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Oral history interview with Charles
Garabedian, 2003 Aug. 21-22

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Charles Garabedian on August 21, 2003. The interview took place in Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Anne Ayres for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Mr. Garabedian and Ms. Ayres have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ANNE AYRES: Tape one, side A. The interviewer is Anne Ayers for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The interview is with the painter Charles Garabedian. The date is August 21, 2003. The interview is being conducted at the subject's studio on West Washington Boulevard near La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles, California. I think we'll start, Chas - may I call you Chas?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Certainly.

MS. AYRES: C-H-A-S, Chas. I think we'll start with a conversation about your parents, your upbringing, schooling, and how you chose your career. The Archives specifically wants this as a background for discussing aspects of your work and its development over the years. Perhaps talking about your discovery of a real affinity with medieval Armenian manuscript paintings might be a good way to get started on this background.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, it is interesting. I was brought up, totally, without regards to my Armenian heritage. I had already been through school and decided I wanted to be a painter and was painting away and I was well developed as a painter. My development was pretty far along, and my introduction happened in a roundabout way.

I met an Armenian who knew something about Armenian art history and the manuscripts and he said, "There's a great deal of similarity in terms of your line, your color, et cetera." And I thought, oh sure. Then he gave me some books on manuscripts and I liked them quite a bit and was actually taken in by them. It was almost like being conned by them because I felt that their strengths in relationship to my work was almost a shortcoming on my part, but it just became more and more evolved and I finally started getting - and my wife encouraged me to get books on manuscripts - Armenian manuscripts.

After WWII, and in the '60s and '70s a lot of Armenians were coming over from Lebanon and Egypt and Syria, and these were Armenians who were different than the ones who were born here, like myself, or my father who came here with the idea of getting away from the Armenian...genocide. They immediately became workers, uneducated workers. They went into farming and into industry and became laborers and that was my upbringing, lower-middle class Armenian people who had just gotten away.

But this influx of new Armenians had all been educated, and they found me and actually you had a sense that they were looking for Armenian artists over here. Through them I became more and more acquainted with the manuscripts. It was never a very academic knowledge of the manuscripts; I just liked to look at them and could see very...interesting ways of composing and coloring. What do you call it? Not the academic side of making art, but the intellectual side of making art in terms of what do you do to a rectangle. And it got that I learned or I saw so much in these things that I couldn't look at any one of them without finding in every bit of the rectangle some imaginative, creative thing. I started to relate to the people who were making these manuscripts and I thought that somehow there was an actual affinity there. I saw these people who were making these pictures very much like I was in that they had a certain sense of humor, a certain wit, and a certain way of communicating with one another. I got this misguided notion that these guys were sitting around at desks drawing these things and then saying, "Hey, look at this and look at that." And so I think I saw a lot of wit in these things, even in the direst circumstances in the pictures, and eventually that worked out badly, because one of the things I got sick and tired of in my own work was wit. Yet it's something I can't seem to escape. It's almost like the motivating force in the work is, "How clever this is!" And then it becomes a problem of overcoming the cleverness.

MS. AYRES: That sense you give of a cheerful one-upsmanship, was that the spirit of the Ceeje Gallery [Los Angeles, California] when you were showing there early on?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. We were primarily UCLA students and we had an academic upbringing, I think, at that school. And modern art - we didn't even really know that modern art existed.

MS. AYRES: I always had the feeling that they stopped teaching art history somewhere around Courbet in the

middle of the 19th century as a modernist, so modern art is – Impressionism.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, actually we went beyond Courbet [Gustave Courbet]. A lot of what we worked with were these huge reproductions of Monet [Claude Monet], Manet [Edouard Manet], Renoir [Pierre-Auguste Renoir] and I think even some Cézanne [Paul Cézanne].

MS. AYRES: Even Cézanne? I guess I was talking about art history; you're talking also about the studio classes. Was this an MFA program or an MA program? That's a very academic question about the academy, but it shows up differently in different places.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, let me tell you how I got into UCLA. I met Ed Moses simply by accident and Ed had gotten a BA from UCLA and he wanted to get into graduate school but they told him, No, no, no, you can't draw well enough." So Ed said, well, he would improve his drawing. So there was this artist you probably know about, Howard Warshaw. Howard had this private school. He and Keith Finch had the Finch-Warshaw School of Art up on San Vicente [Boulevard in Los Angeles]. And Ed would go there one night a week and draw under Howard's thing. So I saw him one night while he was on his way. I asked him where he was going. He said he was going to Howard's to draw and said, "Why don't you come along?"

So I went along, and at this point, I think, I was working on the railroad and it was after the war. I went and Ed introduced me to Howard, and Howard gave me a piece of paper and a pen and ink and pointed me to a cow's skull, and he said, "Start making lines. Don't try to draw the skull, just start making lines in relationship to it." So I sat there diligently for two or three hours making these ink lines, and he came by and looked at it at the end and he said, "Not bad." He said, "Why don't you come back?" So I drew with Howard for about a month or two months, and then he got a job teaching up at Santa Barbara and he said, "Go to UCLA and study with Bill Brice."

MS. AYRES: But you'd already been painting and you already went to Santa Barbara and to USC.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Not as an artist. I was a major in philosophy and literature and history.

MS. AYRES: But the actual picking up of the first brush happened before you took these drawing classes.

MR. GARABEDIAN: No, it came after it.

MS. AYRES: So Ed just didn't come by and see your paintings and say go to this which some of the interviews say.

MR. GARABEDIAN: No.

MS. AYRES: So that was your first picking up of a mark-making utensil

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. That was the beginning.

MS. AYRES: They let you into UCLA?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, I had my BA in history, with minors in literature and philosophy. I went into the administration and I did all the paperwork and signed up for graduate school in art and was accepted.

MS. AYRES: Ed Moses was having trouble getting into graduate school?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, it didn't work out. What happened was the day before we were supposed to go to classes I got this call from the art department – a guy named Gordon Nunes who taught up there. He said, "You can't just go. You have to be approved by the faculty. I want you to come here tomorrow at noon with some work." I didn't have any work. I was living on the beach at the time. So I called this guy up from the beach and had him pose for me. I did about an hour's worth of figure drawing and then I took them to Nunes. He looked at the work and said, "You don't have a clue as to what you're doing. You don't know what you're doing." But then he said, "I'll tell you what. We'll take you on probation, but you're going to have to be approved after every quarter and you're going to have to take all the undergraduate work." So I said, "Fine, that's what I'm here for." And so that was how it began and I think it took me four years to get my MA.

MS. AYRES: Four years to get your MA. It was not a Master's of Fine Arts. It was a Master's of Arts at that time.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. They didn't have an MFA at that time.

MS. AYRES: Could you talk a little bit about the philosophy of pedagogy at UCLA? You say it was fairly traditional, fairly figurative.

MR. GARABEDIAN: It was figurative and it was traditional, but there was also an acknowledgement, I think, of the

present, although they did not push it that much. We had Bob Heinecken teaching photography at the time. Bob was pretty far out.

MS. AYRES: Bill Brice was certainly a modernist.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Bill was up there, but Bill was a very responsible person, and he felt he had to teach responsibly. Maybe that responsibility was his sense of bringing people along as he felt they wanted to be brought along. So we just fell under his spell. He would have let us do anything we wanted to if we had enough brains to do it. He was a great teacher. The teachers were all good. The thing is they were all very provocative and they made it very interesting.

I had to take all the art history classes. I loved art history. Do you know Karl Birkmeyer, a German art historian? I took a class with him. One day he took me aside and he said, "Charles, are you an artist or are you an art historian?" I said, "I'm an artist." He said, "Okay. In that case, you don't have to write a term paper." So I just went to class and enjoyed the slides. I think he appreciated the fact that I enjoyed his class.

MS. AYRES: Were most of the artists involved with Ceeje [Gallery] from UCLA?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, yes, they were. There were a couple of oddballs that came out of Ceeje. Do you know Ed Newell? Ed showed there. He was definitely not out of UCLA. They had a Philip Pearlstein drawing show. I met him later in New York and he absolutely denied ever having shown at Ceeje.

[Ms. Ayres shows Mr. Garabedian a catalogue] Where did you get this thing? Oh, this was that show [Ceeje Revisited].

MS. AYRES: It's not from the period.

MR. GARABEDIAN: All these people went to UCLA.

MS. AYRES: Would you name them while we're looking at them? You're in the picture. We're looking at the cover of the Ceeje Revisited catalogue.

MR. GARABEDIAN: This is Lance Richbourg, Jim Urmston, Les Biller, Bob Chavez, and Ed Carrillo [Eduardo Carrillo].

MS. AYRES: And Ed Carrillo. In that catalogue, Fidel Danieli - we all remember quips that quote, "If Ferus Gallery was the cutting edge of L.A. modernism, Ceeje was the ragged edge, and several of the artists could parody their own situation and bill themselves as the rear guard." I believe there was an exhibition at Ceeje called Six Painters of the Rear Guard. I imagine that rear guard was a good joke.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. You bet.

MS. AYRES: Did the group at Ceeje feel they were conservative in the sense of upholding a figurative tradition?

MR. GARABEDIAN: No. They looked at themselves primarily as independent artists.

MS. AYRES: You were looking at the art historical record. What painters did they tend to look at and did they enjoy German Expressionism?

MR. GARABEDIAN: German Expressionism was important. I think as an artist, at certain periods of your existence, you attach yourself to different people, and at this particular time German Expressionism was important to all these people. Orozco [Jose Clemente Orozco] also was a critical artist because we had Chavez and Carrillo in there and they were both very aware artists. We traveled to Mexico a lot and saw a lot of Orozco, and I think later even Siqueiros [David Alfaro Siqueiros]. We came to appreciate Siqueiros much later.

MS. AYRES: Which is a very different tradition from, say, classical cubism?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Right, and yet there was within this group somebody like Les Biller who was very, very aware of what you might -

MS. AYRES: So we were talking about the sorts of artists who interested the Ceeje group and you just commented that Picasso [Pablo Picasso], for instance, was a big deal at UCLA.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. But not necessarily just for the analytic cubist thing, but the whole of what Picasso represented as an artist. I think his range was simply that he was the monster. I think we saw him, primarily, not as a particular artist who gave the world a particular style, but as a huge monstrous personality that stepped on the whole world of art.

It's not like people were unaware of Abstract Expressionism and what came before. We had Arthur Dove showing up at UCLA and we all were aware of de Kooning [Willem de Kooning] and Pollock [Jackson Pollock], but somehow we saw ourselves in a very – I hate to say it – a romantic way. We did not see art as a way to make a living. We did not see it as a growth industry. At best, we saw it as a teaching possibility.

MS. AYRES: Well, you've taught for a while yourself, and I think you commented to me some time ago that you didn't like teaching very much.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I think I probably told you that, on driving home, I always felt like I had spent the day lying to people.

MS. AYRES: Because you were encouraging them, or because you were telling them things that you thought they wanted to hear?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, at the moment I was talking to them, I probably thought, boy, I'm really a smart guy and I'm really on target here and I'm really doing something wonderful, but then, driving home I just felt, no, that wasn't right. You're not smart enough to tinker with these people's lives this way.

MS. AYRES: It is a big responsibility. You said Bill Brice took it very seriously, that responsibility.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. I came to dislike teaching in the sense that I don't like that person who's doing that. I'm not going to say you can't teach art, because everybody knows what that means. You can't teach art, but I felt that my teachers were important to me. They taught me something. I learned something while I was there. If they can only encourage you and create an enthusiasm, that's fine. The discipline itself takes over finally in the grand picture of who is chosen and – what's the saying? Many are called but few are chosen?

MS. AYRES: Well, it's also a matter of finding your own voice. You said you didn't find it until maybe 1965.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I didn't even realize I was supposed to have a voice. I thought I was supposed to paint like Holman Hunt or something like that. That was my goal, I don't know why, maybe because I thought that's the correct way to paint. And yet, I didn't really learn to maybe appreciate art while I was in school, or to see just how wonderful some of the things were that these people were doing were. I just liked the idea maybe of being an artist and I thought I knew that being an artist simply meant to draw and paint pictures.

MS. AYRES: I think today people at least go to graduate school with a much more professional, career-bound point of view, and always questioning their position in contemporary art and so forth, but I don't think that existed when you were at school.

MR. GARABEDIAN: No, it didn't, at least not at UCLA because UCLA was a university. I was contemporary with Bob Irwin, Billy Al Bengston, and those people. We had studios next door to one another and they knew what they were doing. They had a clear idea of what they were doing. Larry Bell once said to me, "Chas, do you know what I want to do? The most important thing for me is to make it big in New York."

MS. AYRES: This was part of the mystique of the Ferus Gallery though, too. It's highly, highly professionalized for all the romance that has grown up around the Ferus Gallery. The more romantic people were probably with the Ceeje or with other galleries.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, we like to say the stupider people were with Ceeje.

MS. AYRES: But the less career-driven, maybe?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, definitely. Well, I think, you could say that most of them there were driven by the idea that they thought that probably the end was teaching at some university or school or something and if they were good enough they would succeed beyond that, but they didn't see the world of galleries and contemporary art out there while they were in school. Didn't see it or somehow didn't connect with it, or didn't see fine art or the selling of art as a way of making a living.

MS. AYRES: Bruce Conner once said something, talking about the Bay area in the late '50s: that there was no eye, ear, nose of the media there, so why not just put some assemblage out in the alley and then sweep it away the next day? Because there was no sense that you were being watched or reported on or reviewed all the time. That reminds me a little bit of the early sculptures you did. You talked about painting and drawing, but you had a period working on sculpture and they were fairly ephemeral, although not all of them.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, very much so. One show I put up, I destroyed at the end of the show. I folded it all up and threw it in the trash. It was...in about 1965 or maybe...earlier than that. At one point I decided to stop reading. I thought reading was bad for a visual artist or a visual person.

MS. AYRES: You came from the study of literature.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I said that the important thing is not to be influenced by what you read, and so I just wanted to be a totally visual person. I went on like this for years and the work that came out of it was interesting, but I finally did start reading again. There was a lot of naiveté involved, and I found out the reason you read is not to learn. You read to enjoy it – it's something wonderful to do, and it took me all that time to figure that out.

MS. AYRES: And I think you figured it out about painting, too, but we were talking about sculpture though.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, the sculpture; there was at one point, I think about 1965 or '66, I suddenly had these insights, these wonderful childish insights I think. The problem with my work is it's influenced by my learning, and I set up this example: if you make two lines in school, the teacher's going to say, this line is good; that line is bad, but finally at some point you realize the bad line – I'm responsible for that, too, and there's something there, it's just that this guy didn't like the bad line, but maybe it's important. And so I said the only way to get rid of that is to stop painting. And I said, well, I'll stop painting and I'll go into sculpture because I hadn't had any sculpture classes.

And so I started making sculpture and it was just wonderful. I had a great time. Stuff looked good and I had no problems, no restrictions, "no how does this thing work in space" or any of that stuff. I didn't have to worry about that. It could be flat. It could be half round, full round, or could be looked at flat, as a silhouette. I think that's when I finally started making what you would call contemporary art [was] when I went into sculpture. I made some things that were so obtuse out of strange materials.

MS. AYRES: I've seen photographs of what appear to be arrangements of long planks or maybe they're made out of cardboard that you freely painted and they were situated directly on the floor. They were painted, though.

MR. GARABEDIAN: They had paint on them, yes. I would drip paint on these things and assemble them.

MS. AYRES: These long horizontal ones; have you thought about these sculptures as precursors to your interest in horizontality? It seems to be very early there.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I never thought of them as such, but I think I'm aware of that horizontal behavior on my part. I thought of the horizontal behavior as a part of an idea about narrative, that somewhere inside of me there is—getting back to the manuscript illuminations—there is an idea that there has to be a narrative at work, and with this format it's almost like you have to go that way. You have to go that way with your narrative, and that's hard to do.

MS. AYRES: Since we were being emotional and romantic about the privilege and joy of painting and being and looking at painting, maybe it's just as well. I wanted to ask you again, and have you say that again, about starting 10 years late. I think today there are all sorts of different ways of approaching a career and no set year to go into work. Especially with women, who returned to a career after they've had children and things like that, but from your period [a] late start that nevertheless had the advantage, as one of your teachers said, of your being already engaged with the poetry of the endeavor without having learned what might be called the techniques or the conventions or the expected ways of expressing that poetry.

[SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

MR. GARABEDIAN: When I think of it, I had lived 30 years and had a unique life – not unique in any particular sense, but unique simply because it was my life, and there was something there that had never been explored. I think I was a person and never knew it, or never knew that there were possibilities for me to express myself, or that I had something to say or that I was somebody. I was just a child of the Depression and my ambition in going to high school and graduating from high school was to maybe get a job at the Continental Can Company and that was it.

MS. AYRES: You were in the Air Force?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, and when I got out the whole world opened up to me in terms of the GI Bill and going to college but once I'd finished – gotten my BA – I just fell back into my earlier life of just getting a job and working and not being able to stand it—working a job here and a job there. Then one day I met Ed Moses. This one little incident just changed my life.

MS. AYRES: Isn't it amazing when you look back how something can change your life like that, and then you think, well, maybe I would have met someone else and would have gone in another direction or – in one sense I think one feels fated and in another sense completely arbitrary. At least the older I get, the more arbitrary I feel.

MR. GARABEDIAN: It's pretty amazing, I guess, when you think about it.

MS. AYRES: After Ceeje closed in 1970, you showed that year at the Eugenia Butler Gallery. What was working with Eugenia Butler like? Was she primarily interested in conceptual art, or was she all over the map?

MR. GARABEDIAN: She was in love with the idea that art is something really crazy, and yet she did have a sense of responsibility about art. I think more than anything, she wanted to be an artist herself and she wanted to behave like an artist in a far-out spectacular way.

MS. AYRES: People mention early performances or performative actions that she did that are famous I think for those who saw them.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Let me tell you one incident. This was years after her gallery closed; I had a studio in Culver City at the time, so this must have been in 1974 or '75. It was on a Wednesday I think she called, she said, "Chas, I'm going to die today. I want you to come up to the house for the funeral on Sunday," something like that. I thought, "What's this nonsense?" I said, "Well, gee, Eugenia." She said, "I'm very sick." So I said, "Well, okay." And this was an Easter Sunday.

I couldn't get the thing in my brain at all that she was going to die on Friday, and so I go over to her house, and there is Jim Butler, her husband serving expensive wine and there are people sitting around - all the art crowd and people with video cameras and I'm still wondering what the hell's going on. Then I hear this siren, and I thought, "Oh, well, gee, this is Easter Sunday and I missed the children's Easter egg hunt."

And sure enough, this hearse comes driving up and pulls into the driveway. The back door opens and these two big guys come out and wheel Eugenia out on this thing and she's covered; then she stands up and throws off the covers and she's totally nude and she says, "I'm resurrected." And then she goes in and we're all sitting there. She sits down on this throne-like thing and she has all these people come up. She had this drug that she had picked up from Tijuana or something and she wanted people to approach and tell her where it hurt and she'd rub this stuff on them and make them better. That was Eugenia.

MS. AYRES: I've heard a version of that story, which reminds me that there were other galleries besides Ferus and Ceeje, such as Virginia Dwan and the David Stuart Gallery and the Broxton Gallery, where you showed once. I'm unfamiliar with the Broxton Gallery. Could you speak a little bit about it?

MR. GARABEDIAN: The Broxton Gallery was Larry Gagosian's gallery. Larry was beginning to feel his oats when [he] opened the Broxton Gallery, feel the scent of his own power. He came around to the studio and said he'd like to show the work. Peter Goulds came around at the same time and asked would I show with him. I said, "You got any money?" He said, "No," so I said, "Forget it." I went with Larry and I had the show with Larry. Immediately after the show - maybe a month after or something like that - Larry folded and moved to New York and that was the end of that. So then Peter came around again. He said, "I told you so." So I said, "Okay, let's do it."

MS. AYRES: Was Ed Moses with him at that time, or did he come later?

MR. GARABEDIAN: No. He came much later.

MS. AYRES: So you were early on his L.A. scene of L.A. artists, you were one of the first?

MR. GARABEDIAN: It's an absolutely amazing story, I think. There's a person who should be interviewed—Peter Goulds—just to see how he did it. I think it's amazing how Larry did it too. I can't understand that either, but somebody said, "Well, Larry's got a great eye."

MS. AYRES: Well, a great eye. They say that about Doug Chrismas. I mean, they've said that about other famous L.A. galleries.

MR. GARABEDIAN: They never said it about the Ceeje Gallery. The directors of the Ceeje Gallery were two great homosexuals: Cecil Hedrick and Jerry Jerome.

MS. AYRES: Interior decorators?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. And one of their people was Ellie Neil, who is now Ellie Coppola. Ellie was doing decorative work with them, and down the street from Ceeje was the Esther Robles Gallery. Was it Esther Robles? No, it wasn't. It was Joan Ankrum Gallery, one day she had a Morris Broderson show. Morris Broderson was an artist who was very popular in the early '60s. They had so much work that they needed the two galleries to show all the Broderson work. They asked to rent the Ceeje space while it was still a decorator's space. All the Broderson work sold. Everything sold out of the show, and Jerry and Cecil said, "God, we're in the wrong business." So they asked Ellie, "Do you know any painters? We want to turn this into a fine arts gallery." That was the birth of Ceeje.

MS. AYRES: We're looking at the catalogue of Ceeje.

MR. GARABEDIAN: We were the four artists in the first show.

MS. AYRES: And we're looking at a photograph of Chas Garabedian, Ed Carrillo, Bob Chavez, and Louie Lunetta.

MS. AYRES: Were they all in the Rear Guard show too?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes.

MS. AYRES: So what do you think people mean when they say a dealer or even a critic has a good eye? Does this mean an educated eye, an intuitive eye to trends, or an eye to some elusive thing known as quality?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I think it's all of those together. Some people would say they don't have any sense of real - but they have the sense of quality, what's pertinent, what'll sell, and they have to know art.

MS. AYRES: And yet the Ceeje Gallery lasted almost 10 years.

MR. GARABEDIAN: They lasted through enthusiasm. They just had incredible enthusiasm. They were great guys. The two of them were just so nuts you couldn't believe it.

MS. AYRES: So a good eye doesn't necessarily imply enthusiasm.

MR. GARABEDIAN: They loved what they were doing.

MS. AYRES: Well, in the '70s you really didn't have anyone representing you in that way. I mean, at Ceeje. You showed with Eugenia Butler and Broxton and didn't go to Peter -until '79, but you were in a Whitney [Whitney Museum of American Art] show?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I went into hibernation for four or five years and this is when I was making the resin things. I had just finished the wood things, which I showed with Eugenia. I showed some of the wooden things with Eugenia in 1970 and I didn't have a show for a long time. I was making the resin pieces, which took a lot of work and a lot of time. I had a friend, Stanley Mock, when I moved to Culver City. He had a studio right around the corner and at one point I said, "Stanley, I want to use your studio as a gallery for a couple weekends." And I showed the resin pieces and they attracted a little bit of interest.

This got me a show at Cal State, Northridge [California State University, Northridge]. An art historian named Charles Kessler saw the work and liked it and he organized a show at Northridge. Are you familiar with the catalogue from Northridge?

MS. AYRES: We're looking at the catalogue from Cal State University at Northridge, called simply Charles Garabedian Retrospective Exhibition, 1962 to 1973. This is a 10-year survey going back to fairly early figurative painting, showing some of your paper sculpture. There's an installation photograph of your sculptural exhibition at Ceeje gallery, and there are paintings from the early 1970's that show you moving from figuration to a more abstract, symbolic.

MR. GARABEDIAN: These are actually sculptural in the sense that [these are] pieces of wood that have been stuck together.

MS. AYRES: We're looking at a painting called The Meeting of Grease and China, which might lead one to a question. I'll jump ahead a little bit. You are soon to have a great interest in ancient cultures, Greek, Chinese, Egyptian.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Not Egyptian.

MS. AYRES: But it also seems to me that some of these interests are somewhat arbitrary or at least serendipitous.

MR. GARABEDIAN: It's evolved, very much so.

MS. AYRES: You decide to read a much-touted new translation of the Iliad or a book on Greek mythology falls into your hands.

MR. GARABEDIAN: It's not a real intelligent knowledge of primitive cultures. It's just a fast-moving appreciation.

MS. AYRES: Well, you've said about the series The Labors of Hercules that they were a good metaphor for living life, but I would think that behind all this is the need for self-discovery and just the sheer fun of painting. A

painter needs a subject if it's going to be that painting. And it seems to me that things would strike your fancy and then you'd be off and running.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. I think the example that keeps coming to mind [is] that at some point I felt like I was totally finished and I didn't know what to do. Didn't know what to do and I simply started reading the Iliad, and I thought, oh my God, there're all sorts of possibilities. I thought, boy, this is it. I immediately started doing paintings of people dying on the battlefield and it just got me going for years, for a couple of years anyway, with good, bad, and indifferent work.

And the Chinese thing was also - to talk about serendipitous - somehow I got a book called Chinese Gardens, and it was photographs by a person named Henry Inn and this just tickled my fancy. Henry Inn, I thought people are going to think this is a hotel or something.

MS. AYRES: I-N-N? Henry Inn?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. So I started doing things and calling them Henry Inn.

MS. AYRES: Completely enigmatic. Nobody's going to understand that.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Right. It was simply because of that. I was just being foolish, but it got me into looking at Chinese gardens, more so than Chinese art, but Chinese gardens. I saw them in a very particular way - particular to me, but probably not at all accurately as was the epitome of anarchy. But these things are really crazy, no governing principles whatever. Which is probably completely wrong, but that's the way I looked at it. So, I had a great time and I started looking into Chinese lattice designs. I've got a whole book on lattice designs and the cracked ice pattern.

MS. AYRES: It shows up in your paintings in small areas. You have a wonderful painting called The Chinese Mr. Hyde. Which is this huge sun form, but that title is so odd, A Chinese Mr. Hyde. Where did that come from?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, I was doing a lot of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde at the time I did the painting; in other words, the title wasn't the inspiration for the painting. I think the big yellow form was the inspiration. But as I worked on it and as the painting evolved, that just seemed to be the appropriate title for it at the time.

MS. AYRES: We're looking at the Northridge catalogue.

MR. GARABEDIAN: This is the first Henry Inn drawing. It's a big, huge drawing. That's the first Henry Inn. Here again we have a group of pictures that no longer exist that were done in the early '60s of rubber and paper.

MS. AYRES: So Henry Inn #1, and I assume that there was number two and number three and so forth. It would be, in terms of title, incomprehensible to anyone looking at it, so the title seems to be another fragment, so to speak.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes.

MS. AYRES: It works in with the entire painting.

MR. GARABEDIAN: If there is any similarity, I think this is Henry Inn number two here. And there were a lot of things with the Chinese heads. Somehow I have a provocateur in me so I do these things of Chinese spies and things like that, and they were primarily to provoke irritation from people. These things are the last paintings I did before I turned to sculpture.

MS. AYRES: Death of Napoleon.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Napoleon Solo. I was using craft paint; not oil, not acrylics, but a craft paint that my wife sold - just really terrible, terrible stuff that you can't get any real beauty out of, and I was using these paints and this was an earlier painting of Jean Harlow.

MS. AYRES: Well, why don't we talk a little bit about the '70s again and when you showed in Marcia Tucker's Bad Painting Show, the famous Bad Painting Show in 1978, because you just mentioned using a paint that you just couldn't do anything with.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, but those paintings weren't in the show.

MS. AYRES: No, but the whole concept of giving yourself a problem.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I don't know how it came about, but I started working with odd materials. I might have actually said, "You can make art out of anything." I might have said this to myself and totally believed it

because I certainly did. I started using rubber and I would paint with squeeze bottles – which I still do – just squeeze out an image. The resin pieces were part of that idea.

After the Northridge show Bob Smith put a show up at LACE called The Underbelly of LA, and Marcia Tucker was in town and she was at the opening. I went to the opening and somebody said Marcia Tucker would like to talk to you. So they introduced me to Marcia and she said she'd like to come by the studio. The next day she came by and spent three or four hours there talking about stuff and looking at the work. Then she put me in the Whitney Biennial [1975], and she had a show in the small gallery downstairs. She put up a show of the wood pieces, the Henry [Henry Inn], and the big paper pieces. I always felt that I was extremely lucky Marcia had been around and she had a lot to do with whatever success I've had. Then she put together the Bad Painting show. She called me and she said she was doing this show and she said –“What do you think of the name Bad Painting?” And I said, “Well, what you should call it is a ‘Good Painting’ show.”

MS. AYRES: That bad painting is good painting.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I said if you're interested in controversy just call it the “Good Painting” show. But she didn't.

MS. AYRES: What was she trying to catch with Bad Painting – a sense of awkwardness?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I really don't know, but I think she felt that there were a lot of people who were being ignored, who were talented artists, and who were saying things. Ed Carrillo was also in that show.

MS. AYRES: This was in 1978.

MR. GARABEDIAN: The Bad Painting show?

MS. AYRES: Yes. This was coming after cooler art or conceptual art. So she was being a provocateur herself and making a statement about what she felt art might have in the way of emotional impact or, as you say, “Saying something.”

MR. GARABEDIAN: I'm sure. She never talked to me about it, so I really don't know.

MS. AYRES: There's also an implication of lack of academic polish when you say “bad painting.” I think that's very clear, considering the artists in the show. These were artists who were purposely exploring techniques and areas of depiction that weren't within a school-type model, at least then.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. I'm trying to think of all the people that were in it.

MS. AYRES: Was Wally Hedrick in that show?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I don't know [Wally Hendrick was not in the show]. I know that Judy Linhares and Ed Carrillo were in it.

MS. AYRES: That's a conversation for another day maybe. You use the human figure expressively in the early work. I'm thinking especially of paintings about Adam and Eve and you tend not to fragment the figure in earlier work. You were coming off your UCLA interests, but you have said that you have painted figures in an awkward and ungainly way to give them a sense of humanity. But in looking at some of the early work I get an almost balletic sense of grace and poignancy, but then I thought that's not really a contradiction is it? That things can be graceful and poignant and maybe because of their awkwardness and ungainliness.

MR. GARABEDIAN: The awkwardness is important, but there also has to be balance. Somehow, there has to be balance there.

MS. AYRES: When I look at those paintings – and I'm trying to do this with my own body now – I get this wonderful sense of a pose that is caught at a moment between one movement and the next and perhaps that's the sense of dance that I mean.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I understand what you're saying, and it is certainly there and it's a very conscious way of being able to avoid a static figure simply because the rendering of a static figure is just so boring and something that I don't think I'm qualified to do. Lately, though, I've been leaving a part of the figure off if it is getting in the way.

MS. AYRES: Leave it off and maybe it will turn up somewhere else.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, I think I did the Ozymandias paintings simply because I could put the different parts of the figure in different places.

MS. AYRES: I suppose part of the pull for certain mythological or history paintings is a freedom to leave limbs dropping where you wish them to be.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, by all means. In the Iliad paintings I put a head here and an arm there.

MS. AYRES: You've also said there's a very consistent attitude about sex in the work. The women are always aggressive and the men are passive. Are you using the word sex as we might use gender today, or do you mean a real eroticism born out of a certain tension between male and female?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Okay, could you explain what you mean?

MS. AYRES: Well, the consistent attitude about sex in the work. The women are aggressive and the men are passive. I guess my question is, are you using sex to mean gender? Women are usually considered as passive and men as aggressive and you switched it. This is a cliché of our tradition.

MR. GARABEDIAN: No.

MS. AYRES: Or are you talking about sex in terms of eroticism? Maybe just talk about the women being aggressive and the men being passive and it will come out in the wash.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I had never looked at it that deeply. I just always noticed that the women are always more aggressive or more alive than the men. I keep saying, "God, this is awful," because, I said, this is very autobiographical. I look at my wife who does all the laundry, all the shopping, and wakes me up in the morning and it really does work that way. If you look at the Jean Harlow here, she is very aggressive, and all the Adam and Eves that I have done. I was in the Prado [Museo del Prado, Madrid] and I saw the Dürer [Albrecht Dürer] Adam and Eve, and you get a picture of how it is really done, but in a very subtle way. She is just so beautiful and has this smile on her face, so you hardly notice him. I don't know when I picked up on it in my own work.

MS. AYRES: But the Cranach, Adam and Eve [ca. 1530], at the Norton Simon Museum where she has these slit eyes and she's very, very sexy and he's just scratching his head in bewilderment.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I love Cranach too. That's a great artist. I've been aware of that.

MS. AYRES: Have you read Milton's Paradise Lost?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Not since I was 22 years old.

MS. AYRES: You have no desire to crack it again.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Actually I do have a desire to take another peek at it.

MS. AYRES: Because it seems to me that he handles the relationship between Adam and Eve before and after the "Fall" in a very, very interesting way.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Okay, now you've inspired me.

MS. AYRES: To push this question again, it seems to me when you talk about aggression and passivity – and I do understand you might just have made that comment and I don't want to make too much out of it because people hate to have their words come back to them – so finesse it if you want to that you're not really talking about a sexual eroticism between a man and a woman as much as you're talking about a certain role-playing, a dividing of tasks maybe.

CHARLES GARABEDIAN: Well, I think I'm talking about who is really the boss.

MS. AYRES: You were talking about who is really the boss because I'm interested in the convention of the Odalisque that you use a great deal– the reclining female figure in a landscape– which is very resonant. The figure has associations with the landscape itself. The reclining figure as landscape or even as nature, but I don't find these figures necessarily aggressive, but they're single female figures.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I can recall one single figure of a woman that's very aggressive, which I think is part of the Iliad series and I just simply referred to her as a study for the Iliad in the sense that she's another one of the soldiers, but it's an extremely provocative view of the female.

MS. AYRES: The goddesses were so involved in that battle; she could have been a female. I know the painting. Well, there is one study where there are a lot of men and one flipping over on the left upside down and then there's a female figure in the upper right.

MR. GARABEDIAN: But this is a single figure.

MS. AYRES: You're talking about a single figure, but that figure is also pretty interesting. At what point is there a shift from the figurative and the narrative to works that are both symbolic and abstract with the understanding that symbolic, abstract images can be narrative also that would have their own storytelling ability? Looking at your work, whether it's slides or catalogues or memories of exhibitions, there is a break between a more resolved, figurative composition and the breaking up of figurative parts and bringing in stuff from other places. I guess I'm talking about the unity. There's a certain unity in an Aristotelian sense in some of the early work of place and time and story, and then it becomes a huge explosion, sometime around the early '70s maybe, or early '80s?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I'm not quite sure I understand. When you said explosion, I think that's about it, when the ideas just opened up. Maybe it had to do with that thing I was telling you about earlier about how I was trained as an artist and wanting to get away from that by stopping painting and going into sculpture. I think this not only brought in the idea of different materials, but also different ideas, how to construct a picture, how to make a picture. There is a point of view that's being observed and dealt with and maybe I was limited to this behavior of composing. Composing a figure did change gradually in that I could do the one thing and then do the thing next to it where ideas were starting to shift and the ground was starting to shift.

I think just the fact that I was maturing as an artist also enters into it in the sense of you have to see more, therefore, you have to do more. It's exploration that is important. It's also unavoidable in the sense that artists are able to focus very beautifully and simply stay with something for years on end. In the sense of what you're talking about, it has hindered me in that I make a pointed effort to avoid perfection.

MS. AYRES: But you've mentioned earlier that you also want to avoid wit if it becomes too easy or too facile, perhaps.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. This thing over here, I look at that and I think that is just beautiful, but I think, "What am I going to do next?" I look at it right now as being pretty witty. In fact, I look at all four of these things and think they're pretty witty. I think maybe this has to do with the large horizontal in that you can work your way right through the wit and compose so much idiosyncratically.

MS. AYRES: You're talking about a visual wit.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, of course.

MS. AYRES: That would reside in things like unexpected rhyming of colors or shapes, an unexpected imposition in an area that should be free, but isn't.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Right. Line has a lot to do with it.

MS. AYRES: That sounds like the thing that you would allow yourself more and more as you get more in tune with who you are in your own development.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, let's put it this way. Let's say that may be true, but you don't want to be what's obvious for you. I think there is an incredibly tragic aspect in me somewhere that I should search for.

MS. AYRES: Last time I was here you talked about wanting to do solemn paintings, I think was the word you used. And, on the one hand, that seems as if it's certainly a more serious challenge than these witty paintings; but, on the other hand, I think it has its own wit from you. I mean the idea of doing a solemn painting might strike you as being funny.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Why not? I'm trying to think if I've ever done a solemn painting. I'm sure I have.

MS. AYRES: We're looking at the Charles Garabedian catalogue from Northridge again, as Chas looks for what might be considered a solemn painting.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Maybe this.

MS. AYRES: A painting called Red China from 1968. That's a work on paper isn't it?

MR. GARABEDIAN: No, this is wood, pieces of wood sticking out the bottom.

MS. AYRES: In a rather subtly threatening way, isn't it? But China, the words, become part of the landscape?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes.

MS. AYRES: Chas just showed me a painting that he might consider to be solemn, but not tragic.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, the Chinese Mr. Hyde [see page 14], I would say that it's not witty for me. I think it's a beautiful painting.

MS. AYRES: It's a beautiful painting, but it seems very sad.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, it would not be witty. This is what I would consider very witty.

MS. AYRES: Where the legs become part of the tree trunk in the thing.

MR. GARABEDIAN: That's Adam and Eve. Now this is meant to be a Man Tearing His Heart Out. How more tragic can you get than that?

MS. AYRES: Well, I was going to ask you about that actually. To me whether the works are figurative or abstract, the feeling is often - I'll use the word domestic or everyday or non-heroic, even if it's The Iliad, but for instance I love the title, If You Need Me, I'll Be at the Hairdresser's - in a different tone than the series of Man Tearing his Heart Out. What is the place of this domestic give-and-take in your paintings?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, in that particular one that you're talking about, If You Need Me, I'll Be at the Hairdresser's, I was watching a Doris Day movie when I needed a title and that line came up. It's one of her lines and it just seemed appropriate.

MS. AYRES: It struck you?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. That happens occasionally. I'll just get a line out of a movie that just seems to gel with the image in a pertinent way.

MS. AYRES: It's not the thing your wife might say to you: if you need me, I'll be at the hairdresser's. It sounds like that it comes from a movie situation.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes.

MS. AYRES: And the Man Tearing his Heart Out?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I was making this huge drawing primarily of this figure. It was probably as big as this painting or as big as this resin piece. And that's a hundred inches high. It just came about, in relationship to what you were saying earlier, from trying to find balance and trying to find an interesting gesture. It evolved into a man tearing his heart out, coming from something a little bit different, but it was a big drawing. It was primarily a dark shape with some modeling in it.

MS. AYRES: So it discovered itself, or you discovered it. It grew out of the painting, but yet once you have that thought in your mind, you use it for other paintings because I seem to remember one where there's a woman's head in the foreground.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I'll use a figure, re-use a figure, but its original state was one of discovery.

MS. AYRES: And once discovered it's available to be used in different contexts.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes.

MS. AYRES: Every figure doesn't have to be freshly discovered. It can be used in different contexts. On the other hand, I don't think of your paintings as autobiographical, although they suggest a sense of self-psychoanalysis. Would the difference between autobiography and self-psychoanalysis be that between presenting a fixed or constructed persona and as opposed to engaging in the discovery and surprise that we just talked about?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, well, I've described my efforts in a funny way as the idea of trying self-consciously to work with the hope of uncovering the unconscious, which is you might call a form of self-analysis, or accidental self-analysis or a stream of consciousness. I painted with a stream of consciousness looking for the unconscious, and of course, it shows up in the work where at some point you hope that your work will mean something. At times you'll say, "Who cares? I don't care; I just like to work, that's all." And that may be true, but there's also the thing that secretly you say, "I'd like to think that I have done something. And you say, "Well, the thing that I want done is an uncovering of my soul."

MS. AYRES: But from a viewers' point of view there is a real difference from feeling as if an artist is trying to communicate something to you and the feeling you get in front of your paintings where I feel I am being made a participant in this voyage of discovery. When you go through the process of discovering yourself, even though

it's you, it has to relate to other people. I mean, the communication is there, but it's not a didactic one. I think you would shudder at the thought of a didactic communication.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Absolutely right. Early on I think I was aware of the fact that I wasn't trying to communicate and yet knew that it can't be helped in the sense that someone will understand or someone will see something.

MS. AYRES: I guess I'm trying to draw some unnecessary distinction between the intention to communicate and the desire for your work to have meaning and significance to people. There is a difference.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, of course, and I'm not trying to communicate, but there's stuff out there and it's just there for people to deal with.

MS. AYRES: Yes. When you say, I just want to paint and wonder what's going to happen next, this is not as someone might think, an elitist studio, self-discovery process that cuts itself off from other people, because that endeavor is going to be meaningful to other people on an emotional level as well as just the sheer joy of looking at them visually. The studio practice seems to me an incredibly, as we said earlier, odd situation and yet an extremely humanistic, or human, and important odd endeavor.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I'm not sure I understood everything you said.

MS. AYRES: I rambled a bit. I guess I'm saying that the studio practice of a painter is one of the most important things a culture can support, despite the fact that it looks self-indulgent and elitist and all that nonsense. And I was hoping you would agree with this.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, I think I probably agree with it.

MS. AYRES: You have been called a self-styled expressionist. Are you, and what do you think that means? And I'm going to not go on with the rest of this because I tend to confuse us if I go on with these long questions.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I want to know who said that.

MS. AYRES: Actually, it was in one of your reviews and you didn't say it yourself. I'm not quoting you here. But to say you're self-styled implies that you said it yourself, but it was not a direct quote. I'm asking it because Expressionism is a word like nihilism, it often means not simply expressing human emotions, but as in German Expressionism which we have mentioned earlier or in literature the absurdity of Kafka or Beckett it often means an emphasis on dark humor, madness, isolation, and despair. You've also mentioned the European novelist Thomas Bernhard. In your paintings, how do you connect expressionism and absurdity and the tragic-comical?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, I agree with everything you've just said for a start. The only thing I would disagree with is the self-styled, which is the idea that I said it about myself. Along with wit comes the absurd and I think that enters into the work a lot. I might also be leery of the wit and of absurdity. Once my daughter said to me - it wasn't about my work, but it was about something - she said, "Oh, that's just another non-sequitur," and I said, "God, she just described a lot of my work."

I think absolutely it's true that there is a sense of expressionism in the work. I think expressionism doesn't discount or does not exclude formal composition and responsibility to the academic aspects of the work. It doesn't imply irresponsibility. In that sense I would say, "Sure, I'm an expressionist, but I think I'm also responsible to my works." At least I like to think so.

MS. AYRES: Expressionism emphasizes the artist's subjectivity, but what you're talking about to some extent are people who say - youngsters usually - "I just want to express myself."

MR. GARABEDIAN: It's easily said.

MS. AYRES: Easily said, and what's to be expressed? It certainly takes a lot of time of living.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Right, and experiences. Experience is wonderful and necessary.

MS. AYRES: If nothing else, expressionism, I mean to say the least, it doesn't favor anonymity of touch or presence, and by definition I would think that's part of your responsibility - to own your touch and to own the presence.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. Well, let me ask you a question. What would you say is an important aspect of my work in those terms? What controls me? What do you think controls me that manifests itself in the work and shows up as a something that drives the artist?

MS. AYRES: Well, these will be generalities, but I would think after a lifetime of painting that there's a sense of

complete curiosity of wanting.

MR. GARABEDIAN: That's wonderful! I think it's absolutely on target. Curiosity is an incredible word.

MS. AYRES: I would think in some ways we all want to live life that way, so your paintings become great permission – this is beyond the visual beauty of them – but they give a certain permission to go out in the world and experiment in one's life.

MR. GARABEDIAN: These four pictures here are really stuck on that thing of, "What if I do this?" I have no "What ifs" to apply to these guys right now and I'm looking for them.

MS. AYRES: You also like them the way they are right now, but you also find them quite beautiful?

MR. GARABEDIAN: This one and the one on that end is almost finished – I think, but I'm not sure. So what I might say is that these two ugly things right in the middle here are the most promising in a funny way because I know that I have to come up with something interesting there.

MS. AYRES: Well that gets us back to the concept then, too, of giving yourself challenges.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, absolutely.

MS. AYRES: Do something boring and then do something to it.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Right now with these two things here I'm thinking I'm taking on an incredible load in the sense that I'm thinking Van Gogh's *Starry Night*.

MS. AYRES: Well, there's almost always a reference to art history if one looks at art. I think that you can't help it.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I love art history.

MS. AYRES: And Van Gogh doesn't own *Starry Night*.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Right. We've also got a little *Vija Celmins* over there in the corner which is a starry night, also.

MS. AYRES: But humankind, I mean it's a mythic subject matter to begin with.

I'm going to push this a little further, and I am quoting you here from an interview when you talked about each painting being a voyage of self-discovery, quote, "Associations are judged on a formal and spiritual level." That's so interesting, the formal and spiritual level. Speak a little about the judging aspect of the process. The formal decisions must be a bit more conscious – a bit more critical. I think you mentioned that earlier when you were saying something about a conscious play with – to bring out the unconscious. I'll re-ask the question: Associations are judged on a formal and spiritual level. Talk about the formal considerations. I know you've touched on this.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I don't know how to answer it.

MS. AYRES: Visual puns, shape-rhyming, the way rhymes work; these are things that you're responding to on a formal way as opposed to it's a fragment of a foot or it could be a head or it's telling a narrative story based on semi-recognizable imagery. Some formal considerations wipe away that, if it indeed can be wiped away, to see things in terms of color, shape, line, space. How conscious are you of that when you're actually working? When you're talking about the painting as a voyage of self-discovery, those associations are when you're putting this down and you're associating with something else, and you judge them on a formal and spiritual level.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Okay.

MS. AYRES: I think that's what any painter does, at least the formal part. I mean, if you're using a red here and you're using a red over there, you're making these formal associations, are you not?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Maybe you answered the question with your question.

MS. AYRES: Bad interviewer technique. I'm actually a little more interested in what you mean by "on a spiritual level" because spirituality is a word that's always difficult.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Spiritual – I think this is what I look for to finish the painting.

MS. AYRES: Chas is putting up a picture that he feels is successful for us to look at and talk about. Chas has the painting pinned on the wall.

Chas, this is an acrylic on paper, with various levels of intensity of the acrylic in terms of washes and things. And for the sake of the record, does it have a title?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, The Anarchist.

MS. AYRES: The Anarchist. And it has a long, yellow pathway running horizontally through this horizontal work with various odd and interesting shapes floating above, beneath, and yellow bank is the best I can do for a verbal description.

MR. GARABEDIAN: It was resolved by formal applications of paint. You can see at one point it was a much more complex picture and step by step I started removing things from the picture up above and below and the way they are removed became very important to me. I became carried away with the idea that there were slight rays, slight bits of color in the illumination of things up above and down below. Its idiosyncratic nature kept manifesting itself in the things that I did to it. It took on a life of its own and I was able to do what it wanted me to do with full confidence. I could do these things to it and at some point I got up to this point and stepped back and looked at it and said, "Oh my, it's done." Even the crazy music that is being played just manifested itself in the idea of The Anarchist. That a picture just doesn't make any sense at all, I think it is just a good picture. I can't explain anything in terms of its color, its drawing, whatever.

MS. AYRES: The not being able to explain it in words is an important part of it. Sometimes I think the easier it is to explain in words, the poorer the painting is to some degree, but I like your talking about music because in some ways it reminds me of those experimental musical scores that people sometimes paint, but that other people are actually supposed to play, as if you could sit down with musical instruments and somehow figure out a musical translation of that painting.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Listen, George Schirmer, music publishers, are going to use a painting of mine on a cover of a book they are publishing called American Aria Anthology. In other words from American composers, they're going to publish a music book with the arias in it for people learning to sing. They discovered this painting on the internet. A friend of mine has a virtual museum and they discovered the painting in his virtual museum. It is a Cityscape. The painting was destroyed in the Malibu fire. I thought it was very touching that the painting's still going to live.

MS. AYRES: One of your critics, I think it was Ingrid Calame, talked about the tasty and odoriferous colors. Do you remember that? I was thinking about your colors that make you really want to use words like lime and watermelon and pistachio or pumpkin. They seemed to have this sense of synesthesia, musical and tasty at the same time.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, this again, the color and the line gets back to the Armenian manuscripts directly. I think there's a direct line in these things.

MS. AYRES: We're looking at some Armenian manuscripts and I can certainly see what you mean. Part of the reason that I suppose a music company would take to that is the way you build space. You're not building space to overlap. Can you imagine a score that overlapped its notes?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, so it is. I guess the relationship of the telling of the story can take place all over the page. I think it manifests itself in other cultures, too. You can see it in Masaccio or the idea that the dialogue can go this way and that way and all over the place.

MS. AYRES: Chas is talking about a lineal design that defines the setting behind which the people are sitting. It seems bizarre, doesn't it, and quite wonderful. Have you seen the Renaissance manuscript show at the Getty?

MR. GARABEDIAN: No, but I've been told to go.

MS. AYRES: It should have gone to another place, but it's a wonderful show. You really will need to see it. You want to talk about this painting a little more? I mean, it does seem to be a landscape.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, not actually...

MS. AYRES: A cityscape?

MR. GARABEDIAN: One of the things I like about it is that there is no reference other than to music. There are those treble clefs. There are a couple of references to bombs. There's the traditional anarchist bomb. There's a black ball with a little fuse sticking out.

MS. AYRES: Yes, I see that. It's called The Anarchist?

MR. GARABEDIAN: The Anarchist.

MS. AYRES: What is it that anarchy seems to be a cheerful thought for you?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well one of my things is that order comes out of chaos. Chaos is really the ruler of the universe and order comes out of it.

MS. AYRES: There are different levels of order. It seems to me in a painting like this you've struck a balance between suggesting the chaos and slightly imposing a visual order that makes sense to you.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, well, nobody's perfect.

MS. AYRES: Well, no. That's a good thing because certainly you don't want to have so much order that you lose the sense of the chaos.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I just love that painting and I don't understand it.

MS. AYRES: Well, there's something very satisfactory about the movement across the page, and it does bring you back, although you haven't done anything compositionally to necessarily pull you back to the beginning. And that's odd for me too. There's something very calm and exciting about moving across at the same time.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I suppose this one here [Stanley on the Silk Road, 2004] - it's very orderly, very well-mannered.

MS. AYRES: Well, we could talk a little bit before we stop about your depictions of disembodied body parts, particularly heads and hands and feet, and they evoke quite different feelings depending on the context. In a war scene, it's hard not to read them as part of violence, and yet in an interior they could seem to make sense as sculptural fragments, or they could be totemic. Many of your images seem to me like characters in a repertory troupe where they don't hold the same symbolic meaning. Their meanings, like roles, could change from play to play but it's the same actor, and the meanings change from painting to painting. Does that make sense?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, I had never thought of it, but it makes sense, yes.

MS. AYRES: You don't want a fixed interpretation of something. The context alone will bring it out. Then you don't come to a painting with an idea of a fixed interpretation. A shape maybe becomes something you've used before, but it becomes different in that context.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. When you discover something, something good, you might as well work the living daylights out of it. Use it as much as you can.

MS. AYRES: By "something good," then, you would mean a shape or image or line.

MR. GARABEDIAN: It might be a shape, a line, a color combination, whatever.

MS. AYRES: To be specific, there are hands that form a partial border in the long work on paper called Cultural Escape. They seem to evoke a certain human presence and maybe creative expression. Don't you think that the idea of autonomy of a part standing for a whole is quite a familiar visual convention today? Nobody's going to look at those hands and say that's a severed hand. They're going to read it as standing for a whole expressive movement. Yes?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Let me tell you another story. Maybe I mentioned this. Morris Broderson is deaf, and he had studied with Warshaw, and he had this very stiff composition and at this show he discovered Japanese or Chinese art, and in one of his paintings, a Japanese style of painting, whatever that means. How will you see the poetry calligraphy come down? He did this thing where he drew hands in sign language coming down the side of the picture. And I thought, God, this is just hysterical and I thought it was really stupid. Then, when I was doing this thing the Cultural Escape - I found myself doing this and I thought, "God, here I am doing the same thing."

MS. AYRES: Using them as a decorative border around the bottom left-hand side. They're very effective, and you certainly don't read them as severed hands, whereas in the context of your studies with The Iliad you might.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, I took a hand and drew it like this and not like this, which I figured was a very non-aggressive way of doubling up the hand.

MS. AYRES: It does read as calligraphy in that space.

MR. GARABEDIAN: It looks casual I think, but it is hopefully under control, of things that take place.

MS. AYRES: I'd like to talk a little bit about The Labors of Hercules. It bemused me that so many people writing

about that show used phrases like “comic classicism”, and “high drama” and “low comedy”, and “classical heroics versus humor”, and it occurred to me that Hercules is the perfect subject matter for something like that., because he’s both man and god. He’s always been open to satire. This is not a peculiarly modern approach to Hercules, right?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, the only reading I’ve done of Hercules has been through Robert Graves’ Greek Mythology, I think the one I’ve read is Hercules, the one who died with the burning shirt?

MS. AYRES: Then was taken right up to heaven as a god.

MR. GARABEDIAN: So I’ve read most of the Greek tragedies, but you read those things and you can’t help thinking this is ridiculous; and the work just took on a zany abstract. When I think of the work now, I really like what happened. It came from The Labors of Hercules that I was reading these things and doing these things at the same time. I wasn’t necessarily doing these things thinking, “I’m doing The Labors of Hercules.” I just happened to be reading The Labors of Hercules while I was doing these works and Peter probably said, “Have you got titles for these things?” And I thought, “No, I don’t.” And then suddenly, “Yes, I do.” I just arbitrarily started naming them this and that.

MS. AYRES: Without in any way assuming that this depicts or pictures the killing of the boar or the apples of the Hesperides or whatever the labor happened to be. Oh, dear. I think my point about The Labors of Hercules is that it’s particularly appropriate for this writing about high drama and low comedy because it’s embodied in the character himself, his lust and bad temper and gluttony. All these things can be very comic; and then [with] all these qualities of strength and adventures, this can seem a bit pompous and you can just play with them. But that’s almost an accident of that series because these low comedy, high heroics affect all your work. It’s just [that] The Labors of Hercules seemed to be a natural for it.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, because this particular painting relates a lot to those paintings that were done at that time, now that I look. I hadn’t thought of it before right now.

MS. AYRES: Yes, because Kristine McKenna, who I think is a very good writer, talks about the fact that your combination of heroics and cartooning imagery is a sign of your modernism. Would you accept that?

MR. GARABEDIAN: No, I don’t think so. I think it just comes with Hercules. I think like you were saying earlier, it’s a natural for Hercules and because Hercules has been treated that way in the past.

MS. AYRES: Yes. Sometimes he’s presented as a overdeveloped, aging Hercules, but in your works we’re not being specific about his age or even about the labor because these titles are another additional fragment to the whole, but give people a place to jump off from, an entry into the painting that you’ve directed them. You have to take responsibility for people searching for this imagery and then either finding it or giving up.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I’m trying to think if I inspired anybody to read Greek mythology.

MS. AYRES: It would be interesting if a painting does that. I think literature inspires painters more than painting inspires writers. There’ve been some writers who were really inspired by painting.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Is that right?

MS. AYRES: Well, a character in Proust who is so inspired by Vermeer.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, a Proust story. For some reason I can’t read Proust. I was in Vermont at one time visiting a friend and this friend’s girlfriend. I said, “I’m going to try to read Proust,” and she said, “Oh, before you read Proust, I want to recommend this book for you.” She took me into downtown Burlington and hunted and hunted and found this book by this Englishman. I can’t remember his name, but it’s about how to read Proust and enjoy it. It was a small book, but I read it and I just hated it. I hated the guy who wrote this book. He totally turned me off from reading Proust.

MS. AYRES: You wouldn’t want me to not look at your paintings because I read a review I don’t respect, would you? That seems pretty unfair.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, it worked with me. It turned me off completely.

MS. AYRES: I have a similar story about James Joyce’s Ulysses, which I was going along perfectly happy, not understanding it, but going along very happily, and my partner gave me a complete annotated edition, and it took me a week to get through the first page in terms of annotation and I just stopped altogether. I think we should avoid these things.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. I understand.

MS. AYRES: Well, that's no excuse. I could go back to reading it and you could go back to Proust.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I don't think I will. I figured if I went back and read Proust, I'd just be doing this guy a favor and I just hated this guy so much. God, that's smarmy writing.

MS. AYRES: I don't know the book. There've been so many books on how to read Proust. I just read one by Roger Shattuck that's called, *A Field Guide to Reading Proust*, [Proust's Way: A Field Guide to In Search of Lost Time] that's actually well written and quite fun.

MR. GARABEDIAN: What's his name again?

MS. AYRES: Roger Shattuck. He writes a lot on art and culture, especially the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I don't think that was the guy.

MS. AYRES: No, I don't think so, he's not English.

MS. AYRES: Are there things that you want to say or we could save that for tomorrow?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Absolutely.

[BEGIN SESSION 2, TAPE 3, SIDE A]

MS. AYRES: This is tape 3, side A. The interviewer is Anne Ayres for the Archives of American Art; an interview with the painter Charles Garabedian. The date is August 22nd, 2003. The interview is being conducted at the subject's studio on West Washington Boulevard near La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California.

Yesterday after we turned the tape off, we decided to speak today about a very difficult subject: the rather mysterious or at least hard-to-get-at relationship between the events of one's upbringing and the imagery and symbolism that appears in your paintings. And an even more complex level than imagery might be considered the structures and compositional formats to which you've been consistently drawn.

How do you propose we start?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, I'll just talk about my childhood, my upbringing, my family, et cetera.

My father and mother came over from the old country in, I think, 1920. At that point they had one daughter, Irene, and then another daughter was born here. The family lived in Detroit. My father worked for the Ford Motor Company. He had an automobile accident and was crippled. My mother died when I was two, and my father was unable to handle three small children, I being two and my sisters being four and six. So he moved us into a Protestant orphanage in Detroit. He would visit us - I'm not sure how often he visited. Things start getting very foggy at this point.

Anyway, I was in the orphanage until I was nine, and my sisters were in the same orphanage, but the boys were separate from the girls. I do have vague memories of marching to school as groups, and in the summer we would go to a summer camp. The orphanage, I don't remember it as being unpleasant or pleasant. The only thing I recall about the food was that I learned to hate tapioca pudding. At the age of nine, we left, my father gathered us up because he had some money from insurance. He gathered us up along with my uncle, who was my mother's brother, and we drove out to California in a 1933 Buick. This was in 1933. My father and uncle went in as partners and bought a chicken ranch in San Gabriel. This was in the midst of the Depression. The chicken ranch failed and we were very poor and lived on welfare until my sisters, Irene and Liz, and I got out of high school, Irene and Liz could go to work.

MS. AYRES: You went to Garfield High?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I went to Garfield High School in East Los Angeles. We were brought up in East LA. We moved to East LA from San Gabriel after the chicken farm failed. The environment in East LA was an ethnic mixture of Russians, Armenians, and a lot of Latino, and Slavic people. I guess you'd call them an average group of people, and they weren't all poor but most of them were.

After I graduated from high school, the war started and I immediately joined the Army Air Force, and this was my introduction to the world in that I traveled all over the country for my training—Colorado, Nebraska, Florida, Texas, and finally went overseas by way of South America, Brazil and British Guiana, then to Africa, and finally to England, where I was a gunner on a B-24. I saw a lot of the world, but I think I was still a very young 19-year-old. I wasn't too aware at that time, other than that I was out in the world and doing a lot of drinking and carrying on and getting through flying my missions. Coming back to the States, I really had a strong sense of who I was at

that time in the sense that I was nobody, I was really still an undeveloped, unlooked-into personage and nothing had occurred to me yet.

I did have a fondness for music as I think everybody did at that age. From 13 on up, I was into jazz and swing. At one point I had thoughts of a career in music, but it turned out I had a tin ear and was really a lousy musician, although I tried fairly hard.

After the war I went back home. I lived at home for a while and worked, and then along came the GI Bill. I thought, hell, I might as well. So I enrolled at Santa Barbara, and they looked at my records and said, if it wasn't for the GI Bill, we wouldn't allow you in this school.

I spent two years at Santa Barbara, again, just spending two years. I still wasn't awake. After two years at Santa Barbara I transferred to USC and went back to living at home, and still nothing was there. I studied very lightly and I wasn't really interested in learning; I was just interested in not having to work. Also, parallel with all this was the fact when we moved from Detroit it was like four strangers were suddenly thrown together. My father could not speak English and we could not speak Armenian. We didn't know one another that well, so you can see what that must have been like with these four people together.

I think we liked one another and we got along fairly well, but there was still a strangeness that was there. After my two years at SC, there I was still. I went out and got a job working here and working there and I moved out of the house and moved into an apartment somewhere and just went to work and wasn't enjoying the work. I went from job to job, getting nowhere. I think at that time I was drinking quite a bit, going to the racetrack, playing golf, and going fishing on weekends down in Ensenada [Ensenada, Baja California].

At one point I made a new friend, who was a student at UCLA, and he was like nobody I had ever known before. His name was Warren Reiss and he was a very bright and an extremely talented guy. It was like talking to a total stranger when I was talking to him because he was so different. He and I and another friend of his got an apartment over on the Westside of town up in the Crenshaw area, and through him I met Ed Moses. He and Ed Moses were competing for the hand of a girl, which Ed was always doing, competing for the hand of a girl.

Finally I entered into a totally different world in a funny way, not just "kaplunk," but I moved into it gradually. So there is the story where Ed Moses comes into my life and what we talked about yesterday - Ed going back to school at UCLA. All the time I was at UCLA I was working on the railroad on the midnight shift to support myself, but my entry into art was one where still I thought of it primarily as learning to illustrate an idea, which is, I guess, what you do.

That was it up to this particular point, this is where I was. I met other people at UCLA. I met Louie Lunetta, who became a real factor in my life, Louie was just totally out there. My second summer at UCLA, Louie and I, we got in an old Pontiac and we went down and toured Mexico for a couple of months. Louie wanted to make a movie and he had this 16mm camera, and we bought a ton of black-and-white film and we went down to Mexico. I was the star of the movie. I had to wear this black suit and he photographed me riding horses, tap dancing, being sick on trains, and climbing the ruins all the way from Mexico City to Palenque. Louie was a factor in my life and I guess he probably still is, although he's dead.

There was a group of artists that were around, Louie being one of them, and Ed Carrillo and Bob Chavez, Les Biller and Lance Richbourg, Max Hendler and Arlene Hendler. We had this group of artists, and I can't say we were naïve because we weren't, but we weren't because Louie knew exactly what he wanted to do, who he was, and he never had trouble making a decision about anything. Lance very quickly proceeded to become who he was as an artist, and very successful at it. Ed knew who he was when he was 12 years old. This guy was just so wise. It was a good group of people and very interesting and talented. Chavez was so talented you couldn't believe it, but he managed to screw himself up as an artist, only as an artist, not as a person, because of being drawn to paternal and family life. He kept having wives and children. He's this amazing person. I think right now he's working in the California prison system as a mentor and a teacher in art.

We were talking earlier about the influences on us. We did talk about a lot of German Expressionism and Mexican artists, primarily, Orozco [Jose Clemente Orozco]. Although Carrillo [Eduardo Carrillo] was wiser than any of us. He knew the value of Siqueiros [David Alfaro Siqueiros]. My tendency was to think of Siqueiros as a joke, and it was only later that I saw him as something a lot greater than that.

Now, how all of this affected my art, I think it's obvious that this early group affected what I did as a painter. The work was always figurative and always, I guess, you'd say a very readable narrative art. You looked yesterday at the family portrait which was probably typical of that and some of the other pictures - The Death of Napoleon Solo, and Jean Harlow.

MS. AYRES: You've used that figure of yourself sawing.

MR. GARABEDIAN: The self-portrait. It was interesting because I painted myself in the painting first and then said, "Well, he should have a study for this," and so I painted the study afterwards.

MS. AYRES: You were presenting yourself as an artist who was a constructor, a hands-on builder of things.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, in the portrait?

MS. AYRES: Yes.

MR. GARABEDIAN: No. I was just looking for a device. I was just searching for devices and I had my wife and this little girl. At first I had an interior and I just didn't like the interior, so then I wanted an interior/exterior space. So I thought, what better than to have them in a building that's being constructed, I was thinking that how to fit myself into it was as the person who was building the house. I don't know who picked up on it as a Holy Family painting, but at the time I thought that was crazy.

MS. AYRES: Joseph the Carpenter.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Right, crazy. But that's what I thought painters did, and that's what I did. I think it's a good painting in the sense that it pushed my imagination and the inventive possibilities that were in me but that still, at this point, hadn't really been developed. Maybe they're not still developed, but this opening up is an ongoing thing. I still don't know who I am.

MS. AYRES: We don't know who we are and we tend to change who we are from situation to situation and yet there's this belief, and a felt belief and a core that shifts and is hard to get a hold of and yet we feel there's a continuation from childhood to death actually.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I can't see it other than saying that I listened to Joseph Campbell talking for three hours one night and he kept talking about the collective unconscious. He had his little map about the subconscious and the unconscious down below, and I was pooh-poohing it because I thought the topic got boring. It was only later when I got involved with the manuscript illuminations that I did say, "There's more to it" and acknowledged the unconscious fully. You'd say, "I hope there's an unconscious, and that there is not a collective unconscious because you want to be as unique as you possibly can be." Maybe that's selfish and maybe it's childish, but you want to think that your place on this planet is totally unique and there's nothing like it; and so I want to say, "See who that is," but I will actually never see who that is. If I make it to the art history books, it will only be other people who will see who this person was.

Parallel to that, my older sister had a heart attack here a couple of months ago, and so I suddenly thought, "Oh my God, if she dies that leaves me all alone. I'm the only one left." I suddenly had this urge to talk to my sister and have her tell me who we were and what she remembered of our past.

I had this thing that we're somebody and I wanted to know if I could get some information from her about who I was. She obviously was observing me as I was growing up and had opinions about me or had some conclusions about who I was. There were conclusions and opinions that I didn't have and I had these notions about who she was and what she was doing and what she meant to the family. So who we are and what we were - I don't know. I think I'm painting not to find out these things so much as I like to paint, and if I paint, these things will happen. This will come. I look at my hundreds of slides and I say, "Well, there's somebody there. There's something going on. There is a person." And it's gratifying.

MS. AYRES: I'm curious if you've thought, given the group that surrounded you, that painting was figurative or narrative. What did you think Bob Irwin was doing with his horizon paintings?

MR. GARABEDIAN: His studio was right next-door to mine and every afternoon we would go to the racetrack together.

MS. AYRES: So that's what you thought he was doing, going to the racetrack.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I know Bob Irwin as a handicapper. This is what he was doing as a painter too. He was the most cold-blooded handicapper I ever met in my life. He was right on target. He didn't let anything bother him, no emotion went into his handicapping, none whatsoever. This is true with his painting too, because he'd tell me that he would sit there and stare for five or six hours at these paints trying to figure out what to do with them. He would get these paints and make these paint swatches just to find the color he wanted for that surface. He was constantly mixing up little dabs of this very expensive paint until he finally got the paint he wanted. The final kicker of all this was that one day he came to my studio and he went to my bucket of turpentine and pulled out all the brushes, cleaned them off a little, and looked at them. He put five of them aside and he replaced them with five brand new brushes, and he said, "I like the way you wear out brushes. It works good for me on my painting." He used my brushes to paint the stripe paintings he was working on at the time. I didn't

particularly have any feelings about his work at all – no responses as an artist. I didn't dislike them; I didn't like them. I thought I knew what they were, because I saw how they were being made, but I didn't understand the idea of application of paint as an important aspect of making art. In other words, I really didn't understand what he was doing. I must admit I did not understand what he was doing.

Billy Al Bengston was right across the street. I don't think I understood what Billy Al was doing either, until now. I look at Billy Al's Dentos and I think they're beautiful, but at that time, I just thought, "Well, these guys are all commercial artists."

MS. AYRES: You thought of them as commercial artists rather than fine artists?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Not commercial in the sense of illustrating for magazines or anything like that, but "commercial artist" is not good, and no, that's not a good description.

MS. AYRES: Careerist maybe?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Careerist would be a good description, but it would not be a fair description either because they were serious. I just didn't realize it. Now with Larry Bell, his studio was one street over, and he was with John Altoon. I was visiting him one day and he told me, "Chas, the one thing I want to do is make it big in New York."

MS. AYRES: This was Larry Bell.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, this is Bell. At that time I think it might have been his first glass collage. He had it in a gold leaf frame that was about this big and he said, "What do you think?" I said, "I really like that frame." So he took his fist and punched it right through the glass collage and handed me the frame. I think Larry Bell is a remarkable artist. I saw his last show at Off Main Gallery [Santa Monica]. I had known Larry for years and years and visited him in New Mexico. This is the first time I've ever looked at his show and saw beyond the surface, beyond the technique, and saw a real, unique personage at work. I've always seen him as a unique person. He's just a human being, but I saw it in the work and I thought it's pretty remarkable.

MS. AYRES: I suppose it's a little misleading at first because the work looks anonymous.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. It looks like it was made on another planet is what it looks like. It's "How in the hell did this stuff come together?" It couldn't have been done by a human being, and yet it was. Because he made decisions, that stuff got there through decision. They're not the decisions I might think of, but they're decisions of his own that came about through – from a unique person making these decisions.

MS. AYRES: What about Altoon?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I didn't get to know John too well, but he looked at this painting here.

[SESSION 2, TAPE 3, SIDE B]

MS. AYRES: John Altoon looked at a painting called Christ Under the Cross, from 1963.

MR. GARABEDIAN: He pointed to the figure of Christ and he said, "That's Marilyn Monroe."

MS. AYRES: This is the figure of Christ that you're looking at. Why did he say that?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I have no idea. He didn't elaborate.

MS. AYRES: Oh, well, and you said, "No it's not?"

MR. GARABEDIAN: No. No. I think I said, "Well, okay. Let's go shoot pool." The pool hall was right next-door on the other side.

MS. AYRES: So you knew a lot of the artists who showed at Ferus.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, God, I knew them all.

MS. AYRES: Briefly, Llyn Foulkes, but he was never part of that group.

MR. GARABEDIAN: No. I became acquainted with Llyn later when he was teaching at UCLA.

MS. AYRES: That's a special vision, isn't it?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Llyn? Oh, my! I had no affection for his early work, but the work that he's doing now I think is

just totally remarkable.

MS. AYRES: Being the early assemblages and the more minimal.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, the mountains and the postcard things. They weren't too interesting to me, but when he finally found out who he was – or he didn't find out, but he was telling everybody in the world what he was. Those recent works in the last 10 or 15 years are just ...

MS. AYRES: Yes, his strongly political paintings. Angry!

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, very much so. Did you ever see that half-hour tape of him ranting?

MS. AYRES: Yes.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I think that's just wonderful. I haven't seen the whole thing. I'm trying to get it from Patti Faure. She said she would get me a copy or let me use hers.

MS. AYRES: When he plays his one-man band, there's a good deal of ranting too on occasion.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, yes. Yes, Llyn's pretty good.

MS. AYRES: But he didn't get along with Ferus group?

MR. GARABEDIAN: No. Let's see, Craig Kauffman. I knew Craig while he was still at UCLA when I was a student there. The one thing that Craig said to me as I was working on a painting when I was just learning to paint and I had a painting about this big, and he was looking at it and said, "Boy, it's really tough with a painting this large to think of things to put in all that space. Well, if you want to really tussle with the medium, you have to scale up."

MS. AYRES: When you worked with resin you tended to be figurative even though a lot of these other guys were –

MR. GARABEDIAN: My feeling about it [resin] was that if Rubens were alive today this would be his medium because of its glazing possibilities or the see-through possibilities of it. And so I was trying to get that quality of looking deeply into the surface. I wasn't patient enough to do it properly, but I had an awful lot of fun with the stuff. It was a good medium, poisonous, but good. I used to pour a batch of that stuff and then I'd just lie down and take a nap right next to it. But after about three or four or five years, I'd open a can of resin and I'd immediately get a fuzzy tongue, a headache, and a stomach ache. I thought it was time to hang it up, so I quit using it. I have a friend who still uses it, Max Hendler, but he uses it very carefully.

MS. AYRES: Yes, he's gone from representational work to complete color monotone beige abstractions.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I've watched Max from the time he was an Abstract Expressionist at UCLA, painting in the classroom on this big painting for Sam Amato. I've watched him go through that to getting married and moving to New York for a year, coming back, and being just at his wits end for years and years. But when he decided it was time for him to graduate finally from school is when he started doing these very beautiful, small-paneled oil paintings.

He got into those things as intensely as any artist has ever gotten into his work. It worked on his emotional state to where he finally moved to Humboldt County and lived up there for many years. I saw him when he was working on that little sand painting. He had a studio down from me and set up this elaborate light system from the skylight to maintain the light as constant as he could during the day. Part of that still life was a little Kleenex box, and he painted that Kleenex box many times as the light kept fading and fading and the dust gathering on it. He had to paint the dust. I don't think it was ever finished. There was a corner of it that he just said "It can't be done." Then he went up north and did all these amazingly beautiful little watercolors – just beautiful! He poured himself into them as intensely as he's able to focus on everything he's into. And he's always come up with something that is very beautiful, always. I can't believe it. At times, no matter which direction he goes, he's going to make it beautiful, and he does it.

One period he did these strange things using pegboard and little light fixtures in these pale colors and they were all very beautiful, and then the letters [came], and then finally the resin. He's an interesting artist, a damn good artist, but he was part of the group, and we all went our separate ways.

MS. AYRES: Do you think that happens when a career is established and then people move out of town and they enter into that difficult mid-career period?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Your relationship with your friends changes, yes indeed.

MS. AYRES: Some of it is cheerful competitiveness and some of it not so cheerful?

MR. GARABEDIAN: You bet. I could tell you stories, very sad stories, but I think you just work. That's all.

MS. AYRES: Did you know Ed Kienholz?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Not well, but I knew him. Ed Kienholz was a great person. He was the first one who saw our group of artists as a valid alternative to what was going on at Ferus. He tried to get us gallery shows and things like that. He was never successful, but he tried. But he did see us as an alternative.

MS. AYRES: So many like Ed Kienholz, Bob Irwin, others from that group had that early Abstract Expressionist period, and with Ed Kienholz those wonderful wood constructions that are in a sense an interpretation of Abstract Expressionism. Abstract expressionism was the school technique, wasn't it?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. Bob Irwin did some Abstract Expressionist paintings and they were not Abstract Expressionist paintings. They were little gems that he constructed. They were like all of his work. Bob is a case. He's something!

MS. AYRES: Did you get a sense of Bob the way some of those artists were concerned with involving the viewer, phenomenological space, light, situation that seems so different from traditional painting?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I never paid much attention to that. I was so adamant about not painting for the viewer, not painting for the audience, saying it's absolutely imperative that you don't paint for the audience, otherwise you are compromising your work. Irwin was dealing with what he felt was a sense of beauty, and somebody once said, in a review in [the] New Yorker or something that they saw one of the disc paintings in a show and they thought it was so sublime. They said that in relationship to others, like a nun in the whorehouse. My feeling was that they were wrong, it was a whore in a nunnery.

MS. AYRES: That's funny. You call them disc paintings and I think that's a clue because they're not sculptures, but they do function in some fashion.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, yes. I was offended by the idea that the lights could burn out and that there was a sense of artificiality to it, which I think is fine. He was aware of that, but I was still working out some idealistic thing that this is it. This is the thing. You can hang it in a junkyard, you can do anything you want with it, but this is it and it's all there to be dealt with, but that doesn't mean I was right. That means I was still a little bit behind.

MS. AYRES: Or ahead. Beauty keeps coming and certainly Ed Moses does.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, good old Ed. I've seen Ed through thick and thin and I've always admired Ed for everything. I've always found him incredibly entertaining. As an artist, there were times when I couldn't get with his work. I just simply could not get with his work, but then when I see a retrospective it looks just beautiful. This last show I saw of his at LA Louver I thought was just fantastic! It was amazing that he did those things.

MS. AYRES: Well, we're getting a little far a-field from our subject which has to do with your biography and your feeling that in some way the painting will stand for your voice, if not who you are. You talked about how history books will look at this work and say this was a person. They'll say that, but they certainly aren't going to sit there and decode various symbols and various forms.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, I think some people will and some people won't.

MS. AYRES: What will they do, look over there and say that [those] yellow and green and blue and lavender figures look like airplanes and you might be a gunner in those airplanes and that relates to ...?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I say, God bless them if they can find that one.

MS. AYRES: Yes.

MR. GARABEDIAN: No, I wouldn't. I would appreciate somebody attacking them that way.

MS. AYRES: You would? Why? Because they don't look like butterflies, there's something mechanical about them?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Absolutely. I can tell you how those shapes came about. They came about as a calligraphic construction and then I just filled them in and flattened them out. In other words, this was something that was going like this and something going like that. Something similar to what you see over here. I just didn't like it, so I filled them in. I did one and I liked the non-information that it presented. Do you know what I mean? That became a nonsensical, a nothing thing.

MS. AYRES: That's a nice phrase, "non-informational." People are always talking about a painting's information, non-information. You can't do anything with it, and anything you do with it might as well be right or wrong.

MR. GARABEDIAN: So from that it just followed that I repeated the form. I did repeat the calligraphy first. I did them all in their separate colors, and then I just filled in the color. I didn't like it, so I just filled them in and got the shape that was there.

Going back to my sister, I wanted to know who the little boy was, and I can say I still want to know. I look at these, and do they tell me who the little boy was? They don't.

MS. AYRES: Do they tell you who the man is?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Somewhat, yes. Yes, they do.

MS. AYRES: And that would be? Talk about curiosity, doubt visual wit.

MR. GARABEDIAN: When I try to recall, I don't recall myself as a curious child.

MS. AYRES: You seem to think of yourself as an unawake child. I think many do, although there seem to be some children who seem to be very wise above their time.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. We were speaking earlier about Ed Carrillo. He was a mature artist at a very early age. He had a sense of style and of who he was and what he was doing.

MS. AYRES: So when you fell into his world, it must have been amazing to know people, who had such different ideas; who were equally serious about what they were doing.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, but I still think my own ego was so strong that I failed to recognize a lot of this. When I say my ego was so strong I mean my ignorance was so strong probably. In other words, you don't learn like that [snaps fingers]. It doesn't occur to you like that. It comes about slowly and through repetition and ...

MS. AYRES: Yes, and also you tend to take things for granted and you look back on them and say, "That was amazing!" Because it's just the environment we're in if we don't question it. You were a little older than many of these people knew?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. I was older than all of them. I may be only one or two years older than Ed Moses or Bob Irwin.

MS. AYRES: That didn't make a difference in the relationships at all. They didn't treat you like a wise, older man, did they?

MR. GARABEDIAN: No, they didn't. I think they actually treated me as a foolish child. When I went to UCLA they looked at me as a crackpot because I was a little older. At the time in the art department, they had maybe three or four people who were older and I was one of those. I was maybe a more naively serious one in that the other people who were my age or older at the time were more sure of who they were, more established and were married and had children.

MS. AYRES: You don't mention any women artists. What was the attitude toward women in the art world?

MR. GARABEDIAN: At UCLA, there were talented women and I think of Vija [Vija Celmins] of course, and there was Joanne Lopez and Barbara Drucker was there. Barbara came in a little later maybe.

MS. AYRES: Yes, a slightly younger generation I think.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, and I don't think any of them have surfaced since then other than Vija.

MS. AYRES: Do you know Carol Caroompas?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I know Carol, yes. I don't think she was at UCLA.

MS. AYRES: No, she went to USC.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, I like Carol. She's nice. My associations have been primarily with the people I've been talking about. I know Vija very well. I met Vija when she first came from Kansas City or wherever she came from Latvia by way of Kansas City. Do you know Aaron Goldberg at all? I think he taught drawing a bit, although this is probably when you were there. Aaron is the stuffiest know-it-all, a great guy. I was a TA [Teaching Assistant] at this time and one day we're all in the hall. I think there was Les Biller, me and probably Chavez and Lance

Richbourg. We were standing around puffing up our chests and talking big time when Aaron came along with this little girl. Aaron said, "Hey, I want you to meet Vija Clemins. You know, she's a better artist than any of you assholes will ever be." Oh, well! Okay.

MS. AYRES: People talk about her master's show at UCLA and how wonderful it was.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well I know the guy who bought the show. Harold Cook. Harold's a friend of mine.

MS. AYRES: He bought the show.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I met him through Vija, in New York when we were living there and Vija, she's just Vija. That's all. Terrific gal!

MS. AYRES: We're going to talk a little bit about Gwendolyn, Chas' wife. Chas is bringing over a work on paper that is hanging on a hanger. It's a pair of pants hanging on a hanger with a profile of Gwen, looking off into the right over a rather formidable classical house with Doric columns.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Something that you'd find in Vermont. The idea of being married to a woman who's infinitely smarter than you are can be fun. I look at this photograph of Gwen and me and I say, "Oh, god, I married the devil."

MS. AYRES: Well, she has a rather sly look, but really beautiful and really a sense of humor.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, she has a sense of humor.

MS. AYRES: But I can imagine what she says, what she thinks.

MR. GARABEDIAN: No, she doesn't. She gets around to it, but she doesn't say it. Gwen is great! It's been a great marriage and we've been married for close to 40 years now.

MS. AYRES: How did you meet?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Lance Richbourg introduced us on a blind date.

MS. AYRES: Was she in the art world?

MR. GARABEDIAN: No. She went to [the] University of California at Riverside and studied languages. Her family lived in Brentwood, and she had a lot of friends that were going to UCLA. I don't think she was ever a student at UCLA. She was a friend of Ellie Coppola and some other women. Ellie at that time was going with Lance Richbourg. So I met Gwen through Lance. He introduced her to me or me to her. We went out a couple times, and at the time Gwen already had Claire. Gwen had been married or she had not been married, but she had a baby. Claire was born in Mexico. I think Gwen went there to have the child. The child was conceived in Southern California, but she went to Mexico, because it was still not proper.

I'll tell you a little bit more about Claire later, but we started living together and eventually there is the story that I tell which she just hates. We were together at one point and she said, "Why don't you ask me to marry you?" I said, "What for? I don't want to get married." She said, "Well, you don't have to marry me. All you have to do is ask me." Well, I said, "Well, okay. Let's get married." And she said, "Okay, when?" I thought, what the hell's going on here. I said, "How about a year from today?" She said, "How about two weeks?" So we got married in two weeks.

You can see she has a sense of humor and she's extremely bright. She asked me, "Why don't you make more paintings that'll sell?" I said, "I'll try." She's very protective of my being able to work as much as I want and makes sure that I get to the studio and have whatever I need or want. She loves opera and she drags me along, and I like opera, too.

MS. AYRES: In one of the interviews you said that you play opera in your studio.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I used to, but I prefer silence. If I listen to music, it will usually be opera.

MS. AYRES: Do you still listen to jazz?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I have Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, and Jimmie Lunceford. I don't listen to it that often. I don't need it anymore, but when I would turn on jazz and I would actually become young again. It was pretty amazing, but now I don't need that anymore. I just come to the studio and I'm not young, I'm not old. I'm just in the studio and everything goes away.

MS. AYRES: We were talking about it in terms of formal choices, your not wanting to go into depth. Do you think the horizontality that you're drawn to ...

MR. GARABEDIAN: Now you've brought up something that we haven't talked about yet, and I thought about it yesterday afternoon that we should.

[BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE A]

MR. GARABEDIAN: I don't know when in my philosophical thinking about painting I came up with the idea of what I wanted to happen in the painting. I wanted to see if I could deal with monumentality, the archetypal, the primal, and the universal. To deal with them, you have to find out what they are. You can see it in great work, but to achieve it yourself, you look at Cimabue [Cenni di Pepo Cimabue], you see monumental. You look at Duccio [Duccio di Buoninsegna], same image, it's not there. It's not quite there. He doesn't have the monumentality of Cimabue, and I know why. It has to do with the way Cimabue crowds the surface. This is my thinking on my part, not necessarily a truth, but things just weigh a little more. Maybe it's the monumentality. Monumentality is okay, but then when you come to something primal, what is primal? And I look for primal and you can see it here and there in the work. I think this Luisetti edges towards it. This is an obvious illustration of it.

MS. AYRES: You're drawing a distinction between an illustration of primal and an embodiment of primal?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. If you think of primal, you think of primitive man, and everything he did was functional. Yet you look at the functional stuff that he's done and it's all very beautiful. So you come up with this terrible notion of form following function, but you look at the houses they lived in, these huts. You look at that hut and it's just beautiful. How they decorate themselves very simply and very bluntly, graphically, and it's always very beautiful. So working horizontally, I come up with images that are basically simple and very direct. If your work's formal, I think you have to be really good to do that. You have to know what you're up to.

We have the primal and the archetypal. I think you try to simply move away from specifics of portraiture or types I was looking for, when I did them. I see you have one of the catalogues. I first started dealing with the notion with this group of figures here. Now these are not primal, but I was looking at these as archetypal and that's wrong, because they're not archetypal. I also labeled them not as prehistoric, but as precognitive. Somebody else kept calling them prehistoric and they labeled them prehistoric, but I kept saying precognitive. In other words, I used very sophisticated figures to get across an idea that these figures could not think. They were just here and they didn't know anything and they were just stumbling along. That had a lot to do with the idea you were discussing yesterday about their gestures, their feet, and stuff like that.

MS. AYRES: I called it balletic. They seemed to be moving through space in a body-conscious way rather than a mental awareness.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, exactly. But that they were learning to walk. They are just trying to figure out how to walk. What's your alternative, to put figures with a lot of hair on them or something?

MS. AYRES: Yes.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I didn't want to do that.

MS. AYRES: You didn't want to do some cliché of the Neanderthal [man].

MR. GARABEDIAN: Right.

MS. AYRES: Well, these are from 1978 and '80 and they're mis-titled, Prehistoric Figures.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. Now this stuff here represented thoughts, their ability to eventually think fence or think lines.

MS. AYRES: But they turn up in an abstraction.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, they do. I hadn't thought of that, but you're right.

MS. AYRES: Your little bamboo constructions.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Now, I'm not sure it was this one, but it was one of these paintings of the figures. It might have been that one [A], or even been that one [B]. It wasn't this one, but I was looking at it late in the afternoon, [and] I said, this figure needs something primordial. It needs something really primitive, really prehistoric. I was sitting there trying to think and then all of a sudden it dawned on me, it's a turtle. A turtle! So I painted a turtle and as soon as I did that, I thought, "Oh my God, what have I done?" I thought of the Matisse [Henri Matisse] and

I thought, "Oh shit." So I painted it out, but I thought it was okay. It was a great moment because I understood Matisse a little better and had a new appreciation for him.

MS. AYRES: Compositionally, you cut off the feet and you cut off the heads.

MR. GARABEDIAN: The idea was an ego-oriented idea about composition and placing them in the format of the picture.

MS. AYRES: It emphasizes the negative space and makes a strong shape of that space.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, but I thought that was just a wonderful group of paintings.

MS. AYRES: But she looks so insouciant. She looks rather sophisticated for someone not having a thought in her head. This is the beginning of the aggressive woman?

MR. GARABEDIAN: This was the first figure of the series.

MS. AYRES: These are bones.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, they're bones. You had to put something in the picture and here, again, the idea that this is the future.

MS. AYRES: Well, then it seems quite clear - although this is reasonably representational - that if these are thoughts, how easily they could abstract in your later work, because they're not geared to the landscape particularly if they are ideas in the mind. That's the thing one thinks when one looks back on the work. You don't think of it at the time.

MR. GARABEDIAN: When they happen I know I'll know them.

MS. AYRES: You use these wonderful words like monumental and archetypal and universal and primordial and yet there's also this goofy, cartoonish aspect to the work. That's not a contradiction?

MR. GARABEDIAN: God, I certainly hope not! If it is, I'm really stuck. Contradiction enters into the work in a huge way - I'm not here to inform you, and in order not to inform you, I am going to trip you up. Contradiction is a way of tripping up.

MS. AYRES: You also talk about being very lighthearted and cheerful and that that might be in contradiction to this primordial run.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Bad news. That's really sad and I'm such a jolly sort.

MS. AYRES: Well, maybe it's part of the desire to find yourself because you experience yourself in terms of contradiction. I'd suggest that most people feel contradictory in their being, at least if they think and do and live.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Not Bob Irwin.

MS. AYRES: No sense of contradiction there at all?

MR. GARABEDIAN: No way! Bob is - well, he's not one in a million, but he's one in a lot. I think Max is like that too. We were down in Tijuana once and when Louie gave our last dime to a little kid for some Chiclets, Max said, "That's our last dime! What are we going to do? That's our last dime!" We were right at the border.

MS. AYRES: Well, this subject matter of doubt and the subject matter of contradiction, of confusing the viewer - of tripping yourself up, I think, too because you do paint for yourself and you want to trip yourself up.

MR. GARABEDIAN: You bet.

MS. AYRES: Set yourself problems without being pompous about setting a problem, I guess, or without being programmatic about setting a problem. Yet problems develop and then you're stuck with them.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Well, yes, we look for problems. Problems are what we want, as much as we hate to admit it, it's what we want, at least in the paintings. Maybe not outside of the painting, but in the painting that's in a sense what we live for is solving problems and of course it's not that simple.

MS. AYRES: There's a great deal of faith that you may not paint for the viewer, but you assume that someone's going to be looking at this.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I think you do, but that's still not what you want. You want to even get away from that and

that assumption, but it is there.

MS. AYRES: Then the viewers are particularly on their own, which is not a bad thing for them to engage in finding the problems and finding the solutions and looking into that mindset that you present. Isn't that the best way to be looking at your paintings?

MR. GARABEDIAN: When viewers look at my painting and say they like the painting, that doesn't necessarily make me happy because you reveal yourself, and you don't want to do that. You don't want to reveal yourself.

MS. AYRES: But you never know what people mean when they say they like the painting. Maybe you have artist buddies whom you trust.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, of course, Louie was my eye. He died and now I think Peter Goulds probably more than anybody has a knowledge of my work, but the problem with that is he is a dealer. A dealer has an incredible knowledge of my work, and I don't know what to make of that. He obviously likes it because I'm not a money-making proposition. I was earlier. I'd have these shows and he could sell all the work, but not anymore.

MS. AYRES: Why do you think that is?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I think there are several factors. One of them is, it's just not my time anymore. I had my time and it's past. In a way that's pretty good. I have to simply find my reason for working without thinking that there's a profit to it. It's just I'm working because I want to.

MS. AYRES: When do you think your time was?

MR. GARABEDIAN: It was a small, very tiny window.

MS. AYRES: Somewhere in the '80s?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, in the early '80s. Let's see. Wait a second now. When did the recession start?

MS. AYRES: The late '80s.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Through the '80s I sold a ton of work in New York when I was with Hirschl and Adler. Donald McKinney. Donald sold a lot of work. When I first started showing with Peter, Peter sold a lot of work. He sold it right up on through the late '80s, and then it slowed down, but there'd be something that would go every now and then. I would find it very difficult to complain about what Peter has done for me because I understand the nature of the times and the nature of art.

MS. AYRES: Oh, that people tend to discuss that as those '80s in terms of neo-expressionism and say that you prefigured neo-expressionism. That's an after the fact explanation of a moment, as you're saying, that hits when the work looks juicy and ripe for a period, but, good lord, then you talk about history. I mean, Matisse, they're not going to say that there isn't a moment for Matisse all the time and that they live in history in a different way.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Did you see the Pushkin [Old Masters, Impressionists, and Moderns: French Masterworks from the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, July 27 - October 13, 2003] show?

MS. AYRES: Yes, I did.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I understand the Matisse's are really something. I saw the Matisse/Picasso in New York and that was a mind-boggler. And I saw the Spanish show - Spanish influence on French at the Met [Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting, March 4, 2003-June 29, 2003, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York]. And I loved that show. I thought that was just terrific and informative in terms of history and painting. Did you see the show?

MS. AYRES: No.

MR. GARABEDIAN: You saw about eight people through the years trying to deal with Las Meñinas and it was great, and finally with Picasso trying to do it also. It had all these people copying it and doing this with it and doing that with it. And also in the entrance into the gallery was a Velasquez. On the other side you had this big, black Manet figure. You had both dressed in black and you looked at these two paintings and your immediate response was, "Oh, poor Manet." Boy, they should never have done this, but then you finally realize that they're just two different painters.

MS. AYRES: I often am afraid when I look at work, say from the Renaissance on, that somehow modernism won't hold up for me, and I walk into a gallery and there's a Manet across the room and every time this snaps right

into place. It's just a different world.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, yes, Manet is something. Well, obviously I like him a lot and I copy him. Shall we get back to that? Here you see a lot of attempts at primal and contradictory and obscure.

MS AYER: You don't know whether this is finished yet. This isn't finished yet. You're not sure about this painting?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, I'm pretty sure it's not finished.

MS. AYRES: You're pretty sure it's not finished and it doesn't have a title yet because that's going to come later. I'm looking at a little section of gray fruit, pears and grapes. You're not going to tell me you just needed something in that area are you? That you just needed something in that area and so you put those there

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. That's why I did it. I don't know whether we said it yesterday, but I do have an ego, and every now and then it will manifest itself and say, "I can make a mark or a line anywhere and it will be all right. I can do anything at any time and it'll be all right." Today I did some things that were just with that attitude and it didn't work out at all, but the attitude was right.

MS. AYRES: The attitude is the right thing to have. Whether it works out or not is irrelevant. This slightly closed opening of a hand is a motif that shows up all the time isn't it?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes.

MS. AYRES: We were talking about it yesterday and you told a story of where it came from. Why did it grab you?

MR. GARABEDIAN: You're asking me to remember when I first used it?

MS. AYRES: No, I guess I'm saying that no matter where you get an image, there must be a reason for your attention to be drawn to that image. I'm trying to bring you back to your initial question about who you are and what your childhood must have given, and the idea of holding onto something in a loose way is rather sensitive.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I was very conscious of the nature of the grip, as there could have been any number of different ways that I could have used the grip. I can't remember why I wanted that gentle thing, maybe it's I just didn't want something aggressive. Why I wanted the hand, I don't know, other than it's a series of lines or something like that.

MS. AYRES: Well, Jasper Johns and other people used the handprint directly. It's not something that you would tend to do.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Everything comes about through lines for me.

MS. AYRES: It's a lip?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, and then an eyeball.

MS. AYRES: They're displaced in the face in a way, the lip and the eyeball. The face is globelike as if it has meridians around it, so that becomes a monumental and maybe that's not how you used the space, but that face is a human and yet the whole world. That's certainly a monumental idea.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Somehow monumental is a tough one.

MS. AYRES: I guess one can't just throw the word at an image or at a place.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I got this book.

MS. AYRES: Oh, looks like primitive architecture.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Hoping to stop yourself from lifting from this stuff.

MS. AYRES: This becomes a real source, doesn't it? I mean, even this shape, if it were filled in with a color, would be a very enigmatic shape, wouldn't it? There's so much linearity. When you lift, how do you lift from something you've done?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I try to take it out of context. In other words, if I did something like this I'd take it out of context. I wouldn't put this as a hut in a landscape. I might even turn it upside down or put it sideways and I would go for the linear and the sticklike quality. Let's see if there's any instance shown of it there right in front of our eyes. If we went through that book, we'd probably pull up something like this in there somewhere.

MS. AYRES: So the image sticks in your mind and then comes out later? I don't envision you peering, just poring

through this book looking for an image to put there. It just stays in your mind.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. I'll just look at the book for a couple of hours and just admire it and maybe something will come through to me. I don't think I could ever deal with something like that in any a direct way, but I know that elements of something like this creep into my work.

MS. AYRES: We're looking at a totem pole scene. You would never lift the whole thing.

MR. GARABEDIAN: So primitive architecture I've looked at and it's been helpful in the sense that there is primitive architecture and that these people are incredibly civilized. They have a sense of who they are and what's beautiful about their existence, their buildings, and their compounds and their decoration.

MS. AYRES: Do you find that in our culture today? Civilized?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I think it's there, but I don't look for it. I think it's too late. I look for it. Let's say I had an earlier period when I dealt with our contemporary society and I dealt with it not in a very profound or long-term way. I just went through and got over it and went back into history.

MS. AYRES: When you dealt with contemporary society, can you give me an example whether it was profound or not?

MR. GARABEDIAN: It would have had to do with television images and the time and temperature collage, time being simply an alarm clock and temperature being a thermometer; and then with an airplane on the bottom.

MS. AYRES: You certainly don't go to, say, commercial advertising? No stretch of the imagination would you be considered a Pop artist.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I'm trying to think back. I might have made some foolish maneuver, too. I never really understood Pop Art and when I finally did understand it, I wasn't interested in it.

MS. AYRES: The whole discussion about whether it celebrates or critiques the culture, and it gets tired.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I'm not interested in that. I don't want to be critical of anything or anybody.

MS. AYRES: Some artists can do it. I'm not always sure that it's the best way to be a social critic.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Example.

MS. AYRES: Who can do it? Well, Manet.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Manet, and, where?

MS. AYRES: In his history painting. You don't think?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I don't think so. Well, he might have been. I know he had political friends, but I look at that as an exercise in painting.

MS. AYRES: Maximilian, the assassination or execution? This is a hugely political subject, and certainly in the news. You're saying that because he was being a disinterested observer?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I think, he liked the composition, is what I'm saying.

MS. AYRES: Was it based on a photograph?

MR. GARABEDIAN: It probably was, but it couldn't have been. He'd have to invent the smoke and stuff and the fire coming out of the guns, because they didn't have candid camera then. They had time exposures.

MS. AYRES: Well, then, what about Goya?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Goya, you got one there. How about somebody like Rosenquist [James Rosenquist]? If he is a critic, and he might be, he's a very benevolent critic. I think he is a great painter. He paints so beautifully.

MS. AYRES: It's hard to get beyond the pleasure in looking at the work. Not that one would assume that social criticism paintings should be terrible to look at. Certainly there are aspects of Goya that have everything to do with your appreciation of what he's doing, but a part of what he's doing is to rub your nose in the subject matter itself.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I think this brings up Andy Warhol. I think finally you look at his work and he was a critic. He

was tough, and even all those silly portraits, they are very, very socially critical.

MS. AYRES: Yes, you don't have to go to the electric chair or the car crashes to get that through.

MR. GARABEDIAN: It's in everything he did. Do you know, Pach [Walter Pach]? Pach was an art critic.

MS. AYRES: What did you think about his [Andy Warhol's] large Last Supper? It was in the show at MOCA. That's always a surprise to me.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I didn't see the show.

MS. AYRES: You didn't see the show?

MR. GARABEDIAN: No, I don't like his work that much. I don't find him interesting, and I think that's why.

MS. AYRES: Because he's a social critic?

MR. GARABEDIAN: If Goya were showing, I'd certainly go. Goya was a beautiful painter.

MS. AYRES: Well, some of those early tapestry designs that seem as if they're almost out of the Rococo.

MR. GARABEDIAN: You can't believe it's the same guy. But then, Goya had a lot of stuff to look at. He must have been aware of the Hieronymus Bosch that was in the Prado, all those fire and brimstone paintings.

MS. AYRES: Speaking of which, when people talk about the '60s in LA, they often talk about seeing the work through art from when it was out here at the magazines and, not getting back to New York a lot at that time, and our museums were not as full of the great work as perhaps they may be considered today. Sometimes one or two paintings - if it were a great Rothko at Exposition Park. Do you feel that sometimes an artist will go a long way with one or two great paintings?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I wasn't aware of the Rothko in Exposition Park. I'd probably seen many great paintings that hadn't meant a thing to me because of my attitude about what painting was at the time. I remember somewhere in the '60s or late '50s, they discovered a couple of Pollaiuolo [Jacopo Pollaiuolo] paintings in Pasadena. They had been lifted by a soldier or something in Italy and somehow they'd gotten to Pasadena. Somebody said the person that owned the paintings took them to some conservator or frame shop. The guy looked at them and said, "Well, you better take these somewhere." So he brought them to the museum. He made him aware of it and the County Museum aware of it, and so they immediately identified them as these two Pollaiuolo.

MS. AYRES: Were known to be missing?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. So they were going to send them back to Italy. Italy was so happy that they said they could put them on exhibit for a couple days. I went down and dutifully got in line and these things just did it for me. It's not like it was the first time that I'd actually looked at a painting of something alive. So you can see I came about very slowly. I evolved into the incredible sophisticate that I am now.

MS. AYRES: Well, it was a successful evolution. Sometimes I think that you've probably had the experience of going through room after room after room of not very good painting in some small town in Germany, maybe where there's a museum and suddenly a Dürer jumped off the wall; but sometimes I think I'm being naïve here, but that I really began to understand about good painting when I looked at bad painting. This is a different use of the word "bad" than the Bad Painting show.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, yes.

MS. AYRES: I was brought up with art. I was taken to the Museum of Modern Art and to the Met at a very early age in New York and just took it for granted. As a kid it was just there. And when I began to look at really inept painting - that's a better word than bad - the miracle of what I'd been looking at all my life just struck me that I was just taking this for granted. So it's a funny feeling. You feel stupid, but happy.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes. Great painting is great painting.

MS. AYRES: Do you have paintings at LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] now that you go back to? There's that little Delacroix study at LACMA.

MR. GARABEDIAN: It's been so long since I've been to LACMA I don't even remember what they have there.

MS. AYRES: Well, now why is that? That you're so busy?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, and I think I've lost interest in painting also, in the sense of looking at it. I haven't lost interest in my own painting. In fact I think my interest now is probably as intense as it's ever been, but I would love to look at good painting. It's not nice of me to say that I'm not interested in painting anymore, but it's just that I find it difficult to drag myself down there.

MS. AYRES: That's why the Getty is such a pain too. You said not because you don't like their art, but because it's a pain to get there. You will go and see the manuscripts?

MR. GARABEDIAN: I hope so, but never can tell.

MS. AYRES: So you don't go to MOCA much either?

MR. GARABEDIAN: No. I went to MOCA to see the Lucien Freud show and I hated it. But then I thought about it later and I said, "Boy was I out of line. That was a good show." It was really a great show. I thought I just didn't want to like it so I said, "Oh, well, looks like he spent all day looking at a sweaty model with bad teeth." I could go in there and it seemed like I could smell the model and things like that. After I thought about it and thought about it, because of friends that I respect and I said, "Oh, no, that wasn't any good." But I think I just missed the boat completely. It was a hard, rough-and-tough painting.

MS. AYRES: Well, you allow yourself to change your mind, which is pretty unusual.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, yes, most certainly. I can tell you another show I changed my mind about. A show that I liked at LACMA that I thought was just amazing was the William Kentridge show ["William Kentridge", July 21 - October 6, 2002]. When I saw that puppet thing, The Return of Ulysses [Il Ritorno d'Ulisse, 1998] by Montiverde [Claudio Montiverde], I said, "Everything this guy does has some meaning to it." I figured the drawings were fine, but they were incredibly functional in terms of what he was really interested in doing.

MS. AYRES: Yes, which had to do with a theatrical presentation, whether it was cinema or on stage or whether it was a shadow picture.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, that shadow thing, that big thing on the big wall when you went in with the music, the old hymn, [singing] "We shall gather at the river."

MS. AYRES: I thought that the guard thought that I was nuts. I just kept sitting there and sitting there.

MR. GARABEDIAN: That was beautiful. Then they had it juxtaposed to the Murillo ["Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-1682): Paintings from American Collections", July 14 through October 6, 2002] show. I had gone down to see the Murillo show. There was one decent painting in the show, but Murillo is Murillo. The Kentridge show was right next-door. I didn't even know who this guy was or anything like that, so I went in and just looked at it very quickly and thought, "Well, this isn't too interesting." Then I went back later and it turned out to be very interesting.

Another good show was the Sargent [John Singer Sargent] show, the watercolors particularly. I thought it was a beautiful show. When he tried to do the same thing with oils in the landscape that he had done with watercolor, it just went dead. There was that one beautiful portrait, the young man or young woman with glasses in back. It was a great portrait. I like Sargent. I think he fails a lot, but there are a couple of his paintings that I think rank right up there with anybody's.

MS. AYRES: There's a good one at the Huntington Library.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes.

MS. AYRES: I suppose what I mean about paintings [is that] you go back to look at various museums and why museums should have permanent collections. There are an awful lot of painters who are - how shall I say this - in the storage rooms at LACMA and I wish were up more. Sometimes I discover these when I'm doing a show like Emerson Woeffler or Pat Hogan. They were in their storage. Maybe you are too.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, I certainly am. Yes. They have a good one of mine in there and so does MOCA for that matter. I figure I've done a disservice to my children and my wife in that sense that I'm very selfish.

MS. AYRES: Well, you could be going to an office every day.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, but I wouldn't be happy. I feel guilty about being happy.

MS. AYRES: That's my point. That you could go to an office every day and still ignore your children, if indeed you do, and you probably don't, but it sounds as if there's some inbuilt guilt about accepting who you are.

MR. GARABEDIAN: I think there is. I think that I'm not doing all that I should in relationship to other people. I hate to say that I'm a taker and not a giver and that's not a pleasant feeling.

MS. AYRES: Well, this may be facile, but it seems to me that people who are takers don't usually worry about being takers, and the fact that you're worried about it is part and parcel of a general interest in complexity and doubt.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, I'm sure you're right. I think Gwen likes me.

MS. AYRES: Well, that's one.

MR. GARABEDIAN: There has to be a reason. My daughters like me.

MS. AYRES: Have you considered asking these people and believing them?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Gwen has never said a straight word to me all the 40 years we've been married.

MS. AYRES: But she's stayed married.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Oh, yes. I'm sure she's waffled on me. She has never said an honest word to me. She's the trickiest person you ever met, and I don't know why. I think she's like her mother. I can remember we were traveling through Spain, with her mother and her father sitting in the back seat, and I'm driving and Gwen's mother says, "I think Chas is hungry. I think he needs some lunch." And that's the same way Gwen is. Nothing is straight out or said honestly or straightforwardly. It's always roundabout.

MS. AYRES: And she was really saying?

MR. GARABEDIAN: That she was hungry and she wanted lunch and we should stop for lunch. So Gwen inherited that, and Gwen is just so smart that it's frightening.

MS. AYRES: And your children are smart, too.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes.

MS. AYRES: One daughter is an artist?

MR. GARABEDIAN: She was trained as an artist, but she was more interested in being a housewife with children. We spent a fortune on teaching her to play the piano and violin and, you say, "Boy, this kid is really talented." Finally, she gave this incredible piano recital, closed the keyboard and never played it again. And she went off to France for a year. She came back and was living in New York and she moved in with us. Gwen and I were having an anniversary at some fancy restaurant and we're sitting there drinking champagne and eating fancy shrimp and so I said, "Well, Sophia, do you have any plans for the future? What do you plan to do with your life?" And she said, "Oh, dad, I'm going to become an artist." I said, "Look at how you suffer as an artist," as I'm drinking champagne and eating shrimp cocktails in this fancy restaurant. She says, "Sure." Then she studied art and she went to UCLA and got her degree in art. This is her concept piece.

Claire works as hard to make a living as a professional cellist. Claire works for one of these research companies also.

MS. AYRES: Does she play with any of the local orchestras?

MR. GARABEDIAN: She lives up in Seattle. She plays in Seattle and usually Seattle, San Francisco and Portland. She works for this research company that's researching the effects of mercury on dentists to see how mercury affects the brain. They used a lot of mercury in the teeth. In talking to her about it you learn that a lot of this research is just nonsense and all the facts are fake.

MS. AYRES: Now you have grandchildren to watch grow up.

MR. GARABEDIAN: Sophia has three little monsters, one just turned four and one is two and the other one is just turning one.

MS. AYRES: Gwen is there alone with them?

MR. GARABEDIAN: Yes, the husband and wife went up to San Francisco for the weekend. This is their first chance to get away. This is where I say I'm really selfish. I'm probably going to spend as little time as I can over there, but they come over every Sunday evening for dinner and it's just high tension for about three hours. They just scare the living daylight out of me. I don't know why.

MS. AYRES: I was much calmer with my own kids than my grandkids. We're coming to the end of the interview now and I've asked Chas to deliver a few words of wisdom.

MR. GARABEDIAN: The first manifesto is it's not what you paint but how you paint it. A week later it was not how you paint it but what you paint. So that takes care of that one. Other manifesto is Cézanne painted great paintings, but Rousseau painted interesting paintings. So you can see that all of these manifestos come from people who don't know what they're talking about, but like to make manifestos. I think your life goes on this way. Part of the fun of being an artist is coming to conclusions which you're going to reject eventually, and hopefully there'll be many, many more of them. So that's about as far as I can see.

MS. AYRES: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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