

A Late Bloomer



ARTISTIC MEDLEY: Charles Garabedian combines Surrealism, folk elements, Outsider art and graphic whimsy with horizontal flatness in his "Garden of Hesperides."



BOB CAREY / Los Angeles Times

Charles Garabedian came late to art, but his 'Labors of Hercules' at L.A. Louver reveals work sensitive to ancient Grecian themes and loaded with the contemporary symbolism of Jung.

By Kristine McKenna

I've never played the art game, because I started my career 10 years late—and I don't see that as an advantage," says artist Charles Garabedian.

"If I'd started at the right age I probably would have been an Abstract Expressionist painter—I would have loved that, too, because for me Jackson Pollock is the most important artist of the 20th Century," adds Garabedian, who didn't pick up a paintbrush until he was 31 years old.

Coming late to the game, what the 72-year-old artist did instead was hammer out a style of figurative abstraction revolving around symbols and themes drawn from Greek mythology. Combining elements of Surrealism, folk and Outsider art and the graphic whimsy of Saul Steinberg, Garabedian's flat, iconic paintings are freighted with Jungian portent and feel very much of the Old World.

There's also something Byzantine about his lurid visual fables, and as is true of work by Francesco Clemente, who works similar turf, they have a Mediterranean fragrance. Sex and violence crop up repeatedly in Garabedian's art but are rendered with the good-natured bounce characteristic of cartoons; this flippant take on tragedy is what makes his work modern.

Garabedian—the subject of a survey exhibition at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art in 1981 and a mid-career retrospective at the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University in Massachusetts in 1983—has been making these provocative

paintings and exhibiting them hereabouts for more than 30 years, yet he remains one of the art world's better-kept secrets.

His show of new works, "The Labors of Hercules," on view at L.A. Louver Gallery through Dec. 23, will no doubt be visited by many of his local colleagues—Garabedian has long been an artist's artist—but it may be overlooked by those who prefer art with the heavy perfume of trend. That's never been what Garabedian is about.

"Chas is a great artist, and the only reason he hasn't had a bigger career is because he's too eccentric and is too much of an outsider," says artist Ed Moses, who has known Garabedian for 40 years. "Chas is a lone wolf who carves his work out of history rather than contemporary movements."

Of "The Labors of Hercules," which finds him moving away from figuration in the direction of pure abstraction, Garabedian says, "these paintings are a response to my last show at L.A. Louver in 1992, which was a series of studies based on 'The Iliad.' These new paintings were inspired by an analysis of Greek myth written by Robert Graves—I was taken with the myth of the labors of Hercules because it's such a great metaphor for life itself, and for what we all face."

Garabedian's labors take place in the studio he has occupied for 15 years on a flea-bitten block of West Washington Boulevard.

"I come here every day and listen to opera while I paint—I think I'll play Bizet today," he says one recent morning. "I lived in New York in 1986 and 1987, but mostly

Please see Page 75

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 1994

LOS ANGELES TIMES / CALENDAR

Garabedian

Continued from Page 4

my life has been spent in L.A.—my work is very much a product of this city in its use of light and color.

"There's something of Armenia in there too, however," says Garabedian, whose father emigrated to the United States from the family's homeland in 1920. "Until 10 years ago, I saw no connection between my work and Armenia. The Armenians who emigrated to America were working people, and my father was a farmer prior to leaving Armenia—he wasn't a cultured man. The Armenians who migrated into Syria, Egypt and Lebanon in the '20s, however, went to school and became more cultured. After World War II they were driven out of Egypt by Syria and Iran, and many of them came to America.

"Because they were educated, many of them looked up Armenian artists in America, so I got to know some of them, and when they saw my work they said, 'There's a collective unconscious at work here.' They showed me some Armenian manuscript painting, and there was a remarkable similarity in line, color and attitude.

"None of that visual information was in the world I grew up in, and I don't know why I was attracted to the arts. I think it's just being either blessed or cursed with a kind of middle-range intelligence, combined with the social situations I was in, coalesced to create this kind of life."

Although the life Garabedian has led was difficult in certain regards, you would never guess that to talk to him. An easygoing, upbeat character with a wry sense of humor, he tells the story of his life with little emotion and a lot of self-deprecating wit.

"I was born in Detroit in 1923, the youngest in a family of three children," he begins. "When I was 2 my mother died, so I was sent with my older sisters to live in an orphanage. My father worked in an automobile plant in Detroit, but around the time my mother died he was in a car accident that left him crippled, so he couldn't take care of three small children. He never recovered enough to work again and spent the rest of his life being cared for by my sisters—his life was quite tragic. He lost his wife, his health, his country, and never liked it in America. He would have loved to return to Armenia but was forced to leave by the Turks."

When Garabedian was 9, the family reunited and moved to San Gabriel, where his father bought a chicken ranch, which quickly failed. Living on welfare, at the height of the Depression, the family moved to East L.A., where Garabedian graduated from Garfield High School. In 1942 he enlisted in the Army and was sent throughout Europe, where he stayed until 1945.

"I was a gunner on a plane, which means it was my job to point a gun out the window and shoot at other planes," he says. "I was 19 years old, and death isn't a reality at that age, so I was too stupid to be

afraid. I saw people die, but I doubt that I killed anyone—it might have been some kind of awakening, had I known for sure that I killed somebody. Mostly I was just a fun guy and wasn't unhappy in the Army, because we lived a wild life over there."

Returning to L.A. from the Army in 1945, Garabedian went to college on the GI Bill, first studying literature and philosophy at UC Santa Barbara from 1947 to 1948. He then transferred to USC, where he switched his major to history, and received his bachelor's degree in 1950.

"I'd begun to lose interest in literature and philosophy towards the end of my time at USC, so after I graduated I began working crumby jobs—I worked at the Chrysler plant in Maywood for a while and at the railroad. I had no ambition when I was in my 20s and spent all my time on the golf course and at the track. I was gambling, but that wasn't how I made my living—that was how I lost it.

"I still go to the track once a week—the thing that continues to pull me there is the environment of the track, the people and the trashiness of it. I think it feeds my work. When I'm there I think about Hieronymus Bosch, who painted his figures very sympathetically. It's as if they're helpless and can't control themselves—you gotta have sympathy for them. My figures are painted to suggest something awkward and ungainly because that's how I see humanity."

In 1964, Garabedian moved to an apartment on Crenshaw Boulevard in the Wilshire district that he shared with two roommates. One day a friend of one of his roommates stopped by and Garabedian had a fortuitous encounter.

"The guy was Ed Moses, who'd just graduated from UCLA," he recalls. "He was taking drawing lessons from Howard Warshaw then, and one night he stopped by on his way to class and invited me along. I went, Howard gave me paper and a pen, pointed to a cow skull and told me to draw it. At the end of class he looked at what I'd done and said, 'Not bad—why don't you come back?' So I drew with Howard for about a month, and Ed and I became friends—in fact, we had apartments across the hall from each other on the beach in Santa Monica in 1967."

Recalls Moses: "Before I met Chas I heard about him from this mutual friend of ours, who told me about this pal of his who was sort of out of it. He said this guy had graduated from USC but was fed up with life and had thrown in the sponge, so he was working nights for the railroad and hanging out at the track all day.

"This guy said Chas had talent, though, and that he'd been making these paintings I should see. I saw them and said I thought the guy really had something—they were very naive paintings, but there was something there. It was sort of like mad art—they had a definite edge, and that edge has never left his work. There's always a lot of tension and angst in Chas' paintings."

At Moses and Howard Warshaw's encouragement, Garabe-

ART



TRIPLE PLAY: Garabedian's "Phrasius, Thrasuis or Thasius" (1992).

dian enrolled in graduate school at UCLA in 1957, where he studied with painter William Brice for four years.

"Being in art school was like being in the Army. I had a great time—in fact, I've always had a good time," Garabedian says with a laugh. "I just have a sunny disposition. As [artist] Lance Richbourg said, 'immortality's only interesting if you're alive,' and I don't worry about anything other than what's in the studio.

"I wouldn't mind if all my paintings went up in smoke either, because it's the activity rather than what it produces that interests me. I make art to find out who I am—and so far I've been rather disappointed in what I've discovered. I'd hoped to find Giotto or Omar Khayyam in there somewhere. I can key it to three words: I want my work to be primal, archetypal and monumental. Those qualities are at odds with my nature, which is lighthearted, yet you can't help pining for things."

Garabedian graduated from UCLA with a master of fine arts degree in 1961, and the following year he met Gwendolyn Morris, whom he married in 1963. They have two daughters, Claire Garabedian, a cellist living in Boston, and Sophia Garabedian, an artist who lives in L.A.

"As I was leaving the house this morning my wife said, 'Don't tell that reporter I supported you,' but she more or less did, because I didn't start selling work until

1978," he says. "I taught at various schools from 1961 to '73, but I hated teaching. I'd always go home from a day of it feeling like I'd spent the day lying."

If Garabedian's ambitions weren't aroused by academia, they weren't fired up by the idea of cracking the gallery system either.

"I didn't want to be at Ferus"—L.A.'s hippest gallery during the period when Garabedian began his career—"because all my friends showed at the Ceeje Gallery and we were happy with our scene," he says. "The Ceeje Gallery was started by two interior decorators, Cecil Hedrick and Jerry Jerome, who were always broke. In order to make ends meet they emptied their space in the spring of 1962 and rented it to Joan Ankrum, who was having an exhibition of Morris Broderson. He was popular at the time and Joan wanted extra space to show more of his work, so they rented their space to Joan and she sold the show out. At that point Jay and Cecil decided to get into the art business."

Recalls Moses: "I introduced Chas to my friends at Ferus, but they weren't interested in his work at all. That group tended to be very focused and limited in their views—Bob Irwin, in particular, could never understand my interest in Chas' work. So Chas started showing at the Ceeje Gallery, which opened a few years after Ferus, and developed a coterie of friends there, and he was the unofficial leader because he was the most intelligent and educated.

Chas has a very sophisticated mind, and he spends a lot of time ruminating and reading—he's very much a man of the world."

Says Garabedian: "I started exhibiting at Ceeje in 1962, but it wasn't until 1965 that I began to find my own voice as an artist. At that point I realized the work I'd been making was completely the product of my schooling and that I had to throw out the rules I'd so dutifully learned if I wanted to get anywhere. At that point my notions about what art was changed dramatically."

Freed of the restrictions imposed on his imagination by UCLA, Garabedian embarked on a period of wild experimentation.

"I made sculpture out of things like chicken wire, wallboard and resin, and worked with Flo-Paque, a crafts paint used for painting on dishes," he says. "I made a series of sculptures out of butcher paper and glue, which I exhibited at the Ceeje Gallery in 1966, and after the show I folded them up and put them in the trash."

Having sown his wild oats in terms of testing alternative materials, Garabedian returned to paint and canvas and zeroed in on a set of parameters he's more or less stuck with for the past 16 years; central to those parameters are the nude human figure and sexuality.

"The figures I paint are always nude because I don't want them to be tied to a time or station in life," he explains. "And, to paint clothing properly you have to paint from life, which is something I also avoid—I'm interested in creating archetypal figures and I don't think you can do that when you paint from life. I don't work from photographs either—the paintings come entirely from my head—and my work always tells a story, although that's not by choice. I favor the long horizontal band format because I don't like creating illusions of depth. That somehow seems false to me, and a painting that unfolds horizontally somehow seems less apt to create illusions of depth."

"There's a very consistent attitude about sex in the work. The women are always aggressive, and the men are passive—I'm sure that's a reflection of the relationship between my wife and I. She wears the pants in the family and I don't argue much with her decisions. My friends tend to be men, yet I think men are worthless in a way that women aren't, and I think those feelings are reflected in the work."

"The paintings always surprise me," he adds. "I begin them, then they take over and lead me, and it's frightening, like a roller-coaster ride. You lose it, you get it back, then you lose it again. Sometimes I surrender to the painting, and sometimes I fight it. Regardless of who wins, art has given me an amazingly rich ride through life." □

■ Charles Garabedian, "The Labors of Hercules," L.A. Louver, 77 Market St., Venice. Tuesday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Through Dec. 23. (310) 822-4955.

Kristine McKenna is a frequent contributor to Calendar.