

George Gabin

reflections

"I never really left Coney Island¹," George Gabin says of his childhood turf, and the salt breeze of the past blows through many of his paintings. But when viewing his Tuscan landscapes or his boardwalk paintings, one doesn't feel the imprint of an urban environment on an impressionable boy. Rather, one senses an inner vision, tender but indestructible, that the grown man has been unfolding through his art for six decades.

George Gabin's art has its roots as deep in his own psyche as it does in tradition. His symbols are elemental and universal—rock, water, tower, stairs, flesh—and for that reason, irreducible to words or formulae. Like Joseph Cornell's boxes, Gabin's paintings create a world apart, a place we can visit but cannot stay. Yet at the same time his attention to the realities of the visual, external world is acute and unerring. His world tells us of ours with hard-won wisdom, if we will only attend carefully enough.

Biography

George Gabin describes the Coney Island where he grew up as the source of his vision, stretching and fueling his imagination as a young artist. Afflicted with asthma, George spent much time bed-ridden during his youth, an entrapment that allowed this artistic sense to develop. He had decided to be an artist by the age of seventeen rather than to follow his father as a garment cutter in the New York garment district². A lifetime reader, he says that he was kicked out of high school once for reading Joyce's *Ulysses*, though the principal admitted to never looking at the book. Clearly, the determined will necessary for him to pursue his vision, indifferent to the fads and trends of the art world, was already fully formed.

Gabin received a scholarship to the Arts Students League in New York City, studying with Reginald Marsh, Ivan Olinsky and Will Barnet. During the same period (1949-54) he also continued taking classes at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, studying drawing with Victor Candell and sculpture with Joseph Konzol. Through his teachers, he found himself drawn to figurative art, becoming an admirer of Vermeer and Thomas Eakins. Gradually he developed the symbology with which he would work in the coming decades.

In 1960 Gabin moved to Rockport, Massachusetts, to make his way as a painter. He taught at the New England School of Art before breaking away with other faculty to found Montserrat College of Art in 1970, where he was a revered teacher for almost three decades before retiring in 1998. While at Montserrat, in the early '90s, he began teaching in Italy each summer, first in Trieste and then later in Viterbo, and developed the vision of the Italian landscape that became so important in his work. Once Gabin retired, he and his wife, the painter Martha Stone, spent six months each year in Italy living and working in their studios in the small town of Lamole, near Florence.

The Paintings

To linger before a Gabin painting is to have our eyes untrained of the habits we've been taught by the disposable visual information that surrounds us everyday, in magazines, on television, on the internet, in the stripmall landscapes that line our commutes. We snatch at information from that environment, the visual wallpaper we see but don't see, and we hurry on. Gabin forces us to stop, to rethink what we're looking for, to enter his reverie and to tune ourselves to the pitch of his mood.

In several canvases in this show he melds the beach at Duino, with its upsurge of rocks along a paved pathway, with his memory of the Coney Island boardwalk of his youth. "Whenever I painted Italy, I was painting Coney Island," he said recently.

A repeated motif in Gabin's art is that of a trio of figures along a stony beach overlooking the ocean. The three figures are often separate but together, with ambiguous hints at a narrative. In *The Last Days of Summer*, triangulated glances between a woman and two men are filled with expectations and anxieties. Behind them the indifferent, glistening sea stretches toward infinity.

In another such painting, *Incident*, a Lolita-like figure stands, solitary and longing, gazing at a young couple together on the eternal rocks. She's trembling on the borderline between innocence and experience. One feels the inevitability that the rough texture of the rocks will bruise and abrade all of the tender youths. The tumult of rocks here, as elsewhere, seem to be clambering slowly upward rather than crumbling under gravity. Thorpe Feidt aptly wrote, in his fine introduction to Gabin's January, 2001, show, that Gabin's treatment of rocks renders them "as condensed and expressive as Chinese ideograms."³

The youths in these paintings are creatures of Gabin's world, mirroring us, but remaining exotic and apart. Lissome and wistful, they are more like Ariel and Puck. They mimic our world, but they inhabit the more enduring world of art.

Another painting of a couple on a walk above the beach, *Summer's End* (2004, not in this show) is of a couple face-to-face on the walk, an unabashedly romantic ocean behind them. The man's yellow shirt and the woman's apricot dress share a subtle warmth, framed in the shimmering blues and greens of the summer night. The man's face is a complex study in desire and anxiety, that says that nothing in this world is without its price. The narrative is as compressed as a Chekhov short story.

La Filetta and *Early Spring* are under-paintings that Gabin decided to leave as is, and they stand on their own as completed works. His wife Martha Stone remembered⁴ that George used to use an unfinished painting with under-painting by Tintoretto to instruct his students. The pleasures of these drawings are many and subtle: the variations of gray achieved in the fields, the textures of the carefully worked foliage, the rhythms of the receding road.

Hidden in the larger landscape are elegant lines that echo his figures, and one can see a stretched leg here or the angle of a hip there in his Tuscan hills, as if the landscape is about to sigh and turn.

In *An Afternoon in the Fall* a precarious bike rider wobbles between two hedges while a couple retreats in the distance. Again we find the trio of figures, separate but with wisps of connections. The setting here seems a formal, Tuileries-like garden, but within this city, with its Italianate tower in the distance, the boy on the bicycle is solitary, uncertain, surrounded by lush nature as he proceeds into a future away from the couple, where memory may linger.

In *The Farm at Casole* a woman and a white dog are retreating away from the viewer. The mystery in Gabin's paintings is often created by the distance between people, the oblique glance, or the turning away. Here the woman and dog walk past the brick tower of a gate and into the embrace of a cluster of farm buildings, broken down into a complex, tectonic structure of rectangles. (The compositions of Gabin's paintings are always as solid as the surfaces are shimmering and delicate.) The stones of the building here speak of endurance and strength, at odds with the woman's fleeting movements.

George Gabin said he started *The Studio*, "after I got my death sentence," a doctor's verdict that his cancer had returned. His wife suggested⁴ it was a manner of documenting the private space where he labored for years, with the brushes, the cans of turpentine, the landscapes leaning against the walls, and the central pillar which seems to dominate, reminiscent of the towers in his landscapes. Like many of his paintings, this one is filled with the haunting absence of a DeChirico, the sense we have in an empty room where secrets were recently whispered.

The Moment II, the other painting of his studio, is a seven-foot canvas, a slightly smaller than life-sized self-portrait. It is evidence that his ambition and vision are burning brighter than ever in his eighth decade. He said of this canvas "the intimacy of allowing the world to see me in my private world"--the world where he creates his art--"was new."

An air of anticipation fills the canvas. George's back is turned to the viewer, though the slant of his shoulders and the curve of the back of his head would be instantly recognizable to anyone who knew him. His back is lit with a mysterious, dissolving light. He turns to the door on his right as if a visitor were about to enter, or as if, his wife suggested, he is about "to look over his shoulder at death."⁴ A pencil sharpener and door handle are rendered with acute precision, as if to remind us of the importance of sensory specifics, even the seemingly trivial, amid larger mysteries. A huge mirror looms behind the artist and his easel, framing them: the mirror of art framing the artist creating the mirror of art.

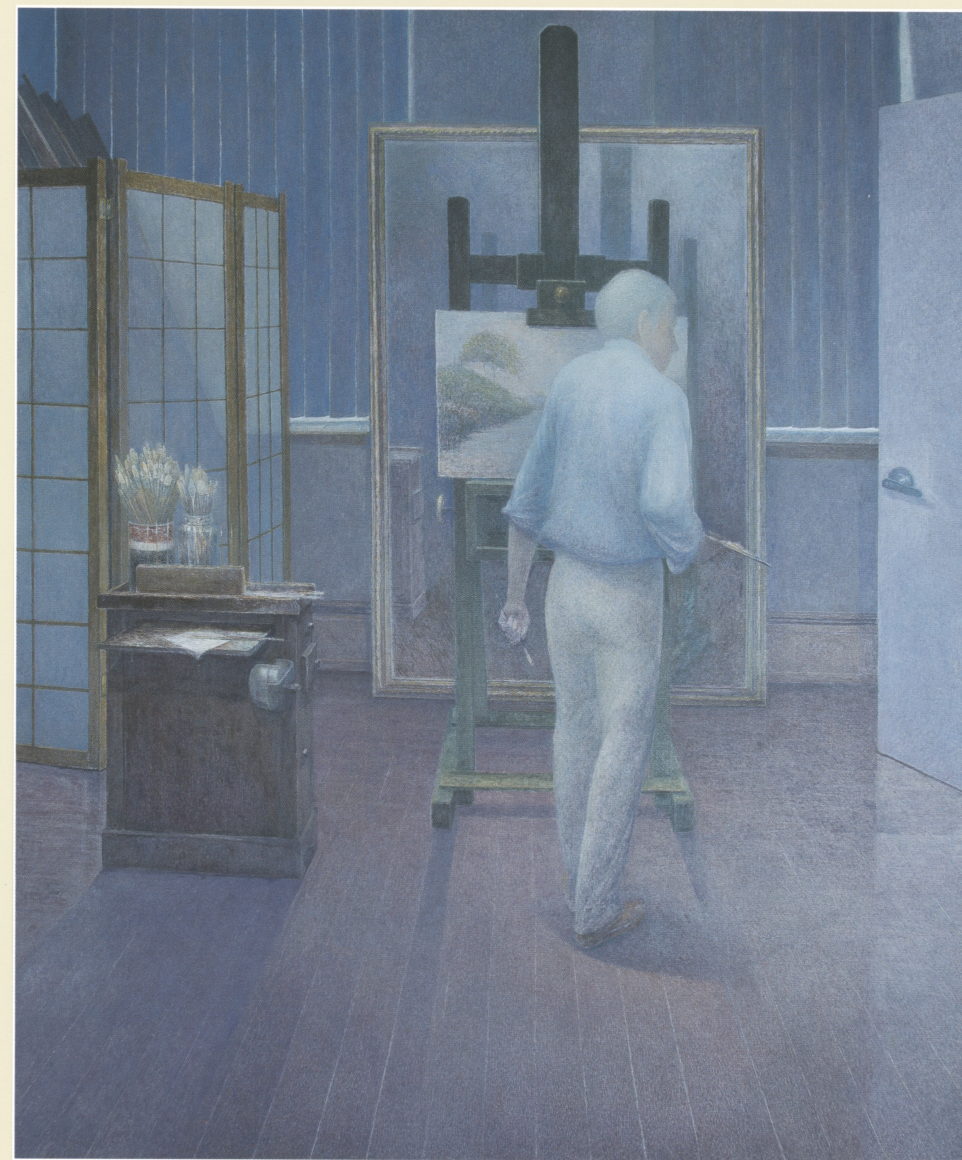
“Most artists don’t know when they’re going to die,” George said recently, “but I know about when. Knowing that I haven’t wasted my time is very important to me; I’ve been consistent. Some skills are lost by a painter near the end, but something’s gained as well. I think of Titian’s late Crucifixion. It’s an icon of abstract expressionism. He had such passion! Such intensity!” One cannot help echoing his comments on Titian when viewing his own recent paintings. Later he added, “I’m a humanist. I’ve always believed in truth. I’ve always believed in beauty.”

Gabin’s trios of youths on the beach always are surrounded by rocks and a shimmering sea. The obdurate rocks threaten the youthful flesh but will also be the material of which the mature artist will build his towers—the towers that often loom in the background of his paintings. Gabin’s enduring rocks and ravaged towers are reminiscent of the lighthouses of Edward Hopper or the tower extolled by the elderly Yeats. They are about the isolation and triumph of the artist, but also about time, and bespeak Gabin’s complex attitude toward it: it brings us what it will soon take away. Yet we paint our pictures and build our cities in defiance of it, knowing they won’t last, and eyeing the horizon-line of infinity.

About the author: Charles M. Boyer is a poet and fiction writer who teaches at Montserrat College of Art, where for many years he and George Gabin were colleagues.

ENDNOTES:

1. All quotations from George Gabin from conversation with the artist, November 23, 2011.
2. Edward Strickland, “The Imaginist Art of George Gabin,” excerpted in “George Gabin 35 Years,” exhibition catalogue. Chase Gallery, Boston, 1994.
3. Thorpe Feidt, “George Gabin,” exhibition catalogue, Chase Gallery, Boston, 2001.
4. All citations and quotations from Martha Stone from interview, November 23, 2011.



The Moment II | oil on linen | 84 x 72 inches



The Sound of Distant Thunder | oil on linen | 27.5 x 35.5 inches



The Farm at Casole | oil on linen | 31.5 x 31.5 inches



La Filetta | oil on linen | 28.75 x 30 inches



Valley of Lamole I | oil on linen | 19.625 x 23.75 inches



Afternoon in the Fall | oil on linen | 21.625 x 29.5 inches



Over Lamole | oil on linen | 13.75 x 10 inches



The Studio | oil on linen | 46 x 42 inches

George Gabin

Education

1949-54 Brooklyn Museum Art School, Brooklyn, NY

Studied drawing with Victor Candell, sculpture with Joseph Konzol

1950-54 Art Students League, New York, NY

Studied painting with Reginald Marsh, Ivan Olinsky, Julien Levi and Charles Alston

Studied printmaking with Will Barnet and Harry Sternberg

Museum & Juried Exhibitions

2008 Museo di Arte Sacra San Francesco, Greve in Chianti, Italy

1983 Wisteriahurst Museum, Holyoke, MA

1975 Boston Printmakers, Brockton Museum, Brockton, MA

1968 Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT

1966 The Albright Museum, Buffalo, NY
The DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA

1965 National Academy, New York, NY

1964 Allied Artists of America, New York, NY
Providence Arts Club, Providence, RI
Springfield Museum, Springfield, MA

Solo Exhibitions

2008 Cell Signaling, Danvers, MA

2008 Chase Gallery, Boston, MA

2006 New England Biolabs, Ipswich, MA

2004 Chase Gallery, Boston, MA

2001 Chase Gallery, Boston, MA

1994 Chase Gallery, Boston, MA

1990 The Pingree School, Hamilton, MA

1987 Bravos Gallery, Gloucester, MA

1986 Edna Stebbins Gallery, Cambridge, MA

1985 Rockport Art Association, Rockport, MA

1983 Montserrat College of Art, Beverly, MA

1975 Doll and Richards Gallery, Boston, MA

1972 The Guild of Boston Artists, Boston, MA

1967 Carl Siembab Gallery, Boston, MA

1965 Gallery Seven, Boston, MA

1963 Carl Siembab Gallery, Boston, MA

Select Group Exhibitions

2009 Greve in Chianti, Italy

2008 - 2003 Lamole, Greve in Chianti, Italy

2009 - 2000 Guild of Boston Artists, Boston, MA

2005 The Founding Faculty, Montserrat College of Art, Beverly, MA

2002 Biblioteca Comunale, Impruneta, FI, Italy

1999 Group Exhibition, Chase Gallery, Boston, MA

1998 Figure and Fantasy, Chase Gallery, Boston, MA

Parallel Visions, Montserrat College of Art, Beverly, MA (two person exhibition)

1996 Sherry French Gallery, New York, NY

1995 Boston Public Library, John Merriam Collection, Boston, MA

1991 Chase Gallery, Boston, MA

1990 Montserrat College of Art, Beverly, MA (two-person exhibition) Chase Gallery, Boston, MA

Emerging Boston Artists, The Brush Gallery, Lowell, MA

Figuration - Likeness and Symbol, The Gallery at Brickbottom, Somerville, MA

1984 Point Hill Gallery, Gloucester, MA

1983 Art Institute of Boston, Boston, MA

1982 Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Boston, MA
Geraci Gallery, Rockport, MA

1978 Sport in America, Huntsville, Museum of Art, Huntsville, AL

1977 Collection of John Merriam, State Street Bank, Boston, MA

1974 Impressions Gallery, Boston, MA

1970 Mainstreet Gallery, Chicago, MA

1968 Gallery Seven, Rockport, MA

1966 National Exhibition, "Magic Realism - What is It?", The American Federation of Art, NY

1964 Travelling Exhibition, Boston Artists, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA

1962 Carl Siembab Gallery, Boston, MA
Boston Arts Festival, Boston, MA

Teaching

1992-96 Summer Program in Italy, Montserrat College of Art, Viterbo, Italy

1989-91 La Scuola del Vedere, Trieste, Italy

1970-98 Professor Emeritus, Montserrat College of Art, Beverly, MA

1963-70 New England School of Art, Boston, MA

Permanent Collections

Bank of America, Boston, MA

Bagly Memorial Museum, Charlottesville, VA

Boston Public Library, John Merriam Collection, Boston, MA

Brush Art Gallery, St. Lawrence University, Canton, NY

Davidson College, Davidson, NC

Deloitte-Touche, Boston, MA

Eckard College, St. Petersburg, FL

Gruenwald Center for Graphic Arts, UCLA Los Angeles, CA

Honolulu Academy of Art, Honolulu, HI

Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, California State University, Chico, CA

Manhattan College, Riverdale, NY

Mercer, Meidinger and Hanson, Boston, MA

Republic Savings and Loan, Washington, DC

Rockport Public Library, Rockport, MA

Samuel P. Harn Museum, Gainesville, FL

Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY

Tennessee Fine Arts Center, Nashville, TN

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Publications

Who's Who in the East

Who's Who in American Art

The World and I, Washington, DC

George Gabin was born in 1931 in Brooklyn, NY and passed away in 2012 in Somerville, MA USA.

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