

Santa Barbara Museum of Art

Rattling Our Mythic Bones... The Creativity of Charles Garabedian in a 50 year Retrospective

“Creativity is a strange thing, very elusive. The important thing is that everybody has to do something and everybody should find out who they are.”
 – Charles Garabedian

A RISING FROM THE BONES OF SOCIETY, and stretching ancient narratives into a vibrant new mythology, works by Charles Garabedian are on exhibit at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art through April 17th.

Charles Garabedian: A Retrospective represents the first important museum presentation in 28 years devoted to the work of this elusive artist. Bringing together around 60 works from institutional and private collections across the United States, the exhibition represents the artist's entire career with an emphasis on paintings and drawings produced since the early 1980s.

Celebrating the opening last Saturday, the Museum flung wide its doors for a reception with the artist, art luminaries, donors, and then general membership, and then welcomed everyone back for a panel discussion with the artist on Sunday.

Well into his 80s, Garabedian may not be a household name, but his accomplishments and influence among artists on the West Coast during the last 30 years has been substantial. His exploration of figure, landscape, and subject matter paved the way for new generations of artists who have demonstrated a renewed focus on imaginative representations of the figure.

“Charles Garabedian's substantial body of work holds many revelations for younger figurative-based artists who owe him quite a debt,” shared Julie Joyce, SBMA Curator of Contemporary Art and exhibition organizer. “He has been labeled in the past as an eccentric,

which I believe marginalizes the role his work plays in the realm of contemporary art in the United States. This exhibition will reveal his highly unique path as an artist, but also, more importantly, reposition him as a figure who contributed to the pluralistic view of art, place, and practice that took shape on the West Coast in the 1980s.”

“I'm not an expert at mythology,” Garabedian commented during the reception. “I just paint what floats in...” And the exhibit has that sense of being fed by this intuitive artist's vibrant unconscious.

Garabedian dismisses any perceived lack of attention, claiming that his work is more about understanding and expression of himself, than about providing a road map for an audience. “By nature, I'm suspicious of myself and curious about myself...I don't

think it's true that without an audience you have no reason for working. When you work in relation to an audience you're a designer, not an artist...Once you start thinking of other people, you start thinking, ‘Let me make this a little clearer.’ If you do that with your paintings, it makes the painting dull,” he remarked in a previous interview.

Garabedian's work is far from dull. His paintings and works on paper explore themes of war, music, the body, dismemberment, heroism, comic pretension, love, and death—all conveyed with a sense of immediacy, intimacy, and poignancy.

While a prominent influence stems from ancient characters and tales, including the *Iliad*, *Romeo & Juliet*, the Minotaur, and Apollo and Daphne,



Charles Garabedian, *September Song*, 2001-04. Acrylic on canvas. Collection of the Artist, Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA.

underlying the work is the artist's own confrontation with the joys and struggles that pervade our daily lives.

“In his extraordinary works, Garabedian approaches painting as a kind of battlefield of the psyche, manned by cultural tropes and personal memories,” Michael Duncan, art historian and critic, commented on the artist's distinctive approach to artmaking in his essay that is included in the exhibition catalogue. “An instinctual Freudian, he offers mythic retellings of war, friendship, death, and sexual experience, mining both individual and collective consciousness for sparks of subconscious truth. This untamed process is everywhere evident on his canvases, manifested in dream-like landscapes and seascapes littered with lumbering forms, sketchy marks, crumbling architecture, and skewed body parts. These are visual representations of the artist's thought, designed to entice viewers to follow the associational processes of an artist on a voyage of self-discovery that just might result in shipwreck.”



Charles Garabedian, *Prehistoric Figure (Brunette Female with Skull)*, 1978-80. Acrylic on panel. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Gift of Jeanne K. Lawrence.



Charles Garabedian, *Study for the Iliad*, 1991. Acrylic on paper. Private Collection, Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA.

The thought-provoking power and occasional uneasiness that the works in this exhibition demonstrate lead us to realize that for the artist, and for ourselves, the journey of self-discovery may never be completely realized. This is part of the reason Garabedian continues to actively work in his studio, day after day—armed with the hope of getting closer to the truth. He notes in a previous interview, “I can do some bizarre things. I'm really a shy person. I can't proceed in a flamboyant way in public, so I make my work and I wonder where it comes from. It comes from who I am, obviously.”

Accompanying the exhibit is a hardcover catalogue that is comprised of 212 pages and 95 color illustrations, designed by Lorraine Wild/Green Dragon Office. Contributors include Michael Duncan; Christopher Miles; Nevin

Schreiner; exhibition curator and SBMA Curator of Contemporary Art, Julie Joyce; and SBMA Director, Larry J. Feinberg.

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The Museum is located at 1130 State St and is open Tuesday - Sunday 11 am to 5pm and closed Mondays. For more information call 805.963.4364 or visit www.sbma.net.



Charles Garabedian; Larry J. Feinberg, SBMA Director; Julie Joyce, Exhibition Curator and SBMA Curator of Contemporary Art; and Gwen Garabedian



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Charles Garabedian, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 1970. Collage, acrylic, pencil, watercolor, and charcoal on paper. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Gift of Hansen, Jacobson, Teller, Hoberman, Newman, Warren and Richman, LLP.