



## APPLE CORES THROWN IN THE MONASTERY

*The New Work of Charles Garabedian*

There are only five of what are called Mediterranean climates around the world. The famous one—from which the climate featuring moderate subtropical weather patterns and land receptive to the growing of fruit, vegetables and native herbs received its name—is in Southern Europe, Central Asia and North Africa. The other four climates are found in central Chile, South Africa, Southern Australia, and notably, California. Each area of the world features the same brushy terrain, and each is graced by the same fragrant bursts of rosemary, lilac, lavender and sage. The shrubland or maquis terrain in Europe became known as “chaparral” in Southern California.

From the perspective of climate, interestingly enough, Los Angeles shares its condition with Athens, Rome, Tunis and Jerusalem. The Pacific currents may crash against L.A.’s coastline with more intensity than the Mediterranean washes ashore in Southern Europe, but the similarities are striking. Bleached sculptures almost look natural at the Getty Villa off the Pacific Coast Highway. Faux Mediterranean villas almost look at home on the slopes of Malibu. It is almost easy to imagine the bluffs of Catalina as able locales for Roman imperial vacation homes complete with atriums. Squint, and perhaps even the name “Catalina” almost could resemble that of “Capri.”

It is hard not to think of this strange reality when viewing the works of Charles Garabedian, who has so long been dedicated to the stories and characters of the ancient world. As one observes Prometheus, Electra, Polynices, Iphigenia and the good thief from the New Testament crucifixion rise up in Garabedian’s paintings, these characters



not only arrive as recurring motifs of literature, as many writers have observed, but they also arrive in a different way, as a part of a Mediterranean legacy in art. However, Garabedian transfigures this legacy through the bizarre mirror that Los Angeles holds up to the ancient world. If one were to try to get a handle on Garabedian, it helps to study the *Iliad*, the plays of Euripides and Sophocles, and the Bible, but it is also necessary to think of faults and earthquakes, of a rare place on earth where (due to the strange collision of tectonic plates) the mountain ranges run east/west, and not north/south.

Garabedian's work can be reminiscent of many artists' work throughout Mediterranean history, but one would be hard pressed to say that he is derivative of any one of them. Garabedian's doughy, slow bodies resemble the languor of Pablo Picasso's classical period (see *The Pan Pipes*, 1923), with its listless mothers and bathers rendered with a gravity and volume too heavy and thick for normal humans, yet too soft and tender for stone. Garabedian will foreshorten like Andrea Mantegna. He will compose a picture, at times, like Piero della Francesca, with abrupt but organized transitions of distance. He can be as dreamy and as prone to finding spirits in the world as Paul Gauguin, or as idle and luxurious as Henri Matisse.

However, these associations explain nothing. Instead, Garabedian's world is strange and hard to reduce to influences. I find no portrayal in the Mediterranean canon, for instance, quite as cartoonishly graphic as Garabedian's *Sacrifice for the Fleet*, 2014. The subject is familiar—the sacrifice of Iphigenia at the hands of Agamemnon before Greeks launched for the Trojan War—and all the characters have been assembled and have taken their positions: Agamemnon with his knife, Iphigenia in her central position of sacrifice, and the tortured Clytemnestra. The head is off and laying to one side, the knife is in its sheaf, the blood drips from the corpse. However, the fleet is as colorful

and as flat as a homemade theater curtain. It pushes all the space out of the picture, and the figures are as pliable as clay. Unlike the background of sea and ship, the floor is allowed to recede, as Renaissance tile would, but the floor is not tile at all, more like a De Stijl rug. The crimped hair of Clytemnestra, the animated punch of the severed head, those pigeon knees of Agamemnon. The dead body of Iphigenia looks ripped right out of Matisse's *La Danse*, 1909, but the grace is gone; she contorts and wilts like a puppet deprived of its strings. As with many of Garabedian's characters, the bodies are awkward.

Strangely enough, it is not the characters themselves or the narratives that drive Garabedian's paintings, at least at the beginning. Instead, his paintings begin as formal enterprises. He will set out to draw a body or a form, and will get to know the form through drawing. From there, he will paint. In regards to the arrival of a narrative in his work, Garabedian seems to be very patient. He does not know what is emerging until it has emerged. A woman with a contorted pose could be Iphigenia, it might turn out that she is Electra instead, or Clytemnestra. Garabedian “doesn't want to jump to any conclusions” about what the painting or drawing wants to be. It seems that what he is reading and thinking about will eventually arrive in his work, but the stories arrive only when they are ready. That awkwardness to Garabedian's figures is perhaps more a formal imperative than anything else.

“I used to make excuses for these flaws in bodies,” the artist will tell you, “but not anymore. Those are exactly the things that give the figures life.”

One of the highlights of Garabedian's new work is no doubt the large grouping of assembled sheets of paper titled *The Good Thief*, 2015. “There he was,” Garabedian said, “Christ again,” as a crucifixion scene started to emerge from his charcoal. Any insertion

of nails, of spears or blood in the scene, however, would, in the artist's opinion, be too disruptive. So, Garabedian segued into adding ropes, letting the character hang from those ties rather than from bloody bits of iron. Slowly, the painting became the good thief, and slowly took on aspects of the good thief's story. Saint John and Mother Mary, typically at the foot of Jesus' cross, became a man and woman that would not be out of place at a Grateful Dead concert. A nude arrives in front of the cross, seated on the ground apparently resting. Is this a vision of the outcome of the story, where the good thief joins Jesus in paradise?

There is certainly a bit of hijinks going on in these paintings: Garabedian always seems to be having, to his credit, a good time. Lately, he has been returning to inspirations present earlier in his career, the Armenian manuscript illustrations that fascinated him in his forties. If one views these manuscripts, one sees many of the features of Garabedian's art: a flattened approach to the human figure, ease with contorted poses of the body, and the appearance of the extraordinary presented with a deadpan or understated personality. The linear or illustrative impulse of figures and the eclectic compositions of these manuscripts often give only shy clues about their narratives. There is something elusive about them, something individual and unique in each plate.

"I'll tell you my untrue fantasy about Armenian manuscripts," Garabedian says. "They take some kid and put him in a monastery. He has talent at drawing, and so he has a job along with other kids who are also talented at drawing. I imagine these guys at their desks, horsing around, throwing apple cores at each other, and having fun."

This is an odd way of thinking about monasteries, but a delightful and instructive fantasy for viewing the work of Garabedian. In many ways, Garabedian is throwing

apple cores, making totemic and archetypal bits of seriousness from history, and making them personal and quirky and fun. His paintings are full of flights of fantasy and historical extrapolation, where way lays upon way such that you never know where you are going to end up. They are laid back and patient, waiting for the literary and wordy brain to catch up with the visual brain that wants to do whatever it wants, that is content to doodle, but also enjoys when the doodles accumulate in the never before imagined.

It is a rare treat in Garabedian's new work to see a large selection of drawings on view with his paintings. It is rare because Garabedian's drawings usually become his paintings. He starts out with charcoal, and almost always, at some point, decides to get the acrylic going and begins blocking in the forms to make a painting. However, drawing shows the genesis of Garabedian's thinking, and how he orients himself to the world of his painting.

There is something very fitting to find Garabedian's drawings taking on the material of the Greek plays and texts. The passion of the Greeks, one could say, sounding far more simple than they might want, was navigating the distance between the flux of the world on one hand and its apparent solidity on the other. What made the system of Greek gods so pliable and so interesting was that their different personalities seemed capable of handling the paradoxes of form and chaos. The fall of a Greek hero and the nature of hubris, from a certain point of view, was the punishment for a fundamental arrogance to claiming your meager knowledge as a handle on existence and the makeup of things. The world is too prone to change for that sort of certitude.

Observe the drawings of Garabedian dance and move and morph, and you have creation in Greek terms: The drawings seem, at their heart, lines chasing chaos, trying their best to remain alive and moving, but at the same time, calling out for form and willing

themselves into creation. *Untitled*, 2015 (p. 36–37), is simply tremendous in its ability to show forms evolving as though out of energy, out of clay, out of flux, out of whatever exists before thought. The man and the woman, that give and take between similar but different forces, fight, love, play, think themselves into being. They are bodies in the process of growing skeletons. Some features of their anatomy have definition, other features seem to be waiting for definition. They are in a middle state, a state of change, a state of becoming. They are Greek, through and through.

Nothing Garabedian touches lacks a personal spark of off-kilter vibrancy. His lines find their way through chaos, only to find form to not exactly be explainable on the other side of things. He is always both in the story and to the left of the story. He gives us clues to what may be going on, and then mischievously dismantles each clue one by one.

Such it is in Garabedian's Southern California world, where if one looks awry, they may see the classical lands coming gently into view in the sun and quickly fading away again. Garabedian, like Hollywood, can awaken archetypes of ancient tragedies and comedies and watch them change in contemporary application. After all, Southern California is a place where one can dig up a sphinx and discover that it is not ancient at all, but instead Cecil B. DeMille's dream of a sphinx, buried somewhere in Santa Barbara County in 1923. Garabedian lives here and thrives here, living in a legacy of Mediterranean art by way of the Venice canals and late night gondola rides in Marina del Rey.

One particular painting made me sad and happy at once. Sad, knowing its content, and happy knowing what Garabedian did with it. *Antigone and Polynices*, 2014, initially appears as standard art historical fare—one need only look to Jules-Eugène Lenepveu's tiny neo-classical work from the 19th century in the Metropolitan Museum of Art

to find an Antigone like Garabedian's. The heroine is against a desolate backdrop arriving to attend to Polynices, left naked to rot in the sun by decree, unable to receive a proper burial. We've seen this scene in theater, we've seen it in opera, we've seen it in painting. The subject is timeless.

Then it gets weird. Polynices could easily be a sleeping Buddha, such is his present contentment in death. And Antigone? It is not exactly resolve or determination on her face in this painting. Instead of asserting a universal imperative that the dead must be buried and the body must be honored even after death, she might as well be tending a garden. Antigone's face is not nearly in line with her task. In the end, what is this painting? It can't hope to generate what the original story hoped to, that cycles of violence and violation come back around, that pain and tragedy, by nature, infect generations.

Instead, Garabedian's painting takes us through all of that, all of those intentions, and leaves us alone in the sun, delighting in his imagination and personality. Yes, these are serious proceedings, but unselfconsciously so. Dionysus must be, in the end, allowed to enter the theater after all.

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