



JUNE 15, 2010
Volume 2, Issue 11

Will Barnet: Recent Abstract Paintings

Longtime observers of the New York art world can't help but hold Will Barnet in amazement. Forget for a moment that this near-centurion—Barnet will be a 100 years old roundabout this time next year—continues to work in the studio and, as his new paintings at Alexandre Gallery attest, with impressive command. But think about it: Here's a man whose career began, well, pre-Chelsea. Way pre-Chelsea: He studied with Stuart Davis at the Art Students League some 80 years ago. For the bright young things featured in P.S. 1's *Greater New York*, that may as well be a million years ago. It says something about the scene's overweening emphasis on undigested talent that even those of us who won't again see 40—or, for that matter, 30—harbor something of the same feelings.

Barnet is best known for exquisitely calibrated paeans to family, domesticity and the mysteries of light—tableaux whose linearity looks to Egyptian hieroglyphs as a model and whose precision recalls early Renaissance masters like Cimabue. This body of work has much to recommend it, not least an exacting attention to gesture and contour.

But the so-called Indian Space Paintings Barnet created during the 1950s trump them in terms of pictorial invention, metaphoric complexity and generosity of spirit. Many mid-century artists sought inspiration in the stylistic motifs of Northwest Coast Indian art, but few absorbed its lessons as thoroughly or as bracingly as Barnet. Tibor de Nagy Gallery mounted a canon-shifting exhibition of the work in 1998, and the pictures formed the core of a splendid Barnet retrospective Gail Stavitsky organized for The Montclair Art Museum two years later.

Barnet began revisiting the stylistic vocabulary of the Indian-inspired abstractions seven years ago. If the results are less than world-historical, that says more about history than it does about Barnet's roughhewn sophistication and sober, but good-humored, élan. Figurative associations are abundant and most engaging when concentrated within pictographic emblems. In "Ahab II," "Confluence," "Joyous" and especially "Call It Winter," Barnett choreographs bumptious and sometimes cranky shapes to magisterial effect. The images perform the neat trick of being simultaneously old as the hills and a brand new thing—an irony certainly not lost on Barnet and to be enjoyed by the rest of us. (MN)

Through June 18, Alexandre Gallery, 41 E. 57th St., 212-755-2828.