

# Art issues.

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## Charles Garabedian

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Isolated shapes and disconnected images are rendered like mismatched jigsaw-puzzle pieces in Charles Garabedian's recent exhibition of large-scale acrylic paintings, "The Archipelago of Time." Lush with color, shape, and meaning, the paintings are the ripe fruit of a long career navigating the territory between abstraction and figuration. They join personal psychology with a rich lexicon of heroic history painting.

Garabedian's painting is the threshing floor for his experiences. Such a foundation is unusual to see: Since the early nineteen eighties, abstraction has become codified to the point where painting and its

elements simply quote the concepts modern art originally explored, as forms in all mediums often are conjured to serve theoretical or social agendas. The impulse to explore life through art is framed by the window of postmodernism, and painting has become a shopping trip through art history. In the best-case scenario, these connections are vital; in the worst, they are necrophilic. By contrast, Garabedian's art lies firmly within the canons of both abstraction and figuration, exploring life's history as well as art's.

At seventy-three-years-old,

he is not an anachronism, but an artist who has tenaciously continued to develop both with, and against, the culture of his time. His paintings have the freshness of a musical dub, but it is his own history that he is sampling.

Moving between representation and abstraction, Garabedian's art has the feeling of polymorphous familiarity. Abstract forms are dissociated from any one referent, while representational forms have many. Within each painting, the surface shifts fluidly between flat, linear, and volumetric space. *Always* (1996) is layered like a Silverlake hillside. Backgrounds of yellow, lavender, beige, and ecru emerge as amorphous shapes. A bulbous column, beige and sparsely bricked, reads as the floor plan of a barracks, and a river or waterfall of bubble-gum pink bumps into the edges of a flabily mottled lavender ground. In *Herodotus* (1995-96), what at first looks like a string of pink teeth outlined in red later appears

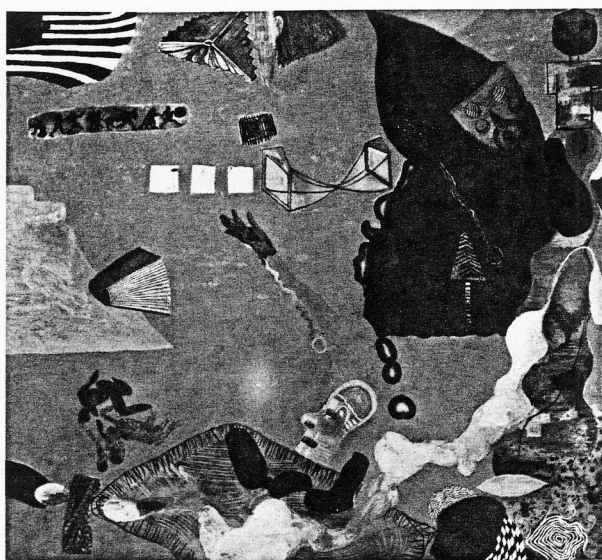
as the belly of an alligator tipped on its nose. Its fins transform themselves into a mountain range, and then disperse into pointy islands lying in an ocean. This figurative hybridization plays out in Garabedian's painting, the associative transitions emblematic of the continuous movement of thought.

Garabedian mixes public icons with private ideas in idiosyncratic narratives. Juxtaposing these symbols, his paintings communicate imagined events without being tied to particular historical occurrences. *Looking for Alexander* (1986-96) evokes an eternal battle through the use of various symbols of home, country, and war—including American flags and battling centaurs. The recurring symbol of a man's oxford knee-socks brings direction, travel, and decision-making to an individual level.

Garabedian's figures have developed from the voluminous contorted nudes of his earlier series "Studies for the Iliad" to the more disintegrated figures shown here. Surrogate and dismembered body parts now stand in for different aspects of the human psyche. Masks bear witness to painted events. In *Calendar* (1995), phallic masks with conical eyes, an oven-shaped head of painted yellow bricks, and a red wood-grained Cyrano-type silhouette hover about, watching like a gaggle of ghosts. A blackened skull in *Ozymandias* (1996) floats with fleshy body parts in front of a desertlike ground. The checkered pants of a truncated body drip blood from its ankle cuffs and waist; legs are splayed and bent like rubber. Arms fall, one here, one there, as fingers are severed in a clean line. Shoes and feet are heaped in the bottom corner of the painting; a decapitated head looks up sleepily from beneath the rippling lines of water. This complete but disconnected body is exposed as ultimately helpless and ridiculous, an image of death charged with life's fears of impotence.

Alluding to time through fragmentation, Garabedian's paintings achieve a strong sense of pictorial completion. Like a kid ambitiously trying to make a picture of his whole world, his dreams turn to stone. "The Archipelago of Time" simultaneously documents lightning impulses and repeated, slow-moving thoughts. One again comes to believe in the ability of painting to communicate the sensation of memory, an awareness of living in history, not after it.

Ingrid Calame is an artist and writer living in Los Angeles.



Charles Garabedian  
*Archipelago of Time*, 1986-96  
Acrylic on jute  
68" x 74"