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Poetry beckons painter Charles Garabedian

Charles Garabedian's emotionally resonant paintings underscore the lasting influence of a prolific albeit underacknowledged artist.

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Charles Garabedian came to art at the relatively advanced age of 32, after fighting Air Force missions in World War II, studying history at USC, manufacturing tires for B.F. Goodrich, assembling cars for Chrysler and working as a night shift railroad clerk. He was living in East L.A., "at loose ends," as he puts it, with low expectations for the future, and he tagged along with a friend — the artist Ed Moses — to a drawing class with the Surrealist painter Howard Warshaw.

"Howard pointed me to a cow skull," he recounts, "and gave me some ink and some paper and said: 'Start making lines.' After a couple of hours he looked at it and he said, 'Not bad, why don't you come back next week.' And that was how it started." Two months later, on Warshaw's advice, he applied to study painting at UCLA and was accepted on a probationary basis due to the fact that, by his own admission, he didn't know what he was doing. "I applied myself with enthusiasm," he says, "and I think the enthusiasm sort of carried me through." He studied with the painter William Brice and completed his MFA in 1961, at the age of 38.

Speaking now at the age of 87, in the Washington Boulevard studio he's occupied for more than 30 years, he relays these stories with detached amusement, as if a little surprised, himself, by how it all turned out. "In one of my earlier classes," he recounts, "one of the teachers said to me: 'You're starting too late.' He said: 'You're too old to learn technique. What you have to do is go straight for the poetry.' So I said OK, not knowing what the hell he was talking about."

It was a prescient bit of advice, in light of what his work became. His trajectory as a painter — illustrated currently in a wonderful retrospective at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art — has been one of inspired introspection, in which the intrinsic dictates of self, material and subject hold sway over the external demands of technique or fashion. What may have begun as painterly awkwardness gradually grew into an emotionally resonant visual language quite distinct among Garabedian's contemporaries (though visible in traces among the scores of younger painters he's come to influence).

Blending whimsical abstraction with a robust, archetypal brand of figuration — the nude figure is his most consistent motif — and a bright, energetic palette much indebted to the Southern California sunlight, the work is lyrical and strange, yet startlingly lucid. He's drawn his subjects primarily from mythological sources since the early 1980s — Adam and Eve, Apollo and Daphne, Dido and Aeneas, Odysseus — and brings to these stories a degree of sensitivity that illuminates both their and painting's fundamental humanity. (For example, a series made in the early 1990s based on "The Iliad" — a stunning portrait of war, devastation and mankind's capacity for self-annihilation.) If by "poetry" one means that mysterious lifeblood of the human imagination, Garabedian found it in spades.

Not that he would put it in those terms. When asked whether he believes that what his teacher said was true, he replies, "Absolutely." But when asked whether he managed to find the poetry, he demurs with characteristic modesty. "No," he says. "No, no, no. But I was able to ignore technique, which is just as important, isn't it?"

The silent type

Neatly dressed in pale slacks, a gray sweater and a red plaid scarf, Garabedian has a quiet, dignified presence, an air of formality that is periodically dispelled by a wry chuckle or a casual gesture. Unlike many younger artists one encounters today, who are encouraged from the outset to articulate their work in verbal, often academic terms, or some of his own generation who've developed a calculated spiel over time, he seems not to have many words for what he does. He speaks slowly and pauses frequently, glancing often to the work tacked up on the walls around him.

"You can talk on forever," he says, "about what you've learned. I don't know. I've learned something. That's all I can say: that I learned something. In fact, I think I may have learned an awful lot. But a lot of what I've learned is what to discard. There are no absolutes. There's nothing you can really count on. And I think it's better that way. When I open that door in the morning, I keep telling myself I hope somebody new is walking through this door. You're looking to change. That's the exciting thing about it: change, who you can be next, who you can be later on."

Garabedian's career took off quickly following his emergence from UCLA. He began showing with Ceeje Gallery in 1962, alongside two good friends — the painters Louis Lunetta and Ed Carrillo — whom he cites today as his greatest influences. He had his first solo show there a year later, the year he also married his wife, Gwen. (They have two daughters.) He had his first solo museum show in 1966, at the La Jolla Museum of Art; his first retrospective at Cal State Northridge in 1974; and a small solo show at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1975. Four years later, he joined LA Louver, which remains his primary gallery. He taught throughout this time as well, at UCLA and other schools.

A painter's painter, regularly cited as a precursor for each of painting's figurative resurgences — for Eric Fischl, Francesco Clemente, Julian Schnabel and company in the 1980s; Lari Pittman, Laura Owens and Dana Schutz more recently — he nonetheless remains conspicuously underacknowledged on the institutional level. Despite his steadily prolific output — he's had a solo gallery show nearly every year for decades, and appeared in a number of historical surveys, including MOCA's "Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-1986" — the Santa Barbara show is his first major museum survey in 28 years.

"While it is important to analyze Garabedian's pioneering and continued individuality, it is equally essential to place his work within a historical context, which hasn't been adequately accomplished through exhibition or in print since the early half of his career," says the show's curator, Julie Joyce, who also organized a smaller survey of works on paper at Cal State L.A.'s Luckman Gallery in 2003. She situates Garabedian among artists such as John Baldessari, Bruce Conner,

Llyn Foulkes, Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, who were working outside the constraints of the East Coast and Europe, developing highly imaginative, hybridized strategies. "The current pluralism of contemporary art is due in no small part to developments in art that were being made on the West Coast from the 1960s through the 1980s. Garabedian is one of its significant progenitors."

Both Joyce and Garabedian's longtime dealer, Peter Goulds, point to his enduring influence on younger artists. "Anytime there's a Charles Garabedian show," Goulds says, "it is tremendously well attended by all generations." He blames the lag in institutional attention on shifting curatorial preoccupations, but suggests that the rise of a younger generation of curators such as Joyce, as well the word-of-mouth engine of L.A.'s close-knit teaching system, will likely shift that tide again. "There are some terrific artists out there who teach, and even if the museums cease to focus on his work in any specific manner, other artists follow the work and those artists in turn tell younger artists, and the whole thing keeps going."

Paper chase

Garabedian's studio — a comfortably cluttered, rectangular space with a covered pool table at the back — is still very much in working order, though he says his time here has been limited in recent months by his wife having undergone knee surgery. "I used to come in seven days a week, rain or shine," he says. "I might not work but I was here looking at the stuff. Now when I come to the studio I feel compelled to do something, so the work has shifted. It's become a little more surface-y. The drawing is more casual." One wall is lined with a series of mid-sized paintings on paper based on Strauss' opera "Salome," another with works of a similar scale involving Prometheus.

He's worked primarily on paper for the last five years, though there are a couple of canvases in the back he says he hasn't had the "nerve" to get to. "There are those edges that you're stuck with, for one thing," he says. "Whereas I can add a piece of paper to any of these and just continue along." He flips one of the Prometheus paintings to face the wall, revealing extensions on either side. "Either I haven't had the nerve or I just find painting on paper so much fun. It's so friendly, such a friendly surface. I can paint in a very fluid way now, very watery. With canvas, you've got to have it straight up and down to work on it."

Garabedian speaks of art as "a process of self-realization," "a journey of self-discovery," though it's clear from his slightly perplexed tone that these words are merely provisional, the closest available to describe what is in truth a vast and indescribable process. What he's discovered is already there — quite literally — in the paintings themselves.

"There are times when I feel like it's over, I'm finished, there's nothing left," he says. "And I can look into my brain and see nothing there. I see it as a glass jar, and I reach in just trying to find a crumb or a scrap and there's nothing, just nothing. And then I'll be sitting in the studio and I'll just inadvertently make a line, or draw a foot or something like that, and that starts it going again. How do you explain inspiration? I don't know. It's a funny business. But I'm optimistic. I feel at times like there's a lot — obviously there is — a lot more to be done. There are things that I haven't seen in here and in here." He gestures to his head and to his heart. "Things that I'll see if I keep working."

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