

'Archipelago' Meshes Bliss With Doubt

ART REVIEW

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Some of us, in rare moments of grace, are suffused with an appreciation for the simple miracle of being alive. Something about Charles Garabedian's art imparts the hunch that he feels that way pretty steadily. It also suggests he holds a superstitious suspicion that something fishy, something slightly untrustworthy, lurks around this state of beatitude.

This combination of bliss and doubt reveals itself with unusual felicity in eight large new paintings on view at the L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice. Their collective title, "The Archipelago of Time," seems to equate human experience with the fragmentation of islands scattered in the sea. That notion acts as an apt description of both the pictures' composition and their mind-set.

They're a mélange of amorphous shapes that read simultaneously as geographic and metaphysical. Into this vessel Garabedian pours symbolically rendered images juxtaposed in a way that is at once so right and so wrong as to become comic.

"Searching for Alexander," for example, seems to dwell on the ancient classical world of primal myth. We see a fossilized mummy in her sarcophagus and a silhouette of Hercules wrestling with the centaur. The latter figures, however, are rendered upside down in a fishbowl. Nearby stands a row of ancient sailboats, but there is a modern military barracks sitting atop their sails, sprouting Old Glory. Next there's a golden trumpet that appears to be vomiting. Then comes a human heel. It should be that of Achilles, but then there is a foot wearing an Oxford shoe and a pink sock. The picture sets us off looking for Alexander the Great and leads us to Alexander's Ragtime Band.

That's funny but neither nonsensical nor cynical. Garabedian has been respected as among L.A.'s most engagingly wall-eyed eccentrics since the '60s. When the Neo-Expressionists came along in the '80s, he suddenly looked like a historically important pioneer. His art also links to current concerns with Deconstruction. But he is not about meaninglessness. This art is essentially about wonder.

Garabedian grew up hard. He spent time in an orphanage and saw combat in World War II. Generationally and chronologically he had every reason to



Charles Garabedian's acrylic "Herodotus" at the Louver Gallery recognizes that we're all beasts.

dwell in the world of classic modernism, of Diebenkorn and Francis; Picasso and Matisse. He's pushing 73. There are echoes of that in "Always." Its fleshy Matisse pink is as sexy and longing as the old love song. But there's a flag in it that recalls Jasper Johns. That's a reminder that Garabedian chose to retool himself into a contemporary artist.

His art is, thus, philosophically very existential. It agrees with guys like Camus and Sartre that life is a matter of self-invention. It clearly does not agree that the task is hedged around with angst and pointlessness. This art says life is confusing but it's a trip. A big painting like "Calendar" translates a quirky lack of pretense into an act of heroism. "Herodotus" recognizes that we're beasts like the Minotaur. "Apotheosis" knows we're just a bunch of nice guys who dote on our buddies and ladies with painted toenails.

It's far from a routine exhibition. Awareness of this is reflected in a fully illustrated catalog with a nice essay by Neo-Expressionist painter Pierre Picot. There's an almost symphonic richness about the work that causes a sense of crescendo and summary. The whole acts to remind us that the only comparable artist hereabout is Ed Moses. He recently had a retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art. It's time for that venue or the County Museum to accord equal recognition to Garabedian. He's earned it. He deserves it.

■ L.A. Louver Gallery, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice; to Oct. 19, closed Sundays and Mondays, (310) 822-4955.