

Paul Claude Gardère

Haitian-born American artist, 1944 – 2011

Born in Port-au-Prince in 1944, Paul Claude Gardère was the eldest of two sons and raised in accordance with French-speaking, Catholic customs, typical for the wealthier, “mulatto” class in postcolonial Haitian society. Paul’s father, photographer Pierre Camille Gardère, died a premature death at age 31, leaving their mother, Marcelle Borno Gardère, with two young boys to raise on her own.

In 1957, Marcelle accepted a position in New York City as a draftsman at an architectural firm to support her children. She sent for her sons, who were being raised by female elders, two years later. Reunited again, the little family lived in a meager 1-bedroom apartment in Queens, and faced the racial discrimination, xenophobia, and linguistic challenges typical for Haitian immigrants in the segregated United States pre-Civil Rights legislation. Their American social status stood in sharp contrast to the family’s position of comfort and esteem in Haitian society – a paradox that would heavily inform Gardère’s lifelong inquiry into social, economic, and racial dynamics of power, as well as profound questions of racial and cultural identity.

Academic merit earned the boys full tuition scholarships to the Lycée Français de New York for high school, and daily movements around Manhattan’s Upper East Side introduced Paul to the city’s art economy. He was enthralled by the art in gallery windows and frequently found comfort in The Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Museum of Modern Art. In 1960, he enrolled at The Art Students League, where he studied under Charles Alston, the famed Harlem Renaissance painter and mentor to iconic African American artist Jacob Lawrence.

Encouraged by his mother to pursue his artistic interest, Paul attended The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in 1962, an education made possible by school’s then-radical tradition of racial inclusivity and free tuition. He graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting in 1967, having studied under social-realist artist Robert Gwathmey, figurative painter Nicholas Marsicano, and interdisciplinary artist and sculptor, Reuben Kadish. Gardère continued his formal education with a Master of Arts from Hunter College in 1972, under the tutelage of artists Robert Morris, John McCracken, and briefly, Mark Rothko.

In 1970, Gardère married Marcia Green, a Jewish art student of Eastern-European descent, raised in Paterson, NJ, whom he met during his residency at the Yale Norfolk School of Art in the summer of 1966. Their first child, Nicolas, was born in 1973 and the young family lived on modest means on Brooklyn’s Atlantic Avenue while Paul worked as a house painter and Marcia earned her Masters degree in Early Childhood Education. The death of Paul’s beloved mother in 1976 prompted Gardère to revisit memories of Haiti and hear a call to return. In 1978, feeling uninspired by the prevailing trends of minimalism and pop-art in 1970’s New York City, Paul and family moved into the house built by Paul’s grandfather in Port-au-Prince, in which Paul had been raised as a child, to allow him to explore his roots and the rich artistic traditions of his homeland.

In Haiti, Gardère was embraced by Le Centre d’Art, the nation’s premier artistic institution which nurtured

masterful Haitian artists from Hector Hyppolite and Georges Liautaud to rising contemporaries Edouard Duval-Carrié and Antonio Joseph, with whom he regularly exhibited. Gardère's output during these years was prolific. Finely painted in acrylic on masonite board, these "early works" blended socially realist depictions of Haitian life in conversation with the country's revolutionary history and spiritual traditions. Beloved by their owners and passed down through generations, these works have rarely entered the secondary market. Despite his local success, the family, which now included young daughter Catherine, returned to Brooklyn in 1984 to escape the violent climate of the 2nd Duvalier dictatorship and its hostility toward the established Haitian class and American expatriates.

According to Gardère, his return to Haiti revealed his artistic purpose: to marry in his work the Haitian and Western traditions that informed his experience and visually express the tensions therein. The legacy of French colonialism and pride in the Haitian Revolution that birthed the world's first free Black republic are central to Haitian identity and nationalism. And yet, as a member of the Francophile Haitian bourgeoisie assimilating to American values, formally trained in art practice and Eurocentric art history, Gardère was forced to internalize antithetical values and narratives that challenged his sense of self. Accordingly, his lived experiences of these racial, social, and economic contradictions became allegorical fodder for his art.

Back in New York, Gardère soon pivoted away from the more "traditionally Haitian" pictorial aesthetic to expand further into the contemporary field. Always one to experiment, he began to play with abstraction, explore usage of symbols and dichotomy, and over the years employed a wide variety of mundane materials such as plaster, cement, wire lathe, rope, wood and earth itself in tandem with his brushwork.

His painterly styles also grew to include expressionist, surrealist and impressionist techniques and he employed these various styles deliberately, nodding to emblematic periods in art and world history, and reflecting his own multitudinous cultural allegiances. In content, material, and form, Gardère's work reflects the juxtapositions of the multiple worlds he inhabited. His mixed media paintings were a daring stylistic departure from his early work, but they exhibited a thematic continuity that sought to both broaden the relevance of Haitian ideas in American contemporary art and to expand the lineage of Haitian painting beyond the island nostalgia that dominated the world's perceptions of Haitian Art.

To Gardère, the Western art world's prevailing views of Haitian Art as exclusively "primitive" and "naive" were steeped in the patronizing exoticism of colonialist attitudes toward non-white cultures. Similarly, the West's grossly skewed and maligned portrayals of Vodou failed to recognize the conceptual power of Haitian traditions, in practice and in aesthetic discourse. Vodou's usage of symbols (vévé), in particular, reflect an elaborate visual language that functions spiritually, culturally, and creatively, making it a unique framework that Gardère and ethnographic scholars knew deserved more discerning and respectful consideration. In other words, both the history of fine art in Haiti and Vodou's active employ of aesthetics earned Haitian Art a place within the canons of global art history which the dominant art discourse was denying. This omission of Haitian cultural significance from the art history books is of course in keeping with the erasure of the historical significance of Haitian Revolution itself -- both are byproducts of white-supremacist, colonialist paradigms which exert insidious cultural influence long after colonial rule ends.

Armed with a mission to explore these ideas in his work, Gardère completed residencies at The Studio Museum in Harlem ('89-'90), the Jamaica Arts Center, Long Island University, and Fondation Claude Monet ('93) in Giverny, France - a coveted opportunity that brought his work into direct confrontation with Haiti's historical colonizer and classic French art traditions. He received a fellowship from the New York Foundation for The Arts and The Joan Mitchell Foundation Award for Painting in 1998. Gardère had solo shows at Le Centre d'Art and Le Musée d'Art Haitien, the Figge Art Museum, the Jersey City Museum, Lehigh University, and Skoto Gallery among others and exhibited extensively in group shows in the US and Haiti.

Works of his reside in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, The Studio Museum in Harlem, The New Orleans Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art Library, The Brooklyn Museum Library, Le Centre d'Art, Figge Art Museum, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in NY, and numerous university art collections.

In the year 2000, Paul and Marcia temporarily relocated to Massachusetts' southern coast, following a professional opportunity for Marcia. After a lifetime spent in urban centers, Paul appreciated the quiet connection to nature and a "special quality of light" at the coast. In 2006, the couple returned to life in their Brooklyn home, but the environment had visibly influenced his work and sparked a re-incorporation of pastoral elements.

The 2010 earthquake which leveled Haiti and killed hundreds of thousands took a great mental toll on Paul and the whole Gardère family, both in Haiti and the diaspora. The intergenerational home built by Paul's grandfather in Port-au-Prince had collapsed, and the grief and sense of impotence was excruciating. Paul's final series, "Goudou Goudou", still in-process at the time of his death, reflects the pain and darkness of this time.

On September 2nd, 2011, Paul died unexpectedly in New York City, just weeks after the passing of Marcia, his partner of 42 years. He was survived by his two children, Nicolas François Gardère (1973-2016) and Catherine Anne Gardère (b. 1981). Catherine serves as director of Paul Gardère Studio to shepherd her father's legacy into a new era of the art world and continue his work of enhancing the visibility of Haitian art, history and culture in the global discourse of fine art.

Though Paul spent the majority of his life in the United States and was naturalized as a US citizen in 1991, Haitian life and culture remained the lens through which he explored the crushing effects of Western imperialism, social resistance, racial and cultural syncretism, class conflict, and pluralistic identity in and beyond the Haitian diaspora. Despite the Haitian context of his works, the subject matter they tackle has enormous power and relevance to all postcolonial societies and the issues faced by an increasingly multi-racial, multi-cultural and globalized world.

written by Catherine Gardère

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