

ALEXANDRE GALLERY

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Will Barnet: Self-Portraits and Family

January 23 through March 7, 2020

Opening Reception Saturday, January 25, from 3:00 to 5:00 pm



Will Barnet, *Self Portrait with Minou*, 1991, oil on canvas, 29 1/4 x 28 1/2 inches

The gallery is pleased to present the exhibition *Will Barnet: Self-Portraits and Family*. Through twelve paintings and drawings from the artist's estate, this show explores Barnet's professional and personal life journey through self-portraiture. Like his other known portraits of collectors, family, and friends, Barnet paints himself either within a domestic environment or his studio and often with his beloved wife and muse Elena. The paintings give the viewer a glimpse into Barnet not only as an artist, but also in the most essential aspect of his personal life within his art and his family.

Will Barnet (American, 1911 – 2012) was born in Beverly, MA and studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston from 1927 to 1930. In 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression and just nineteen years old, Barnet moved to New York City believing he would find an environment that would help him flourish as a modern artist. He was awarded a full scholarship to study both painting and printmaking at the Art Students League. There he studied

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with Stuart Davis, Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock, among others. During this formative period Barnet supported himself as a master printmaker and teacher, enabling his early, lasting connection to the New York scene. In 1935, he was hired as the official printmaker at the League and assisted other artists including Jose Clemente Orozco, Charles White, William Gropper, and Louise Bourgeois. These early, strong and varying influences set the stage for Barnet's long career and established his equal interest in both representation and abstraction, each of which were dominant in different periods of his work.

Barnet's style has evolved from his early work—WPA styled social realism and abstract paintings heavily influenced by Native American art and the Indian Space movement—to later figurative works dealing with family, friends, and visual tropes of New England, such as women looking out to sea. Barnet is best known for his semi-abstract depictions of women and domestic scenes by the influence of his own wife and daughter. Initially, Barnet had been given criticism for his move away from abstract to more figurative paintings. However, he argued that his works had always been figurative; he was just transforming them. Accepting the challenge, he deployed the new concepts he developed in his abstract work into his portraiture. In embracing portraiture as his subject, negative and positive spaces were given equal roles, flatness was emphasized, and everything was stripped down to its essential form. Explaining his move to portraiture, Barnet said:

Considerations which have impelled me to work abstractly for the past decade are present—though with a shift of reference...so that a portrait, while remaining a portrait, becomes in this sense an abstraction, the idea of a person in the most intense and essential aspect.

In 2011 Barnet's work was the subject of a major career retrospective organized by Bruce Weber at the National Academy Museum. Weber wrote of Barnet on this occasion:

For some eight decades, Will Barnet has made outstanding contributions to American art as a painter, printmaker and teacher. In the course of a long, virtually unparalleled career, he has always taken a vigorously individual route advancing to the pulse of his own aesthetic and philosophical concerns. He has traveled that road so rarely traveled, moving fluidly between abstraction and representation. Barnet has followed the passions of his own beliefs, even when this has not only meant going against the grain of prevailing movements in American art, but even contrary to the directions by which he established his own reputation.

In 2011, Barnet was awarded the National Medal of Arts in a White House ceremony by President Obama, who noted that “his nuanced and graceful depictions of family and personal scenes, for which he is best known, are meticulously constructed of flat planes that reveal a lifelong exploration of abstraction, expressionism and geometry.”

For further information or images please contact the gallery at 212-755-2828 or at

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