

## VISUAL ART

November 27, 2013

# Burning Love

Tatiana Garmendia's Gorgeous Art Can't Be Contained in Mere JPEGs

by [JEN GRAVES](#)



I rarely go to Patricia Cameron Gallery, and I was walking by it on the street the other day, not intending to go in, when Patricia Cameron smiled graciously and waved to me, and her kindness made me feel even guiltier, because even though the art hadn't looked great in the JPEGs I saw online, the concept of the show interested me, and I felt frustrated all over again about not having time for everything, and I shuffled in dutifully—and the JPEGs were wrong. Dead wrong. Tatiana Garmendia has made some of the most gorgeous things. The main subjects of the exhibition are her erotic drawings that are burned into paper, not drawn on, using a tool that's like a pen, but on fire. She paints between the burn lines in pastel watercolor, in a process she describes as cooling the heat of the burns. You can almost hear sizzling.

***Tatiana Garmendia***  
 Patricia Cameron Gallery  
 Mon-Fri. Through Dec 20.  
[More info »](#)

Garmendia has been living and working in Seattle since 1993. She teaches at Seattle Central Community College, and a couple of her pieces in the Wing Luke Museum's group show this summer, *Under My Skin: Artists Explore Race in the 21st Century*, made an impression for being both unsettling and lovely. They were overlays of love and war, six-foot ink paintings of pietàs set in the ongoing Iraq war. The Madonnas wore dark, shadowy, realistically rendered burqas—such drapery—and the Christs were uniformed soldiers in camo and boots. Prayer-carpet motifs in pinkish red swirled beneath the figures, and calligraphy in English and Arabic quoted from popular songs by Courtney Love, Linkin Park, and the Chemical Brothers.

Garmendia has technical chops, her influences are drawn from a passport full of stamps, and she isn't afraid to take on the biggest imaginable subjects. Cameron explained that Garmendia was born in Cuba, where her parents were jailed, where she saw terrible things. For her, war, torture, and love come together, and they are real.

The pietàs, a series called *Lamentations*, are connected with the erotic drawings, called *Garden of*

*Joys*. They're all part of Garmendia's six-part cycle, *The Last Judgment*. The garden is the final chapter. The story ends in love, not war.

Each pair of lovers (all hetero, as far as I saw) is impossibly intertwined, arms and legs wrapped and splayed. Garmendia is referencing *shunga*, traditional Japanese erotica in which swollen genitalia are located on the bodies in much the same way noses are located on Picasso faces—wherever the artist likes, the better to draw the eye. But *shunga* represents something tangly, primal, and internal, not pornographic, about sex. And in Garmendia's burn drawings, as in *shunga*, the eye may first be drawn to the bull's-eye of penetration, but it radiates out, along the dense foliage of designs that entangle the lovers.

Their hair turns wildly into flowers and storms of curlicues. Those lines lead farther outward, too, to written words, words like "Beirut" and "Aleppo," and demarcation lines and topographic marks. The backdrops, you realize, are maps. The lovers are melting into their environments, and the joining of their bodies also melds sometimes-warring environments together. Enemies have turned lovers.

As in the *Lamentations* pieces, these fantasies contain Arabic script—in this case, lines from Hollywood movies: *Gone with the Wind*, *When Harry Met Sally*, and *Sleepless in Seattle*. Why can't their goopy-hopeful sentiments about kissing, about finding something true, appear alongside geopolitics? The collaging of elements is slyly feminist, like breastfeeding in a legislature.

In larger pieces, some of the burn lines are long, leaving gaping openings in the handmade papers where the images breathe through the wounds. Every disparate person and place is brought together in Garmendia's lightly rococo style. Jeffrey Mitchell—Seattle's most beloved artist, and a master of the subversive rococo—would love these. So would Claire Cowie, another Seattle artist whose tenderness with watercolor and ink line barely masks her forays into death and war. Garmendia's style is not as tight as those artists', and sometimes more stiltedly illustrative, but her ambition is breathtaking and inspiring, the way she DJs together strains of pain and pleasure and tramples down walls that separate languages, people, the high and the low.

Before you leave the gallery, be sure to go over to the wooden cabinet against one wall. Hidden inside are handmade books by Garmendia you're welcome to handle. One contains these tiny, exquisite intimacies—two people kissing, just their heads visible—taking place in windows of translucent Mylar, caught in washes of paint so thin as to feel like gusts of smoke. ★

Want great deals and a chance to win tickets to the best shows in Seattle? Join The Stranger Presents email list!

Sign Up Now!

All contents © Index Newspapers, LLC  
1535 11th Ave (Third Floor), Seattle, WA 98122  
|||