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Call him a 90-day and a 90-year wonder. To celebrate the start of his tenth decade, modernist Harold Garde has just finished 90 paintings in 90 days.

Avant Garde



INTERVIEW BY
NANCY DAVIDSON



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***H**arold Garde was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1923 to Eastern European immigrant parents who worked in the garment industry. After service with the Army Air Corps in the Philippines during World War II, the GI Bill covered his tuition to art school at the University of Wyoming and an MFA from Columbia University in 1951. An educator for decades, Garde taught art at Nassau Community College in Garden City, New York before retiring from teaching in 1984. When he moved to Belfast to paint full-time he made a big splash in Portland, with a show at Davidson & Daughters Contemporary Art. With this interview and “Garde Addendum,” a sparkling show she’s curating at the Maine Jewish Museum through October 25, Nancy Davidson brings their friendship full circle.*

When did you first come to Maine?

Maine was a very different place when I moved to Belfast in the mid-1980s. I discovered a whole art community and was thrilled and delighted to be a retired art teacher, to be someone free to spend full-time in painting.

Part of this experience was being told “You don’t paint like a Mainer.” I guess at that time it really was so. The thing which is a delight is I don’t think anyone would say that anymore. I think the range of what we see on the gallery walls and museum walls in Maine has grown much broader, much less regional looking; and for that, to whatever degree I share in that, I am more than pleased. Looking back at the roughly 30-year period, it really has been a drastic change. And part of that



Clockwise from top: The 16-panel *Iconoclast*, rescued from storage, requires a 24-foot wall; a Harold Garde exhibit at the Museum of Florida Art; *Puppets*. Previous page, from top: *Figure and Profile*; *The Swimmer*; Harold Garde still paints nearly every day.

***Iconoclast* hadn't been seen in decades.**
"I paint to please myself, but with de Kooning on my shoulder."

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Strappo Kimono 3 is one of many images of kimonos Garde has painted over the years.

is the nature of good curators.

How do you feel about the show at the Maine Jewish Museum in Portland coming up?

I'm very excited. It's been a long time since I've had a show in Portland. Spending my time away from the studio gets to be pretty rare. I paint just about every day, and I get up anxious to get started again. Not sure where it's gonna go, not sure how it's gonna happen, but it's been the focus, it's where my attention goes. I paint to please myself, but with de Kooning on my shoulder. So when I get the opportunity to show in Portland it's an important step. I'm [better] known in the midcoast area and in Florida.

Portland is an important center for art. It's in my world, and the Jewish museum is relatively new with a significant mission. The exhibitions focus on the talent of Jewish artists with a connection to Maine. It's also an opportunity to work with you as the curator. I like circular things, things that come back. I like the idea that someone who knew my work earlier is involved with my work now.

Exciting for me in this show will be large-scale new work, non-figurative but much tighter in composition than earlier work, which was based much more in exploring the overall energy. This is much more the sense of resolution that comes from balancing the structure and formal aspects of what makes a painting.

You mentioned Florida. Tell me about *Iconoclast*.

The journey began in the summer of 2009, after more than 30 years of dust and storage. Bill and Kathie Hohns, collectors of my work, came to visit me. We end up in my studio,

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and Bill, ever curious, asks me what's upstairs. I invite him to look, and he wanders up the rickety stairs to my second-floor storage. He pulls two panels and brings them to the edge of the balcony. From above, he calls out, "Harold, what are these?"

Three decades is a long time. I stare. Then, I realize I'd given these panels to my son Keith a long time ago. There should be another 14 panels up there. Do the other 14 exist? Are they all still there?

My nephew, Jay Rosenberg, undertakes the task. Digging through dusty storage is not easy. But he prevails. He finds them all. There'd been a retrospective of my work at the Museum of Florida Art several years earlier. Keith asks if the museum is interested. They are.

It was quite a process to find a 24-foot wall. A reproduction was approved that's displayed outside—with the original inside—the Museum of Florida Art in DeLand. *Iconoclast* has a permanent home. Thanks to Bill and Kathie Hohns.

Describe the Strappo technique, your own medium.

I had gotten to work in acrylics and then I found when I peeled the paint off a glass, I loved the underside of the work, so I started to add that as a texture to the canvas. Then I did some images that were controlled and peeled those off. I started to do this drawing transfer—it's a total transfer, so it's great. I can control it! I see everything just the way it's going to be, remove the clear glass in the transfer process, and it doesn't depend upon how much the ink has dried, so I have a lot of control. I delighted in the process and learned how to simplify it. I started doing workshops in it.

We have not focused on age in this interview, but but but... can you talk about 90-90-90?

I'd never made a New Year's resolution before and this was the exception. I realized this after the start of the new year, 2013, my 90th birthday year. So when the year started and I started working, I decided it would be fun to give myself a challenge of quantity and to push aside everything else. My priority was to do 90 paintings in the first 90 days of my 90th year. And I did it! Ninety Strappo paintings, 90 days! ■

"Harold Garde: Addendum" at the Maine Jewish Museum, to October 25. 267 Congress St., Portland, 329-9854, Monday - Friday, 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. or by appointment ➤ For more, visit portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2013/08/garde.