

# The New Criterion

## Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

The remarkable long life of Will Barnet, born in 1911, is all the more remarkable when you consider what he's created over these hundred-plus years. That's the take-away of a must-see exhibition now at the National Academy Museum called "Will Barnet at 100."<sup>1</sup> Curated by Bruce Weber, the show stitches together the various chapters of Barnet's life into a single narrative. The task is not an easy one with an artist who had his first solo exhibition in New York in 1935 and has been producing compelling work ever since. The difficulty is especially acute when you consider Barnet's varying styles, which have regularly crossed the lines between representation and abstraction, paintings and prints, personal visions and family obligations. The brilliance of this exhibition comes from the way it brings together all of these variations to reveal the continuity of Barnet's lifelong themes.

Arranging his work by type rather than time, the show begins with a room featuring paintings from Barnet's abstract period, or, rather, his two abstract periods—the late 1940s to the early 1960s, and then again from 2003 to the present. As a young artist, Barnet teamed up with Steve Wheeler and Peter Busa to explore "Indian Space," what they called the particular compositional structure of American Indian art. This influential subset of American abstraction, which deserves a reevaluation, formed a counterpoint to Abstract Expressionism and pitted Barnet's own artist group, called The Forum, against the Ab Ex gathering known as The Club.

Barnet's best abstractions came out of his investigations into Indian Space, including *Positano* (1960), a work that re-imagines an Italian moonscape as a simple arrangement of blacks and blues hovering between flat composition and infinite depth, and *Enclosure* (1962–2003), an equally haunting painting that brought Barnet from representation back to abstraction. Confined to a wheelchair in 2003, Barnet completed this work after having started it nearly forty years before.

In the middle of his career, Indian Space also helped inform his move to portraiture. In his abstract work, Barnet never fully dispensed with representation, just as in representation he maintained a sense of flat abstract structure. Barnet's genius was to understand how family could impart its own compositional framework. Barnet has called the family an "organizing idea—a way of making order out of chaos," as well as the "essence of civilization, everything is based on it." A room of his earliest representational work from the 1930s and 1940s, depicting his children in prints and nursery-like paintings, reveals how family has been a lifelong theme for Barnet.

"In my art the family gave me a form, a structure," he said. "It has to do with stability—about discipline and family as a strengthening idea, and about making a work of art out of human relationships." These relations formed the basis for Barnet's foray into representation from the 1960s through 1990s, when he produced his

most well-known portraits of his second wife, Elena, and their children and grandchildren—works that borrowed from Egyptian hieroglyphics, Greek vase painting, late-nineteenth century Symbolism, as well as the structure of Indian Space.

"Will Barnet at 100" inaugurates the reopening of a storied institution. Founded in 1825, the National Academy, a block from the Guggenheim Museum, has counted the masters of the Hudson River School as artist members while long serving as a school and museum of art. Only a few years ago, it faced financial and ethical questions after it sold work from its permanent collection to pay expenses, a serious misstep that led to its blacklisting by the museum establishment. A dramatic overhaul of its governing structure was followed by a year-long refurbishment of public spaces. The reopened museum is still not flawless. The stripped-down lobby lacks warmth. The Barnet exhibition

pairs overly long wall labels with an interview on video loop that is interesting to watch but distracting to hear amplified in the exhibition halls. Still, the Academy has done much that's right, matching Barnet with a show of collection highlights on the upper floors and a public program series that will feature the artist in conversation on October 12. A symposium on the artist's work is scheduled for November 5. The overall result is an institution that has never appeared better as it honors its most famous living artist member.

This month Alexandre Gallery complements Barnet's National Academy exhibition with an intimate survey of the artist's "small works on paper from the 1950s."<sup>2</sup> In the Academy's exhibition catalogue, Bruce Weber discusses the "spontaneous doodlings" that Barnet created on scrap paper, especially around the time he moved to an apartment on New York's Upper East Side. These works in pen and pencil turn junk mail into faceted gems. They also reveal some of the ways Barnet composed Indian Space. From

the shapes and words printed on these found objects, the artist built up simple structures, crossed out names, and drew squares around letters. The process is not unlike the way most of us might doodle, demonstrating perhaps the intuitive sense behind his division of the picture plane. In Barnet's hands these drawings become some of the most personal and revealing works of his career.

1 "Will Barnet at 100" opened at the National Academy Museum, New York, on September 16 and remains on view through December 31, 2011.

2 "Will Barnet: Small Works on Paper from the 1950s" opened at Alexandre Gallery, New York, on September 10 and remains on view through October 15, 2011.