

CALENDAR

Saturday, November 8, 2003



L.A. Lower Gallery

CARTOONISH LANDSCAPE: Colorful forms are ambiguous, nearly abstract, in Charles Garabedian's "Electra at the Gate" (1998).

ART REVIEW

A seriously whimsical take on modern life

By DAVID PAGEL
Special to The Times

Charles Garabedian just turned 80. For the next month and a half, the Luckman Gallery at Cal State L.A. is celebrating his birthday with a splendid solo show. Beautifully organized by gallery director Julie Joyce, "Charles Garabedian: Works on Paper, 1965-2001" is an exhibition not to be missed.

It doesn't matter if you don't know Garabedian or have never heard of him. His user-friendly pictures of people, places and things turn firsthand experiences and autobiographical anecdotes into archetypal stories that resonate on many levels.

Garabedian's dreamy images of anonymous folks groping their way through the trials and tribulations of modern life deliver everything our celebrity-obsessed culture glosses over: familiarity that is not based on preposterous fantasies and inti-

macy that is not built on the fragile all-or-nothingness of infatuation. Slow-brewed and long-fermented, the L.A. painter's accessible art is a potent antidote to fickle fashions and flash-in-the-pan sensations. Just inside the front entrance hangs an approximately 3-by-9-foot sheet of paper on which Garabedian has painted an imaginary landscape that is as airy and elusive as a light-handed doodle and as loaded with as much meaning as you'd like to read into it. At first glance, its coloring-book style and palette of soft pink, baby blue and bright yellow make it look sweet and endearing. Its composition recalls a summer afternoon at the beach, where an inventive kid built a city of sand castles, including an igloo, a tepee, a California bungalow, a two-story storefront, a mill, a strip mall, a Spanish-style church and an Italianate cathedral.

But the longer you look at Ga-

rabedian's squiggly symbols (many of which nearly dissolve into abstract patterns), the more ambiguous the picture becomes. Its title, "Electra at the Gate" (1998), nudges you to see the blue form in the foreground as a figure, either a shrouded silhouette or a shadow cast by someone standing before the landscape.

In Greek myth, Electra enticed her brother to kill their murderous mother and her adulterous lover, perpetuating a cycle of violence from one generation to the next. Standing next to her, you can't be sure of your relationship to the picture, much less the show as a whole. With a few deft swipes of his brush, Garabedian gets you in on the action. There's no escape from his wily art, which is participatory and self-reflective, enigmatic and engaging.

The exhibition consists of 27 works that have not been installed chronologically. This suits Garabedian's oeuvre, which doesn't proceed in a logical or orderly fashion but continually loops back on itself, returning to the same loose corps of themes and ideas.

The aftermath of tragic, seemingly cataclysmic events is Garabedian's great subject. But

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LOS ANGELES TIMES

Survey of painter Garabedian

[Garabedian, from Page E1] his pictures are never portentous. Rather than making a play for grandiloquence, they collectively suggest that when life knocks you down, the only thing to do is pick up the pieces and get on with it. Think of these meat-and-potato paintings as the working-class counterpart to Francesco Clemente's elegant works.

Classic statuary, broken columns, temple ruins and fallen warriors regularly appear in Garabedian's works from the 1980s to the present. In two pencil drawings from 2001, Dido and Aeneas and Apollo and Daphne stare into one another's eyes with hypnotic power. "Amazons in Albania" (1994) shows two Rubenesque lovelies lolling around a plaza in their birthday suits. Others depict temples and the Greek countryside or portray Ulysses, characters from the "Iliad" and anonymous Greco-Roman wrestlers.

All are rendered in Garabedian's cartoon-inspired style, which simultaneously pays homage to Phillip Guston's despair-addled images of lonely souls and Jasper Johns' enigmatic iconography. But unlike Guston, Garabedian is a congenial optimist. And unlike Johns, his puzzles give way to laughter.

"Where Seldom..." (2001) is a hilarious home-on-the-range painting, complete with steers, sagebrush and a giant eyeball peering quizzically over the horizon. Likewise, "Ozymandius #3" (1996-97) depicts a house burning down, a dismembered corpse and a modest lump of dirt or dung on which a smiley face has been emblazoned.

The past is never far from the present in Garabedian's wildly imaginative works. Dreams and reality intermingle in his seriously whimsical pictures.

Before Garabedian turned to ancient Greece to find props for his bittersweet dramas, he turned to television — the source



L.A. Lower Gallery

EARLY WORK: Garabedian's "Time and Temperature" (1965).

of and medium for the modern world's most powerful myths. Five rarely seen works from 1965 and 1966 transform mindless entertainment into a springboard for the loaded stories that unfold in his lively paintings.

On the TV screen that nearly fills the surface of "Daytime T.V." (1966) appears a hobo, a bimbo, a pistol, a hand, a talking head and a huge 3-D cookie, around which spirals red, white and blue bunting. Garabedian used cardboard, plaster and "flo-paque" paint to build his riveting, low-relief image. Off-screen reality pales in comparison. To the TV's left, a figure carrying a cross down a city street is no match for the patriotic cookie, whose surface looks lunar.

Sex, death and tourism take funny yet troubling shape in the four other works from this series. "Assassination" (1966) is both comic and ominous, its snub-nosed depiction of murder turned into a metaphor by the address on the door in the background, 13247. Bad luck, all day, every day of the week is the message of Garabedian's darkly humorous drama.

Five works from the 1970s are transitional. Aside from the one that depicts a fire-breathing dragon, all follow the format of diptychs, their left and right sides mirror images of one another. "Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde" (1970) is a double self-portrait and "Adam & Eve" (1974) shows the biblical figures as lumpy, angelic sculptures, their torsos disappearing into fluffy-cotton clouds.

One of the best things about the exhibition is that many of its works are not covered with glass. While that makes them vulnerable, it lets viewers see every detail of how they were made. This reveals the intuitive nature of Garabedian's art and suggests that most of his images were not painted from preplanned designs but came into being slowly, almost by accident. It's as if each was a discovery of something the artist didn't know he was looking for until he found it.

Viewers experience something similar. Visiting the show is a lot like going to a party where you don't know anyone but end up having a great time.

It leaves you wanting to see more of Garabedian's poignant pictures, the works on canvas alongside these fantastic works on paper.

'Charles Garabedian: Works on Paper, 1965-2001'

Where: Luckman Gallery, Cal State L.A., 5151 State University Drive, L.A.

When: Noon to 5 p.m., Monday-Thursday and Saturday

Ends: Dec. 20

Price: Free

Contact: (323) 343-6610