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Argentine portrait

Images of power, oppression and war — from the artist's life

By Nicole Winfield
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The quiet Manhattan gallery where German Gargano's paintings hang screams with color. Bright color.

So bright you would never guess the artist was held a political prisoner for eight years during Argentina's "dirty war." So bright you would never guess those dark years are what inspire his work.

But it's that juxtaposition that defines Gargano's art and the exhibit of 10 paintings that recently opened at the CDS Gallery on the Upper East Side.

"Color is just a way to enter the painting," the 38-year-old Argentine native says. With time, the initial color-shock subsides and the figures begin to emerge.

Weapons and dismembered corpses piled upon each other seep out of the stains of reds and peaches and streaks of occasional greens.

And while they are the hidden images of power, oppression and war from Gargano's past, they are the images of ongoing power struggles as well.

"The paintings are about the relationship of power among men," he says. "It's not only about war and dictatorship. It's about day-to-day situations among men, between a man and a woman. It's the question of the human condition, of the violence among men that emerges with time."

Gargano knows that violence only too well.

He was 21 and a medical student in Buenos Aires when imprisoned for so-called subversive tendencies in 1976. He was one of thousands jailed by the Argentine military in their attempt to purge the country of leftist sympathizers.

Many simply "disappeared."

Gargano was lucky. He didn't vanish. In 1983, the year the military junta fell, he reappeared as a painter.

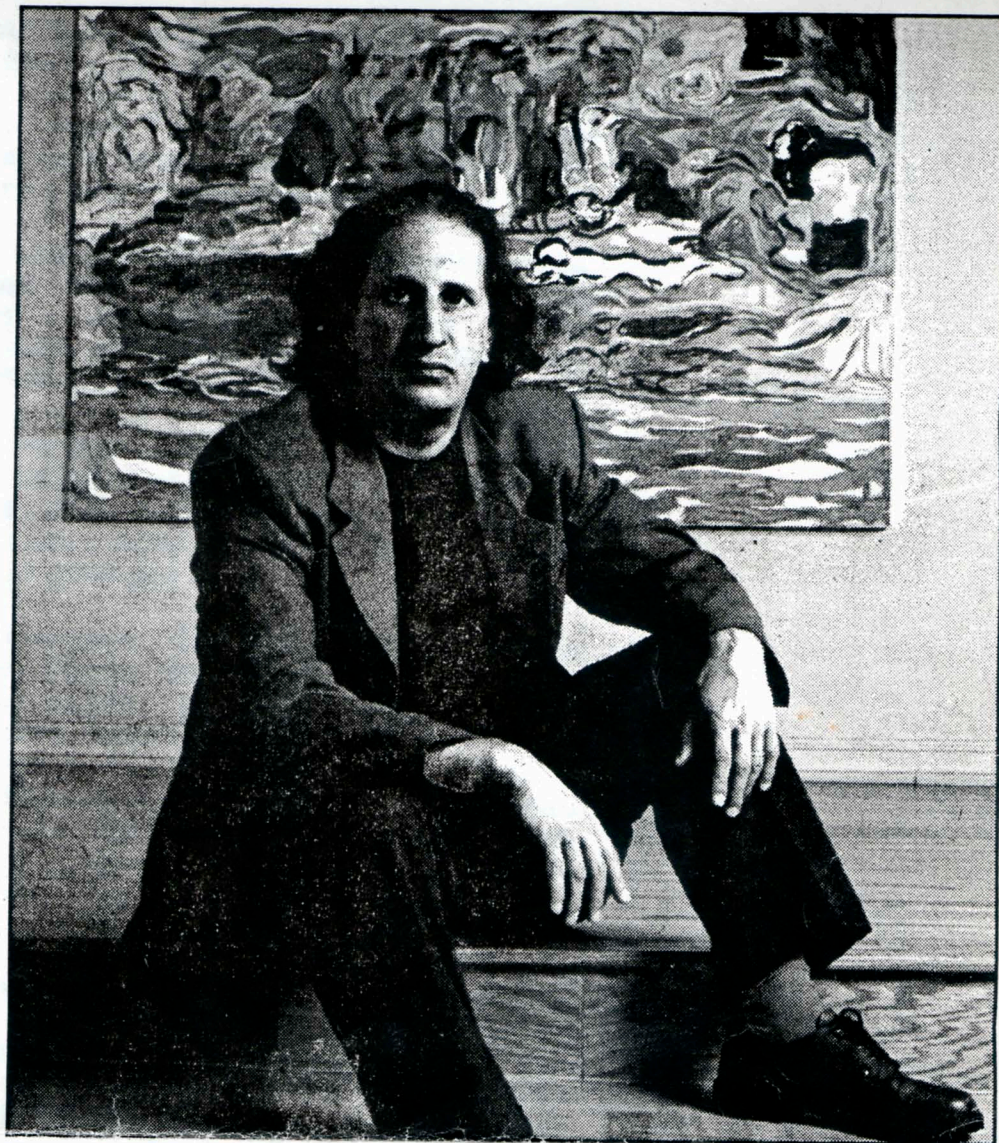
Ten years later, Gargano can count one Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant, one national prize, and numerous exhibits across Argentina under his brush. One of the most recognizable is a tiled mural, commissioned by the city in 1991 for the Buenos Aires subway.

It's a work that holds constant with Gargano's concerns; a battle scene, corpses and weapons; exhibited not in a sterile gallery space but in the dark and rumblings of the underground.

While these 10 years of freedom have brought Gargano success — he paints and teaches painting for a living — marriage and fatherhood, his art still carries with it the constant and harsh refrain of his imprisonment. Only now, with his first solo show in New York, those same somber themes meld with a crisp brilliancy of color absent in his first works.

"There was just a moment when the color started to appear," he says, "when it started to work well with the type of images."

It works very well in "Descendimiento" (Descent). In a sea of reds, beiges, and splotches of purple, a body stretches out and points a gun ahead. Its destination is at first unclear. But with a closer look, across from it



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Argentine artist German Gargano poses with his painting "Decent" at a New York gallery. The former political prisoner depicts everyday struggles for power in bright colors that bring out feelings from his dark past.

lies a pile of body fragments, formed only by flesh-colored shadows.

Other bodies are strewn across the canvas battlefield. One bends over; one spreads its legs.

"The relationship of power of one person over another can be expressed in a thousand ways," Gargano says. "With a knife; with humiliation, with sex."

The subtlety of that relationship is what makes Gargano's work at first comforting — the first-glance of abstract swirls recalls a carnival lollipop — and yet disconcerting when the figures begin to take form.

"Subsuelo" (Underground) is such a painting. While awash in continuous strokes of yellows and pinks, blues and greens, it is carved into mini-paintings, as if a red knife had cut a grid through it.

Within each piece of the patchwork is a hidden story, Gargano says: a network of people who have their own, yet communal histories.

"The things that occur beneath the surface are the real intimacies of relationships that aren't apparent in the streets," he says of "Subsuelo." "But who knows what is really happening? It can be even more tragic when the power isn't so obvious."

In describing his recent works, Gargano speaks pensively, with each word chosen carefully if not poetically. Beyond his words is an understanding of the human condition; an understanding perhaps enhanced by his studies in psychiatry or perhaps intensified by eight years of solitude.

It is not only clear in Gargano's artistic style, but in his understanding of his past and that of his generation.

"The dictatorship has left its footprints," he says. "We have democracy, but Argentines are still afraid. Argentina after the regime has somehow become another country. It still carries with it the profound mark of the military experience."

Somehow, Gargano has been able to step around that footprint, or more defiantly, just walk through it. Even so, his work is not so much a political statement as it is a personal and very solitary one.

"There's no agenda," he says. "First there's an idea, a little subtle idea. It's like soft music. Then what appears, you never know."

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CDS Gallery, 76 E. 79th St., New York City, Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Through May 29.