

ALEXANDRE

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ARTS & LETTERS

By DAVID COHEN

The Will Barnet exhibition closing this holiday weekend at Alexandre observes the spirit of Thanksgiving. Consisting of four paintings from the 1960s and a cache of supporting drawings, this gem of a show, at once elegant and scholarly, has abstraction and representation share a feast of equals. And if Mr. Barnet puts you in the mood for soft modernism, two other shows closing tomorrow also warrant attention.

Nowadays the once virulent opposition, abstraction versus representation, really is an old chestnut. The very act of painting has been marginalized in such a fashion as to thrust rival camps into comradeship, rather like Tsarists and Mensheviks sharing a common exile. Enough contemporaries bridge the divide between the two idioms — think of Gerhard Richter, with his hyperrealism and painterly abstraction — to make the dichotomy redundant.

But Mr. Barnet, who is 92 and going strong, is of a different vintage: Like Richard Diebenkorn or Philip Guston, his shifting between paradigms is almost a defining aspect of his career. The pattern for these artists was to start realist, then discover abstraction, and then move back and forth, seeking syntheses of the two.

Mr. Barnet is now, in fact, revisiting his (for him) purist abstraction of the postwar period in reworkings of old compositions. Like Guston, his second volte-face — the readmission of depictive content during the heyday of formal abstraction — was met with incredulity and vitriol. This seems bizarre, looking at Mr. Barnet's works of that decade, as representation and non-objectivity seem so well behaved in each other's company.

All four paintings from the period here are tightly composed, coolly executed, gentle on the senses, and lyrical in the interplay of shapes. The non-representational pair are themselves politely poised between constructivism and organic abstraction. The figural works, highly stylized mother-child groupings, find their tenderness equally in humane content (they feature the artist's wife and daughter) and unabashed shape coordination.

These portraits acknowledge Matisse without any hint of that master's angst. They also look rather like de-sexualized Balthuses, sharing his sweetened orientalism. And there is more than a hint of Milton Avery, though without the latter's energetic primitivism. The overriding qualities in Mr. Barnet are always softness and charm — hardly characteristics to guarantee a modernist his place in the pantheon. But these paintings are so unabashed about what they are and represent that they seem likely to survive on their own terms.

Interestingly, from the point of view of current credibility, form awareness is more acute and sophisticated in the figural works than the abstract ones. It is as if human content proved a decoy rather than a distraction. When left to dominate, the abstract objects became obsessed with their own identity. Precisely because the portraits are so up front in their decorative stylization and shameless in their sentiment, they are less like period pieces than the abstract paintings.

"Will Barnet: Figuration and Abstraction" at Alexandre Gallery until November 29 (Fuller Building, 41 E. 57th Street, at Madison Avenue, 212-755-2828). Prices: \$5,500-\$175,000.

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