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A Fresh Perspective on Paul Guiragossian in Beirut

by Benjamin Genocchio 20/12/13 6:15 PM EST

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Paul Guiragossian's "Composition" 1990-1991.
(Courtesy Beirut Exhibition Center/Paul Guiragossian Foundation)

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Not long ago I flew to Beirut for an exhibition. I don't usually do this sort of thing, coming and going within 24 hours, but I felt compelled to see an overview of the work of the Lebanese painter and activist Paul Guiragossian (1925-1993), a favorite of a newly minted Middle Eastern art market. Current price points aside, he was one of the region's most innovative 20th century artists.

Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, Middle Eastern art experts, have organized the show on behalf of the Paul Guiragossian Foundation. They have done a wonderful job of telling the artist's story, dividing the work into several themes that flow together seamlessly through the Beirut Exhibition Center, a capacious and pleasant building located along the waterfront.

Born in Jerusalem, Guiragossian was the son of survivors of the Armenian genocide. He was educated at a Catholic seminary in Jerusalem before settling in 1947 in Lebanon, where he would spend the rest of his life. He was more or less self-taught as an artist, with the exception of a short period of instruction at the Studio Yarkon in Jaffa in the mid 1940s.

Guiragossian took sometime to become artist: married with six children (one, a son Ara, died at birth), he taught art in Armenian schools, painted banners and posters and drew illustrations to support his family, who not surprisingly appear as the subjects of many of his early pictures. He also painted self-portraits and landscapes but it was his family, really, that most excited him.

If his work delves deep into family, identity, and ethnicity, it also seems to be socially conscious in the early years, with city life, poverty, and hard labor among his regular themes. He was fascinated with what you might call an Arab urban realism, well articulated, for me, in frequent juxtapositions of empathetic human scenes rendered in a harsh expressionistic style.

This tension is visible in work across the various themes that structure the show (Self, Family, Women, Faith, Despair, Theatre, Faces, and Life), and that simultaneously provide insight into the artist's lifelong preoccupations. Note also the artist's attraction to and facility in multiple media — oil paint,watercolor, pen and ink, charcoal, and collage.

His paintings reveal a debt to Matisse, Cezanne, Picasso and others, but the lively expressionism is all his own. Figures dominate throughout his career, but from the mid 1980s until his death in November 1993 a bold new abstraction came to the fore and led to the production of what are today considered among his most prized and valuable masterpieces.

Guiragossian had been playing with abstraction on and off since the 1950s, experimenting with staining, drips and even a sort of geometrics. But in the 1980s he somehow loosened up, allowed those rows of vertical figures that define his early work to melt and then meld into each other in a way that created a pleasing abstract field of color with subtle patterning.

I love these late abstracts, including "Unite" (1989), "Printemps" (1989), "Hiver" (1991), "Composition" (1990-91), and "Tambourine" (circa 1991), with their viscous, loose, and messy brushwork and concentrated if barely controlled use of color. The artist found his own voice with these works — late, but better than never. It is a tragedy that he died so early, aged just 67.

I left this inspiring show wanting more.

"Paul Guiragossian: The Human Condition" is at the Beirut Exhibition Center, Beirut, through January 6, 2014

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