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Myth, Flesh, and Three Paintings by Charles Garabedian

by **Thomas Micchelli** on June 4, 2016

Charles Garabedian, “The Eunuch” (2003-04), acrylic on paper, 48 x 61 inches (all images via **Betty Cuningham Gallery**)

There is a small **exhibition** in memory of Charles Garabedian (1923 – 2016) currently at Sidecar, the adjoining annex space of Betty Cuningham Gallery on the Lower East Side. Consisting of one painting on each of the room’s three walls (the fourth is a large window facing the street), it’s a quick reminder of the long life and prolific output of a Los Angeles painter whose work was filled to bursting with light, color, and a ribald empathy for his fellow human beings.

In the introduction to an **interview** for Hyperallergic Weekend published the year before he died, Jennifer Samet captures Garabedian’s personality and influence in a single paragraph:

> 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.

The three paintings, all acrylic on paper and fairly large — ranging from three to six feet in height — were made within the last 13 years of the artist’s life. They are also uniformly enigmatic, touching on myth, religion, and exotic ancient civilizations, themes Garabedian mined for much of the latter part of his career.

“Stigmata” (2014) is the most recent and perhaps the oddest of the three: it is dominated by the figure of a woman, her back turned, her head thrown back, her fingers dug deeply into her hennaed locks as she stares skyward at the crucified Jesus hovering above her like a helicopter. It is a motif usually associated with depictions of St. Francis, holding out his hands in supplication as they are pierced with holes mimicking Christ’s wounds.

Charles Garabedian, “Stigmata” (2014), acrylic on paper, 72 x 45 3/4 inches (click to enlarge)

The woman in Garabedian’s painting doesn’t appear to have a mark on her: is she currently pre-stigmata, or is Jesus passing her by? The woman’s pose can be one of ecstasy or despair, and the tension

between the two lends the image its strength. The colors, though, are unquestionably buoyant — juicy greens, yellows, ambers, and umbers roiling around an expansive field of powder blue.

Even more curious than the relationship between the woman and Jesus is the imagery painted on her clothing: what appears to be a lamppost on a grass-lined sidewalk adorns the back of her blouse while, on her skirt, a sailboat beneath a yellow sun floats across an emerald-green ocean. Is the latter an allusion to the many Gospel stories featuring the sea, and is the lamppost a sign for the equivalence often drawn between God and light?

Garabedian isn't letting on, and the gentle, cheeky humor pervading the image — "monumental but gawky," in Samet's phrase — suffuses it with a lightness of touch that escapes any hint of ponderousness. The artist may be using a theme of pious suffering as his source, but his treatment is in no way tied to the usual connotations or historical precedents. He remakes the idea into his own fresh (in both the offbeat and impudent senses of the term) image.

"Sisyphus" (2007) is a throwback to Renaissance and Neoclassical paintings by the likes of Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Nicolas Poussin, who would diminish the significance of their ostensible subject so that it becomes just one component of a much larger context — the workaday world in the former's "**Landscape with the Fall of Icarus**" (c.1555) or the sweep of nature in the latter's "**Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun**" (1658).

In Garabedian's take on mythology's exemplar of pointless labor, Sisyphus is shoved all the way to the left edge of the painting, an anonymous figure rendered in penumbral tones of muddy brown and moss green. He isn't rolling a rock but holding it aloft, as light as a hunk of Styrofoam. To his right, and taking up most of the composition, is a plinth built of bricks and surrounded by classical columns, which stand atop a stepped platform, like an altar. A pink, rocky outcropping, where Sisyphus can be found engaging in his labor (whatever it might be) rises on the left, while directly behind the plinth Garabedian has made a mountain ridge from scraps of reflective metal foil, a silvery shimmer against the milky blue sky.

There must be a purpose to the altar-like plinth, which comes off as 20th-century-rust-belt-industrial compared to the Doric columns, but the reason isn't apparent. The closely spaced pillars, which, upon second glance, look as if they're made of poured concrete rather than limestone or marble, suggest both a temple and a jail. If the brick plinth is meant as an anachronism beside the mythological figure of Sisyphus, is it a shrine to modern industry or a relic of its decline?

The questions raised by the architectural elements are compounded by the fantastical landscape behind them. The rocky outcropping is sexually suggestive in its pink fleshiness, while the silver foil of the farther range might denote snowcaps or mountains of quartz. The cordoned-off plinth seems to embody the painting's opacity, an obstacle blocking further inquiries while setting off such a buzzy mental tease that we soon forget Sisyphus altogether, who could be an anonymous, routinized worker in the post-industrial social order, or a stand-in for the artist, whose obsessive labor adds a touch of mystery and wonder — the silver foil — to an otherwise utilitarian world.

Charles Garabedian, “Sisyphus” (2007), acrylic on paper, 35 1/4 x 44 1/4 inches

Ten years ago I wrote a **review** of a solo show by Garabedian, who was 83 at the time, at the Cuningham Gallery in its former Chelsea location. The catalogue for that exhibition included an interview between the artist and Kristine McKenna, in which he says, “As we age, our physical need for sex decreases, but the role it plays in our imagination and in our emotional lives remains the same, and may even increase.”

In the review I noted that “[t]he strongest works in the show are the ones in which sexuality is at its ripest—lush, brightly keyed paintings of full-bodied nude women in creamy pinks and hot crimsons,” and so it’s intriguing that the piece hung on the gallery’s center wall is called “The Eunuch” (2003-04), in which a nude man bends forward, legs spread as if anticipating a medically indicated indignity, leaning on the barren ground with his arms crossed at the wrists. His forward-thrusting pose obscures any evidence of his emasculation.

The abstraction of the figure is severe, with the legs and arms forming a set of triangles that shrink in size from left to right, like an inverted W, giving the configuration of the eunuch’s body a hieroglyphic feel. The archaism of the image is underscored by the stripped-down landscape — a sand-colored mountain similar to Yosemite’s Half Dome rising above some brushy, dung-brown evergreens.

The tension here is both formal and physical: the contortion of the nude body is almost painful to look at, and there is an uncomfortable split between the foreground and background as the eunuch’s buttocks form a matching ridge to the mountain on their right. Consequently, the landscape refuses to settle into a specific space, pulled forward by the figure and backward by the pale yellow-and-violet sky.

We can't help but read into the image, which was painted the year the artist turned 80, an element of self-portraiture and self-parody, especially if "[a]s we age, our physical need for sex decreases, but the role it plays in our imagination and in our emotional lives remains the same." The entanglement of need and desire is shot through the figure's contortions, as the split between appetite and ability condemn the naked eunuch to the fate of a sexual Tantalus, with satisfaction continuously at hand and consistently thwarted.

The straightforwardness of Garabedian's bright, simple colors and ungainly figures — mythic icons rendered as flawed, flesh-and-blood humans — springs from the directness and honesty of his vision. In his interview with Samet, he describes how he felt at the moment he decided to commit himself fully to painting: "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." It was a long life, and he was blessed to keep at it until the end.

Charles Garabedian: A Tribute to Chaz *continues at Betty Cuningham Gallery's Sidecar (15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through June 11.*

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