

Paul Guiragossian: Testimonies of Existence

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Opening Reception: March 10, 2018

Barjeel Art Foundation

Level Two

Maraya Art Centre

Sharjah

United Arab Emirates

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Barjeel Art Foundation is pleased to present *Paul Guiragossian: Testimonies of Existence* - a selection of Paul Guiragossian works from the Barjeel Art Foundation collection and other prominent private collections within the UAE. Guest curated by Maisa Al Qassimi with Mandy Merzaban as curatorial advisor, the exhibition is held in collaboration with the Paul Guiragossian Foundation and its president Manuella Guiragossian, daughter of the late artist. Marking the 25th anniversary of his death in 1993, *Testimonies of Existence* will feature paintings from the 1960s to the early 1990s interspersed with elements drawn from the foundation's archive that document his life and prolific career. The exhibition explores key moments in the artist's practice during this period and Guiragossian's pivotal position in the history of modernism in the Arab world as well as among his generational peers.

By drawing on a range of influences and interests from ancient and modern art histories to philosophy in his practice, Guiragossian developed an approach that has become immediately recognisable. Driven by an early curiosity with the human form, the artist spent his career investigating the realm between figuration and abstraction. Acutely aware of the physical and psychological effects of exile and displacement, his personal experience as a refugee played a role in his nuanced awareness of the body. Born in Jerusalem in 1926 to Armenian parents, survivors of the Armenian Genocide, Guiragossian and his family migrated to Jerusalem, then to Jaffa and eventually to Beirut by boat in the years leading up to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

The exhibition's title is drawn from a quote from the artist's own reflections where he described a work of art as being "sealed for eternity" and absorbing the time and place of its creation. "They are testimony to our existence, and we will always find something new in them," he said, upon winning a prize at the first edition of the Paris Biennale in 1959.

The entire exhibition, rather than offering a full survey of Guiragossian's career aims to shed light on important moments and focal points. Paintings such as *Silhouettes*, a 1987 canvas borrowed from the collection of Sheikha Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan and *Journey* (1986/7), from Charles Al Sidaoui exemplify Guiragossian's approach. Long, drawn out figurative characters defined in varying palettes of vibrating colour, oscillates between figuration and abstraction in Guiragossian's paintings. They tap into the multi-faceted condition of human experience. A significant number of paintings also focus on the relationship between mother and child such as *La Lampe* (1979) from the Barjeel Art Foundation collection and *Le Centre Du Monde* (1983) borrowed from the collection of HE M. Zaki Nusseibeh. The latter, for instance, depicts a tender embrace between mother and child in monochromatic colours. The appearance of maternal figures is an important symbol in Guiragossian's works, often viewed as an image of hope and peace.

Maisa Al Qassimi says: “In the mid 20th century, the effects of political conflict in the region resulted in displacement and conditions of exile, themes of which are central to Guiragossian’s practice. In curating this exhibition, it was important to note critical discourse around this subject, such as Edward Said’s exile theory. For Guiragossian and other artists affected by exile, painting was a way to address this grief of separation and to define their identity. This exhibition is inspired by Guiragossian’s continuous interrogation of belonging, which is a theme ever more relevant in the world today with the upsurge in refugees, migrants and exiles. The collection of works provide an understanding of the socio-political struggle in the region at that time and also within to our existing history.”

Mandy Merzaban says: “Hosting a solo exhibition for Paul Guiragossian, which will mark the final show in the Barjeel Art Foundation space at the Maraya Art Centre, is an important milestone in our recent focus on modernism during our extensive exhibition programme over the past few years. Highlighting his remarkable career through the Paul Guiragossian’s archive, which continues to expand, has been a rare opportunity to explore an artist’s life and his encounters and offers an unprecedented access to this key figure in the study of modernism in the Arab world.”

Manuella Guiragossian says: Over the past eight years, at the Paul Guiragossian Foundation, we have made great strides in putting together the archives and restructuring the timeline of my father’s career and life. Through all our work, we attempt to ensure Paul Guiragossian’s legacy and place in art history is preserved and we have also gained a closer understanding of the extremely difficult and fascinating journey my father underwent. In this exhibition, *Paul Guiragossian: Testimonies of Existence* you will find several paintings coming from collections that have played a significant role in my father’s life. Putting it together has given me great pleasure and also helped me to learn even more about my father’s impact upon the lives of his collectors.”

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About Barjeel Art Foundation

The Barjeel Art Foundation is an independent, United Arab Emirates-based initiative established to manage, preserve and exhibit a private collection of modern and contemporary Arab art. The foundation’s guiding principle is to contribute to the intellectual development of the art scene in the Arab region by building a prominent, publicly accessible art collection in the UAE and online. Part of this objective involves developing a public platform to foster critical dialogue around modern and contemporary art practices with a focus on artists with Arab heritage internationally. Barjeel Art Foundation exhibits locally in Sharjah, and internationally through loans and curated exhibitions.

About The Paul Guiragossian Foundation

The Paul Guiragossian Foundation was established in 2011 to preserve and promote the legacy of the artist, Paul Guiragossian (1926 – 1993). Since its inception, the Foundation has embarked on a rigorous research journey to locate, catalogue, acquire and restore artworks

and archival documents by and about Paul Guiragossian. The Foundation boasts an extensive database comprising images of hundreds of artworks along with comprehensive information on their provenance and present location. Moreover, it has gathered a considerable number of archives (photographs, published reviews, exhibition catalogues, personal letters and manuscripts, audio and video recording, etc.) that span the long and prolific career of Paul Guiragossian. This material is available upon request to students and scholars of art history as well as curators who wish to learn more about the life and work of the artist.