

ALEXANDRE

Art in America

October 2002

Will Barnet Alexandre

ervers of arch-romantic
merican art will surely remem-
r Barnet's best-known work
m the 1970s, his series
/omen and the Sea." Here,
men outfitted in stately
gths of black or gray, each
e embodiment of New
gland maidenhood from Anne
adford to Hester Prynne to
ary Baker Eddy, stand on the
ches or on the roofs of their
bled houses. Wrapped in
awls, they wait, it would
em, for their men to come
me from the sea.

In their day, these women
emed to be everywhere in the
t world. Still, should you not
member this phase of Barnet's
rk, there's his Social Realism of
e 1930s to consider, or the
icassoid formalism of the '50s or
ie geometric hijinks of the '60s.
arnet has been nothing if not
rotean in his manifestations. This
cent exhibition, which followed a
trospective at New Jersey's
ontclair Art Museum in 2000
ee A.J.A., May '01], was devoted
clusively to work of the 1990s.

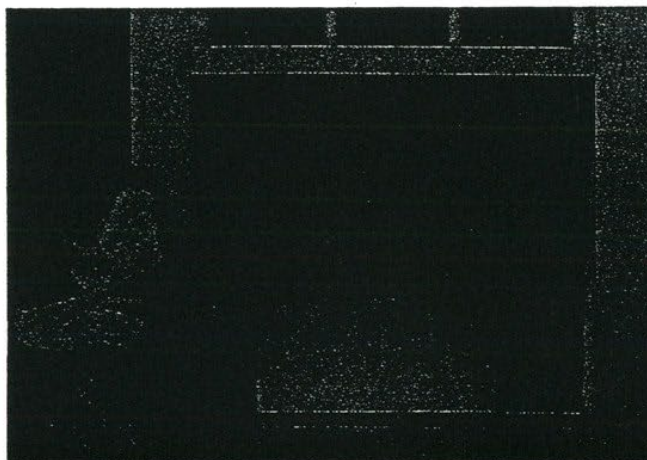
Barnet himself is in his 90s—
e was born in 1911. Yet there
no diminishing of the compo-
tional or coloristic energy he
plies to his round-the-house
nderings of family, friends and
mestic animals. Rather, a cer-
in meditative calm—not
touched by strong emotion—
w underlies all he does, con-
ying a peace perhaps hard-
on but all the more convincing
r its rareness.

Barnet has always painted the
figures around him. Where
those figures, earlier on, might
have included social and profes-
sional "heavy hitters" such as
curators from the Metropolitan
Museum or businessmen or col-
lectors, today they are his imme-
diate 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 paint-
ing 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 fasci-
nates 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-por-
traits; 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 surround-
ings are highly stylized, enjoying
some of the flatness of form—
and even affect—of American
primitive and limner art.

While Barnet seems to sug-
gest that we are all alone—wit-
ness 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.

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