

# ALEXANDRE GALLERY

## Art in America October 2002

### Will Barnet at Alexandre

Lovers of arch-romantic American art will surely remember Barnet's best-known work from the 1970s, his series "Women and the Sea." Here, women outfitted in stately lengths of black or gray, each the embodiment of New England maidenhood from Anne Bradford to Hester Prynne to Mary Baker Eddy, stand on the porches or on the roofs of their gabled houses. Wrapped in shawls, they wait, it would seem, for their men to come home from the sea.

In their day, these women seemed to be everywhere in the art world. Still, should you not remember this phase of Barnet's work, there's his Social Realism of the 1930s to consider, or the

Picassoid formalism of the '50s or the geometric hijinks of the '60s. Barnet has been nothing if not protean in his manifestations. This recent exhibition, which followed a retrospective at New Jersey's Montclair Art Museum in 2000 [see *A.I.A.*, May '01], was devoted exclusively to work of the 1990s.

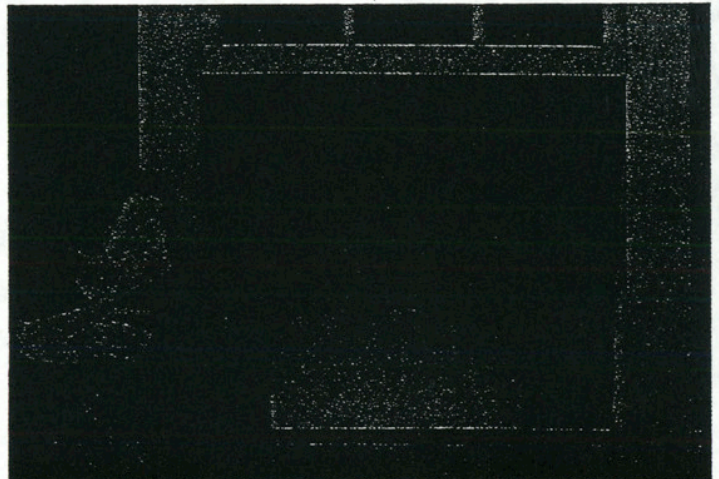
Barnet himself is in his 90s—he was born in 1911. Yet there is no diminishing of the compositional or coloristic energy he applies to his round-the-house renderings of family, friends and domestic animals. Rather, a certain meditative calm—not untouched by strong emotion—now underlies all he does, conveying a peace perhaps hard-won but all the more convincing for its rareness.

Barnet has always painted the figures around him. Where those figures, earlier on, might have included social and professional "heavy hitters" such as curators from the Metropolitan Museum or businessmen or collectors, today they are his immediate family, especially his wife, Elena, whom at every moment Barnet seems to find a joy to behold. In *Three Generations* (1990), he spans the profiled and full-face aspects of seated older woman with book, mother with child and, in a Barnet painting above, older mother and older child. The piece is a feast for the genealogical imagination.

The eternal, slightly comic, slightly terrifying interplay between cats and birds fascinates Barnet. In *The Open Window* (2001), a female figure to the left holds a cat upon her shoulder, the cat staring upward toward a blackbird seen in a tree through an open window. Formally, the picture is full of strange graces: cat and bird are on a strong, vibrant diagonal, with the squared-off forms of the window offering some relief from the predatory and compositional tensions.

This show was full of self-portraits; an especially felicitous one was *Gramercy Park* (1990-91). Here the artist—dressed for fall, with hat and pipe and cane—stands patiently by as a young female charge does a kind of celebratory dance on a green park bench. Behind them are the stone town houses that surround the park; figures and surroundings are highly stylized, enjoying some of the flatness of form—and even affect—of American primitive and limner art.

While Barnet seems to suggest that we are all alone—witness the threatened blackbird or the silent ladies of the sea—we are also, to some extent, alone among friends. —Gerrit Henry



Will Barnet: *The Open Window*, 2001, oil on canvas, 26 by 38 inches; at Alexandre.