



# A LEGACY OF LOVE

Five decades of the late Paul Guiragossian's career are encapsulated in a retrospective curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath. **India Stoughton** reports on the stellar show at the Beirut Exhibition Center.

**H**ow do you bring a dead man back to life? In *Paul Guiragossian: The Human Condition*, a retrospective of the prolific Modernist's work at the Beirut Exhibition Center (BEC), curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath set out not only to showcase the artist's extensive body of work, but to communicate a sense of his character. Helping them in their endeavour was Guiragossian's youngest daughter, Manuella, who served as exhibition advisor on behalf of the family-run Paul Guiragossian Foundation, established in 2011 to preserve and promote the artist's work.

The exhibition, which opened on the 20th anniversary of the artist's death on 20 November, spans five decades of his working life and includes more than 300 paintings and works on paper, many of which have never been exhibited before. An archival room containing an array of material including old exhibition catalogues, personal letters, photographs, newspaper clippings and television and radio recordings affords visitors an insight into aspects of Guiragossian's personality that might otherwise be forgotten: his extensive knowledge of art history; his opinion of his artistic contemporaries; and his eloquent speech in Arabic, Armenian and French.

## A COHESIVE VISION

Ever concerned with finding new and dynamic frameworks within which to present art historical material, Bardaouil and Fellrath – founders of multidisciplinary curatorial platform Art Reoriented – decided to eschew a traditional chronological arrangement of the work. They instead approached the retrospective from a thematic angle in an attempt to communicate a sense of what motivated and inspired the artist throughout his lengthy career.

In keeping with their curatorial vision, Bardaouil and Fellrath divided the vast space of the BEC into a series of more easily manageable smaller spaces sized connecting galleries, in which the work is displayed according to eight thematic categories. Galleries dedicated to self-portraits, family, women, life, faith and despair are grouped around a spherical centre space, representing a theatre. One third of an enormous triptych that



This page:  
*Composition*. 1990–91.  
Oil on canvas.  
130 x 200 cm.

Facing page:  
Above: (Detail) *Portrait of Juliette*. 1978. Oil on masonite. 200 x 100 cm.

Below: (Detail) *Self-Portrait*. 1951. Gouache on paper. 30 x 24 cm.

All images courtesy Beirut Exhibition Center.



Guiragossian created as scenery for a play in 1970 is displayed between two empty wooden frames, marking the spaces where its missing counterparts should have hung. Ten characterful, lively charcoal sketches of Guiragossian's friends and family, among them iconic Lebanese singer Fairuz, form a captive audience, providing a playful, immersive element to the exhibition.

"We wanted to create a context for the life and work of Guiragossian... that connects with what other artists were doing during his lifetime [and] before him," said Bardaouil. To this end, the curators decided to include a selection of works by the artist's Modernist contemporaries as a means of placing his own output within a regional context. This decision – along with numerous quotes from the artist stencilled onto the gallery walls – received a mixed reception from visitors, but well-balanced lighting, sensitive placement of the works and an unusually effective deployment of the space ensured the overall effect was engaging and memorable.

## UNIVERSAL THEMES

The thematic division of Guiragossian's *oeuvre* ably demonstrated that, as Fellrath put it, "it's always been about the human being in his art-

work, and never about anything else." His style hovers between abstraction and figuration, the early works marked by a sombre colour palette of beiges, taupes, blues and blacks, while his later, more abstract paintings are characterised by rich, earthy colours and a distinctive vertical movement. What all have in common is their tender focus on the day-to-day life of those around him, from porters in the streets to friends and neighbours attending parties, weddings and funerals, to Guiragossian's family, members of whom feature prominently in his work.

Exhibition highlights include a series of charcoal self-portraits and a 1948 portrait of Guiragossian's mother, painted just after the family's exodus to Lebanon from Palestine, where the artist was born in 1925, to survivors of the Armenian genocide. The portrait is interesting by virtue of its realism and academism, qualities absent from his later work. Nearby, a stunning 1978 portrait of the artist's wife, Juliette, contrasts a soothing palette of teal and sage with the warm tones of her terracotta dress and auburn hair, combining the artist's penchant for thick, guttural daubs of paint with his instinctive delicacy, the textural surface of the masonite showing through in places.

The exhibition also includes Guiragossian's last painting, executed a few hours before his

death and left unsigned. Manuelle recalled fondly how, after completing *L'Adieu*, Guiragossian left his studio literally rubbing his hands with glee, telling his family: "I finally accomplished what I always hoped for, merging the old and new together." A synthesis of his popular figurative works and the abstraction that characterised his later pieces, *L'Adieu* captures grouped figures in warm autumnal shades, their forms close but not quite touching, implying both unity and isolation.

One of the aims of the retrospective is to highlight the continuing relevance of Guiragossian's work with its distinctive blend of Occidental and Oriental influences. "His work is still so cutting-edge," says Bardaouil, "so fresh and so innovative and so difficult to pin down in a style or a period or a genre... what he was thinking and writing about 30 or 40 years ago is something that is being debated in the intellectual and artistic circles or on the streets of Arab cities today." An extraordinary man, Guiragossian's legacy lives on in a retrospective that is carefully conceived and admirably executed. 🇱🇧

*Paul Guiragossian: The Human Condition* runs at the Beirut Exhibition Center until 6 January. For more information visit [www.beirutexhibition-center.com](http://www.beirutexhibition-center.com)