches



a drawing class taught by surrealist painter and muralist Howard Warshaw, who had an extensive teaching career at UC Santa Barbara. After his encounter with Warshaw, Garabedian enrolled at the UCLA Art Department where he received his MFA in 1961. Upon graduation, he taught at UCLA and began to exhibit his work at the Ceeje Gallery in Los Angeles, the hub of figurative painters. The La Jolla Museum of Art, California State University, Northridge and the Whitney Museum of

New York have showcased his paintings. Currently, LA Louver Gallery in Venice, California is his artistic home. In 2011, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art presented Charles Garabedian: A Retrospective from January 22 through-May 1. According to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art press release, "This exhibition represents the first important museum presentation and catalogue in 28 years devoted to the art of Charles Garabedian. Bringing together approximately



Ceeje Gallery

Ceeje Gallery was a Southern California grass-root, avant-garde gallery led by Cecil Hendrick and Jerry Jerome, which was opened in 1959. The name of the gallery was created by combining Cecil's and Jerry's initials. Hendrick and Jerome both attended UCLA, in the Fine Arts and Theatre Arts Departments respectively. The Ceeje Gallery concentrated on showcasing the art of local artists, specifically figurative art that was passionate, thought-provoking and fresh. Many of the students completing their art education at UCLA gravitated towards the gallery and organized their debut solo exhibitions. The artists included Charles Garabedian, Louis Lunetta, Eduardo Carrillo, Les Biller and others.



“My line, my landscapes, and my figures reflect the collective unconscious,” Charles Garabedian says.

60 works created by the artist, the exhibition represents his entire career with an emphasis on paintings and drawings produced during the years since his first (and last) major solo museum exhibitions in 1983.”

Garabedian creates his art in a Los Angeles studio – a large white space adorned in paint drippings and works in progress taped to the walls. A long table in the middle of the room contains pencils and pieces of paper with bright ideas waiting

to be painted. Two skylights pour down light onto a dusty blue sofa and metal scaffolding used to paint large pieces. His current exploration is the poetry of E.E. Cummings, who once wrote, “It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.” Garabedian personifies this statement as he has given himself the freedom to evolve as a person and become the artist he was destined to become, always in search of finding his authentic voice. ■