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REVIEWS

FEATURED REVIEW

CHARLES GARABEDIAN: A RETROSPECTIVE

Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA



September Song, 2001-04,
Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of
L.A. Louver, Venice, CA.

Charles Garabedian is not the most recent art phenom to graduate from UCLA (his MFA was in 1961). Born in Detroit in 1923 to Armenian immigrants, his mother died when he was two. He lived in an orphanage until age nine, when his father was able to reunite the family on a chicken farm in California. After graduating high school Garabedian, as a member of the "greatest generation," joined the Army Air Force and flew more than 30 bomber missions over Europe as a tail gunner in a B24 Liberator. After the war he worked at various blue-collar jobs and went to college studying literature and philosophy before graduating with a degree in history. He didn't touch a paint brush until he was 31, and interestingly — given the often humorous nature of Garabedian's paintings — his first art instructor was the seriously figurative artist Howard Warshaw.

"Charles Garabedian: A Retrospective" is at the Santa Barbara County Museum of Art and was organized by museum curator Julie Joyce. The display of 61 paintings and drawings represents 45 years of work by this under-shown and much revered "artist's artist." This is a must-see opportunity to witness how an undercurrent of the contemporary art scene in Los Angeles evolved into its own unique and influential presence.

In the 1960s Garabedian was a member of the (not-as-famous-as-Ferus) Ceeje Gallery, which included artists such as Les Biller, Judith Linhares, Roberto Chavez, Louis Lunetta and Ben Sakoguchi. It was a colorful, multicultural group of individualists, mostly out of UCLA, whose work was generally figurative, pictorial and narrative. Writing for the Ceeje Revisited exhibition catalog in 1984, Dr. Susan C. Larsen described Ceeje as "A Warm Spot in the Cool Sixties." In another essay for the same exhibition (at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery) Fidel Danieli wrote: "If Ferus Gallery was the cutting edge of modernism, Ceeje was the ragged edge." At the time figural, narrative work was marginalized as "conservative" and not considered relevant to the "contemporary" art dialogue of the moment. Not willing to categorize himself or his colleagues, Garabedian termed them "independents,"* and he has emerged as relevant and influential in today's more pluralistic art world because his uniquely expressionistic works evolved around classic narratives that resonate with today's complexities.

Garabedian was already an established artist when a fellow Armenian observed that his works had a relationship — in line, color and composition — to Armenian illustrated manuscripts. Garabedian recalls: "I just liked to look at them and could see very interesting ways of composing and coloring ... I saw so much in these things that I couldn't look at any one of them without finding in every bit of the rectangle some imaginative, creative thing ... and I thought that somehow there was an actual affinity there ... I saw these people who were making these pictures very much like I was in that they had a certain sense of humor, a certain wit.**

His paintings are indeed infused with humor. *Family Portrait* (1964) shows a man, woman and child in a half-built Renaissance styled framework. The child is inquisitive and the mother — who may be "showing" — keeps her fingers crossed while the man (Garabedian) labors with a saw as he contemplates "family" dynamics.

Garabedian's way of rendering figures and settings has been described by multiple critics as "cartoon-inspired" or "cartoonish." This certainly is evident in some early paintings. *Adam and Eve* (1974), an example of the artist's use of biblical narrative, employs a suggestive Greek column to separate man and woman. Only their legs show (Eve wears polka-dot tights) because their heads are "in the clouds."

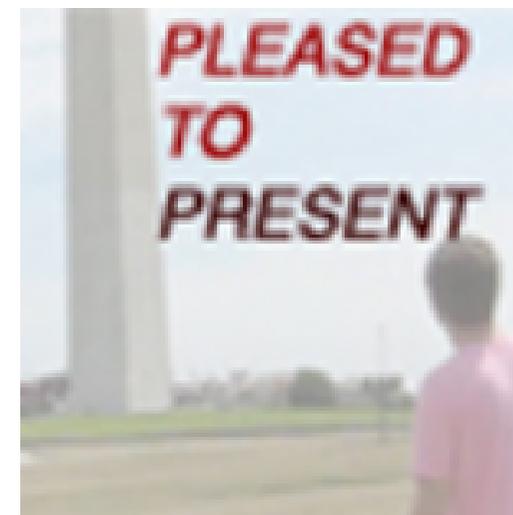
In more recent works — especially those that reference classic literature — the figures are less cartoonish, though "stylized" and whimsical: in *Adam and Eve*, Eve appears as temptress while a longhaired, blond Adam is depicted sheepishly mid-shrug.

The nature of Garabedian's figures is discussed in his 2003 interview with Anne Ayres for the Archives of American Art. They talk about his series of nine paintings (1978-80) titled "Prehistoric Figure ... Garabedian considers them mislabeled. He explains that he was trying to create "very sophisticated figures" that "could not think," so "precognitive" would be more fitting. Ayres describes them as "balletic" — graceful and informed renderings of the human figure though simplified, expressive and painterly. These works arrived at the beginning of the artist's engagement with classical narratives as metaphors around which he could muse.

Garabedian's paintings range widely — some are fairly flat and abstract displays of images and enigmatic shapes strewn across the canvas. But most are clearly narrative landscapes with figures and architecture. A common subject that is evident in nearly all of these paintings are his musings about male/female relations and the fallout of these two overly complicated genders living together on earth. This is inherent in the "Adam and Eve" series, and we can also see this in others such as: *Assassination* (1966) and *Love, Death, and Gambling* (1966), perhaps suggesting the complications of relationships; and certainly in *Apollo and Daphne*, (2001 & 2009).

Likewise Garabedian's many acclaimed paintings based on *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* portray conflict and may include women with men among the casualties. These classical narratives boil down to combat over a woman, revenge and carnage, and finally the quest of a hero trying to get home to his "true love." Garabedian effectively uses these classical narratives as framework for his own musings about human endeavors. But it's probably a mistake to try to read Garabedian's paintings literally, because they are musings and he is a "trickster," joker and master of visual non-sequiturs. Should you attempt to analyze he warns: "I am going to trip you up.** While not didactic, Garabedian does have an over-arching desire to create meaning. Consider his somewhat surprising quote: "Spiritual — I think this is what I look for to finish the painting."

Beauty is another aspiration that Garabedian achieves with color, scale and a refined sense of what is essential to expression.



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Among several truly monumental works in this exhibition are the unquestionably beautiful and spiritual *September Song* (2001-04); and *The Spring for Which I Longed*, (2001-03) — the titles may or may not provide relevant insights. These are wonder-filled paintings, epic in their ambition, gorgeous and truly awesome to behold. They are the heartfelt contemplations of a mature artist in love with life and confident of his intuition.

*(Anne Ayres): "Oral history interview with Charles Garabedian, 2003, Aug. 21-22," *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution.

Exhibition runs through April 17, 2011 at Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA, www.sbmuseart.org

- Noel Korten