

Charles Garabedian Betty Cunningham

It's hard to overlook the awkwardness of Charles Garabedian's exhibition at Betty Cunningham Gallery. Tears and wrinkles in the canvas, ill-framed images, and inarticulate brushwork are all evident. Garabedian is not an accomplished painter. Neither, it appears, does he desire to be. That's not what is at stake in his work. What is at stake is the plausibility of his personal symbolism. Godlike, gods, and beasts drawn from the annals of mythology and the artist's own repertoire populate his paintings. The work trades on the conveyance of meaning in these figures, meaning which is a pure product of the artist's intent. So the question is, is he in earnest?



Charles Garabedian, "The Spring for which I Longed" (2001-2003), acrylic on canvas. © Charles Garabedian.

Courtesy Betty Cunningham Gallery New York.

"The Spring for which I Longed" offers one answer. It is mammoth, of a size comparable with the largest New York school paintings. In it, Garabedian seems stretched a bit thin. In a how with no shortage of rough-hewn paintings, it is perhaps the most crudely painted. It does not lack vitality of imagination. At its upper center, the seething sea reaches high to grasp at the orb of the moon. Musical notes and animals are discernable amid the waves. From this chalky, cobalt mass rises a promontory in the shape of a man's featureless face. Its mute presence on the horizon overshadows everything on horse in the paintings foreground. There, rejects of all sorts are strewn and godlike women. One, perhaps an Anemone with her Poseidon, is caught by a mass of oysters and seaweed. A second goddess is prone, dropping from view at the painting's lower border. The whole feels smashed together. With Garabedian, contours don't breathe and form, painted on, threaten to fly away.

For all of its shortcomings, it's hard not to be impressed with "The Spring for which I Longed," if only for its sheer abandon. At this call, with his painting, Garabedian fearlessly courts disaster. He does so seemingly without intending "bad painting," the kind of painting which self-consciously makes a virtue of its own shoddiness. In that sense, Garabedian's exuberance is reminiscent of expressionists such as Francesco Clemente. In short, before this painting, one reaches the conclusion that the artist is, in fact, in earnest.

That decided, how does one proceed? In other words, once you've established that a personal symbolism is meaningful, that its figures and narratives function symbolically and that the painting of the figures itself is not the issue, how do you proceed with a critique? It is only fitting that the artist set the terms for the critique and, fortunately, Garabedian does so in a smaller painting entitled "Garden." Less explicable in terms of symbolism and more successful in terms of painting, it is certainly not a garden of earthly delights. In it, disembodied forms float freely and an upended body is decapitated by the image's lower boundary. These qualities of disjunction and inversion call to mind another contemporary expressionist, Georg Baselitz, and open a crack in Garabedian's exhibition. Baselitz is relentless and sophisticated in finding ways to upset his imagery, from fracturing his figures to painting them in bloody earth tones to not finishing them at all to hanging them upside down. With the exception of "Garden," Garabedian's work seems less self-conscious. Therein lies its charm. In introducing a painting as sophisticated as "Garden," the artist upsets the naive directness that threads his show together. Although it proves disorienting here, the move might prove fruitful for future exhibitions.

-Ben LaRocco

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