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INTERVIEWS • WEEKEND

Beer with a Painter, LA Edition: Charles Garabedian

- by [Jennifer Samet](#) on August 23, 2015



Charles Garabedian, "Antigone and Polynices" (2014), acrylic on paper, 51 x 48 1/4 inches, framed: 55 1/2 x 51 1/4 x 2 inches (all images copyright Charles Garabedian and courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA, unless stated otherwise)

LOS ANGELES — “I can barely remember doing all this,” Charles Garabedian says to me as he flips through the pages of his own museum exhibition catalog, which I have brought along. We are talking in his studio: a no-frills, large street-level space on West Washington Boulevard in Mid-City Los Angeles, with paintings on paper in progress, and endless marks and grids on tabletops and walls—remnants of four decades of

painting there. “Well, this thing looks terrible,” Garabedian says, amused, looking at one image, “...but this is pretty good. I guess I’ve done a lot.”

He stays above the fray throughout our conversation, telling the stories of the myths he loves and travel adventures with friends, rather than explaining the work or aesthetic decisions. “You are a humanist,” his wife Gwen calls out to him, when she hears us discussing his personal relationship to Greek tragedy. Garabedian is humble but ambitious; the figures in his paintings are monumental but gawky – relatable heroes and heroines. It is hard to imagine the work of Dana Schutz, Judith Linhares, and Francesco Clemente without Garabedian’s example, although Garabedian would never claim to lead any school; he is too busy with the challenges and fun of the daily work, even at age 91.



Charles Garabedian (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Garabedian has been an experimenter with materials and pigments: using Flo-Paque, a commercial acrylic, for early paintings of popular culture subjects like baseball and daytime television. In the 1960s his work straddled the line between painting and object, as he used resin, acrylic, and wood to construct surfaces. Much of his later work is

large-scale painting on paper, with biblical, mythological, and literary sources: the Old Testament, *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, Sophocles and Euripides.

Garabedian was born in Detroit in 1923, and received his Bachelor's degree from the University of Southern California in 1950 and his MFA from University of California, Los Angeles in 1961. He taught regularly at UCLA and University of California, Santa Barbara. His first solo exhibition was held in 1963 at Ceeje Gallery, Los Angeles. He was the subject of solo exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (1966 and 1981), Cal State, Los Angeles (2003-04), and a retrospective at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (2011), curated by Julie Joyce. In New York City, Garabedian is shown by Betty Cuninghame Gallery, where he had a solo exhibition in January – February 2015. He is represented in Los Angeles by L.A. Louver gallery, where a solo exhibition is forthcoming in October 2015.

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Jennifer Samet: *I read about your childhood, which was very challenging. Your parents were Armenian refugees, and your mother died when you were very young. I know that you started your path to becoming an artist later in life. Did you draw as a child at all?*

Charles Garabedian: I had a difficult childhood, but when things are difficult, it is good to be very young. You just get through it. I drew when I was a child. I remember romanticizing World War I pictures. I would draw men in the trenches, shooting at one another. Later, I was in the war, in the Air Force, but I never thought about becoming an artist.



*Installation view of "Charles Garabedian: A Retrospective" (2011), Santa Barbara Museum of Art
(click to enlarge)*

You hear now a lot about the rehabilitation of veterans. I was one of those wrecks. But at that time, there was no program; we were just dumped out of the service and back into life. They did offer tuition funds to veterans, so I got a Bachelor's degree in history at University of Southern California. I graduated and went back to the same old lifestyle in East Los Angeles. My friends and I were hoodlums, just rolling around the streets.

I met a tall, intelligent young man named Warren Reiss. He spotted me and said, "You can do better than this." We became friends and he told me I had to move out of East LA. He had done some painting, but had become a lawyer. He introduced me to Ed Moses.

One night Ed came by the apartment and said he was going to take a drawing lesson at a private school in West Los Angeles in order to get into the University of California, Los Angeles graduate school. Ed suggested I come along. Howard Warshaw was the teacher. He gave me some paint, a pen, and some paper, and said, "Just make lines in relationship to the cow's skull. Don't try to draw it well."

I sat down and drew for three hours. He came back and looked at it, and he said, "Not bad. Why don't you come back next week?" That is how I got started. I went back to

Howard for about two months. Then he suggested I enroll in graduate school at UCLA, and study with William Brice.

I went up to UCLA, filled out a lot of papers, and thought I was all signed up. But I got a phone call from Gordon Nunes, who was then chair of the department. He said, "You can't just sign up for the UCLA graduate school art program. You have to be approved! Come see me today and bring some work." I scrambled for what nonsense I had lying around. He looked at the work; he looked at me; and he said, "You don't know what you're doing." I said, "That is why I'm signing up." He said, "Okay, you are in, but only on probation. You are going to have to be checked out by the faculty every quarter for a year." So there I was.



Charles Garabedian, "Wood China Wall" (1968), acrylic, wood and resin, 72 x 92 inches

It started a whole new life. I became a new person. I moved from East LA to a little apartment on the beach in Santa Monica. Everything was suddenly different. I was doing something that I was incredibly interested in.

I had to do all the undergraduate work in drawing and painting, and I had to take some art history classes. I loved it; I became a real freak about art history. Eventually I graduated and then I started teaching at UCLA.

JS: *In 1965, when you had begun teaching at UCLA, you declared that you were going to stop reading, in order to avoid any literary influence on your work. This statement became part of your artist's manifesto. Can you tell me about that?*

CG: Yes. I said in a pompous way that I was going to stop reading and become a "totally visual person." It became a bad joke because my reading comprehension has deteriorated incredibly. I read more than three words and I am lost. So that's how that goes! I think part of the fun of being an artist is making pompous statements. Manifestoes can be more fun than the paintings themselves.

JS: *It is also ironic, as so much of your work since then is based on mythological and biblical subject matter, like the Greek tragedies, the Iliad and the Aeneid.*

CG: I had read the Iliad when I started college at USC. I kind of liked it but I didn't pay too much attention to it. But at one point, I became very interested in Homer. More than that, I had a teacher at USC named William Baxter, who taught Shakespeare. He was far out and he taught in an auditorium with a stage. He would recite the parts to us, and Shakespeare became very exciting to me. I wasn't involved with art yet at that point.

JS: *You exhibited early on with Ceeje Gallery in Los Angeles, which was nicknamed the "ragged edge" in relation to the "cutting edge" Ferus Gallery. How did Ceeje start and how did you become part of it?*

CG: Lance Richbourg was part of our group of friends from UCLA, and his girlfriend at the time was Ellie. She later married Francis Ford Coppola. She was a designer and was showing at a space on La Cienega Boulevard owned by Cecil Hedrick and Jerry Jerome. She herself had ambitions to turn her quilt work into fine art. Jerry and Cecil decided they should be dealing with fine art too, not design.

They asked Ellie if she knew any artists. She introduced Jerry and Cecil to our bunch. We had no experience, but they took us all on. There was a rousing opening. Everyone

got excited. Of course, they didn't sell a thing, so they came back to earth. The gallery kept going for a couple of years. They didn't get smart. Ferus Gallery was a "can't-miss" situation, and we were laughed at. But, it was fun, ultimately. We had a good time.



Charles Garabedian, "Daytime T.V." (1966), flo-paque, ceramic on board, 41-3/8 x 61-3/8 inches

JS: In the mid-1960s, you made paintings based on popular culture imagery like "Daytime TV" (1966), using Flo-Paque paint. Then you began the China series, which were less narrative and more abstract. Why are they named after China? Also, why did you choose to work with acrylic, resin, and wood at that time? You have said Rubens would be using resin if he could, for the luminosity. Is that what you were after?

CG: I know I had a good reason when I did it. I can remember making pompous statements like, "The Chinese are the oldest culture in the world, so they must be very important, and far ahead of the rest of us. So I will do *China* paintings." I would write the word "China" on paintings. It was self-conscious nonsense, but I got good work out of it. I wasn't copying Chinese art. Part of my statement was indicating my inferiority to it —

that I just wasn't capable of dealing with something that good. It was a sort of childish homage, even though I wasn't that young at the time.

As for the resin, it was about the luminosity, but also the dimensionality that comes with transparent surfaces. I would do drawing, resin, then drawing, then more resin, then painting, so I had five or six different surfaces on the same painting, with the idea that it would come through. And it did. It was a lot of work, but it still didn't come out looking like Rubens.

I went into art and fell in love with the idea of art, without any real understanding of what was going on. I just enjoyed the beginning art history lectures. I enjoyed Jan Van Eyck and Giotto. It was terrific. Here I was, almost 40 years old at the time, and I was like a little kid.

Elliot Elgart, who was a beginning painting teacher at UCLA, also had a big influence on me. He had taken me aside, and said, "Chas, you're not like these other students. You're not intimidated by technique. You'll never understand technique. You'll never have any technique. What you should do is go straight for the poetry and the art. Forget about all that other stuff. That's for kids." It sounded pretty good to me.



Charles Garabedian, "Man Tearing His Heart Out" (1974), resin, fiberglass & acrylic, 100 x 104 x 1/4 inches. Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA

Maybe I was already too well developed as a person. I was an adult, dealing with issues that I shouldn't have been dealing with. I had enough experience in life to understand certain things. There was something that flowed within me, and it was too late to deal with drawing, color, and paint, ironing it out, and making it into a trained kind of product.

JS: *You have also used this rawness to your advantage in paintings like the "Prehistoric Figures." How did that work come about?*

CG: One evening I started painting a standing figure. I got involved and it was just killing me. I was having so much trouble with it. I was working and working and finally after many hours, I said, "Forget it." I left and went home to bed.

The next day I got up, went to the studio, saw it there, and was stunned. I thought, "My God, you finally painted a figure." It told me how to paint more, with these brushstrokes just constructing figures on pieces of panels. It was what they call a turning point or a breakthrough. I had these nine figures. Even today when I look at them, I feel good and like I accomplished something.

JS: *Were you interested in sources like Matisse's dancers or Cézanne's bathers, in relation to those primordial figures?*

CG: Yes. When I see Matisse's *Dance* paintings, I wish I had done them. Even now that I'm 91 years old I think of those photographs of Matisse as an old man, sitting and holding a dove in one hand, or holding his scissors. I wonder, "How did he do it?" Matisse's late work is so great, so beautiful. Now I realize it could not have been perfect. He was probably suffering from hemorrhoids and having a terrible time. When you get to this age, you are limited in many ways. Yet, Matisse was able to pull it off.

JS: *Much of your work, especially in recent years, is on large sheets of paper. Why do you work on paper?*

CG: Paper gives me freedom. You can go to the studio, rip off a large piece of paper from a roll, pin it to the wall, and start working. With canvas you have to stretch, you have to prime, and you have to be serious. Paper is so simple, and sometimes it works. I do have one excuse; I think I have a sensitivity to the way paper moves. It doesn't lie flat, and it affects your linear ability. Paper is kind of alive and has a mind of its own.

JS: *Do your paintings ever come out of dreams or memories?*



Charles Garabedian, "In Memoriam" (1999), acrylic on paper, 16 3/4 x 26 inches

CG: The painting, "In Memoriam" (1999), was done from a memory of two very close friends: Louis Lunetta and Eddie Carrillo, who have died. We were staying at a forlorn hotel in Baja, Mexico. We traveled regularly to Mexico, once making our way from Mexico City down to Oaxaca, to Mérida and the Yucatán.

The Mexican artists, who were true revolutionaries, influenced us. We loved Orozco and Siqueiros. I think Orozco painted the Mexican situation, and Siqueiros painted the mythology and magic of Mexico. Rivera painted the colorful aspects of Mexico. Some of Rivera's paintings are quite beautiful, but a lot of them we weren't interested in.

There was a little painting by Orozco at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that I used to go see. It was a man on a horse and woman with a shawl and a baby holding on to the horse. It was the saddest painting you would ever want to see.

JS: *Sadness and tragedy are such important aspects of your work. Are they, or your own experiences, what led you to work so thoroughly out of the Greek tragedies, like Antigone and Iphigenia?*



Charles Garabedian, "Sacrifice for the Fleet" (2014), acrylic on paper, 47 3/4 x 68 1/2 inches

CG: I just love the Greek tragedies. I don't know what to say, other than I read them. Those tragedies are something else. The writing itself is profound, but there is simplicity to the imagery. Recently I made a painting of Antigone and Polyneices. It was almost convenient to use them, because the story is so step-by-step. In a complicated world, it is possible to reduce those stories to simple images. You can turn them into a compact understanding.

When I read something like *The Burial at Thebes*, I feel so close to Antigone. Antigone wants to bury her brother, so she is shipped off to a cave to die. The king's son, who is in love with her, goes to be with her. The king suddenly realizes he has made a terrible mistake. So he runs up to the cave to rescue her, and finds her, and his son, already dead. He is totally distraught. He goes home, but his wife, who has heard what

happened, has also killed herself. Whoa! How can you be just left like that? He is barren of any life or hope. It is a sad, sad story.



Charles Garabedian, "Iphigenia" (2015), acrylic on paper, 36 x 93 inches

For the last few months I have been painting Iphigenia. Iphigenia's father sacrificed her, so that the fleet could sail off to Troy. She was bound and gagged so she couldn't curse them as they sailed off. I think, if you have to have a subject, it might as well be tragic. You grow older and you see life in a simpler or different way, and it can be looked at tragically. Tragedy is not necessarily painful; it is just tragedy.

When you first start, you think you are going to be a great artist. You get older, and it just doesn't happen. And then you calm yourself by saying, "Rembrandt didn't care either." You just keep going. I'm stuck with who I am and I do the best I can. I do have hopes that it hasn't all been a waste of time. And I don't think it has been. But it is not for me to worry about.

Is there really any use for painting right now? I don't know. But I convinced myself that whether or not there is, that is what I was going to do. You are asking about things that are a total mystery to me. There is no logical reason for doing these things. Being an artist is a strange way to live your life – walking into a room every day, having to do something, and not knowing what to do.

Every time I walk into my studio and open the door, I am hoping I am a different person. I am hoping something different will happen. Of course it doesn't, but I have that slight hope. The studio is magical, and it is not just a place where you work. You can lie down and sleep. It is a place where you create and where you are by yourself, you can be alone. Your studio can be a beautiful and nutty place, and it is.