

TATIANA GARMENDIA'S EPICS

“Water shapes its course according to the ground over which it flows”
Sun Tzu *The Art of War* (62)

Tatiana Garmendia's *Epic* series, large-scale paintings and many drawings, explore warfare aesthetically, metaphorically, and philosophically. The large paintings are startling: huge nude figures in a seaside landscape, with a missile erupting or a mortal battle in the background. A giant fury surrounded by insects hovers over a tank. For Tatiana Garmendia, the ground over which her artwork flows is shaped by her unusual experiences and those of her family.

The erupting missile is imaginary: it evokes the fear and anxiety of a child who actually played in missile trenches in Cuba. Garmendia was born just after the Cuban missile crisis, and missiles were buried on beaches near populated areas. In the late 1960s, her father, a doctor, fell out of favor with Fidel Castro. When Garmendia was about five, the family was sent to live in a one room apartment at a relocation camp patrolled by armed guards. Children were bused to school; teens worked in sugar cane fields or sorted coffee.

Her father was tortured. Her young brother survived guards randomly shooting at him for sport. The family escaped to Spain because of her mother's Spanish passport. Her mother also was born in the midst of violence, during a bombardment in the Spanish Civil War. She was left an orphan. Thus, the family stories behind these paintings are charged with terror, disorientation, and survival. The family moved to Miami, but her father died young. Coming to the United States was a welcome refuge for them.

Thus she has been aware since childhood of the presence of good and the power of evil in the world. It is telling that one of her reference points is the Bhagavad-Gita, that ancient Hindu philosophical treatise which is a conversation between Krishna and Prince Arjuna, as he sits poised for battle, but full of the uncertainty of killing his own friends, family, and advisors. The conversation contains the basic principles of Yogic philosophy at the same time that it speaks on the moral responsibilities of a leader who must go to war to oppose evil. Garmendia's exploration of war is, then, not a simple opposition. It is an acknowledgement of the need to counter evil, to survive oppression by strategies and defenses. The “art of war” as conceived by Sun Tzu thousands of years ago is filled with stratagems for confronting enemies, of offense and defense, of subtlety and secrecy, and, in most detail, the types of terrain on which warfare occurs. Garmendia's dozens of black and white drawings are partially inspired by that text.

As we look at the full sweep of the ink drawings, we see confrontations between mostly nude men drawn in black ink on Mylar. White gesso creates opaque frames that suggest terrains or dramatic stages on which armed oppositions take place. Washes of India ink skillfully shape figures as well as imply outpourings of blood. These men are the warriors of all cultures: Maori, Aztec, Greek, Spanish, Chinese. They are both ancient

and contemporary. They are actively performing and they are suspended in mid movement. In Epic 1 two sets of light skinned men confront a dark skinned man. All are wielding swords. Between the groups of three men is a river of blood flowing down. There are facts: the fact of blood loss, as well as the fact of confrontation.

But in these drawings there is no victory. There are no heroes. In Epic 6 one man seems to stop the warriors all of whom are lunging, but perhaps in the wrong direction. Many seem to be engaged in senseless acts of fighting, as in Epic 24, in which forces in opposition fill one space, as a single fighter in the foreground thrusts a spear forward, spewing blood, but with no opposition. In Epic 28, a warrior has fallen, but he is facing away from us in a pool of blood. These images are full of classical references: in this case we think of the dying Gaul.

In some cases modernity appears, as in Epic 100, in which a man is dropping dozens of parachutes that contain what the artist calls “the terrible seeding of war.” They are falling far down below and behind him. Epic 101 includes an airplane, 102 has a reference to *Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International*, but it seems to be falling apart. Other drawings include horses, bringing to mind the age of the crusaders in particular, although horse mounted warriors are still part of war today. The drawings contain no judgment, no emotion, only the practice of battle; they contain little reference to the impact of war, only orchestrated acts of aggression and defense.

Let us return to the paintings. In *Death at Low Tide*, a large diptych, there are two nude women in the foreground one observing the men fighting and dying in the background, and one ignoring it, looking at us. We are implicated in the scene by her gaze. *Advancing Storm* brings us back to the missiles. Set in a dark beach landscape, a pregnant woman and a man turn away from the sea in agony and distress, as a missile roars into the sky in the background. Another woman reaches her hands toward the sea, as if trying to prevent the deaths that are coming by pleading with all her energy. Unlike the drawings, the paintings lay out the fear and helplessness of ordinary people caught up in acts of war. Finally and most dramatically is *Epic Ground Force with Fury*, an asymmetrical diptych with a huge crone landing with one foot on a small tank. Around her body hornets seem to attack her. But they might be part of her power. It is not clear. Does the giant woman represent civilization or its betrayal?

Over the last eight years we have seen the disasters of war online and in photographs. Garmendia does not show us that. Instead she gives us the peculiar fascination and meaninglessness of war, which can be viewed as an art, a slaughter of human beings, or a strategy that allows the powerful to subdue the weak. She does not give us answers. Instead she reminds us that war and conflict are a permanent part of human existence. Although the outcome of war is destruction, fear, and death, the practice of war is inevitable.

“The art of war is of vital importance to the state. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. “Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (40)