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At 100, a Painter Has a New York First

By Katie Van Syckle

At age 100, painter Will Barnet is getting his first New York City museum retrospective.

Barnet, whose oil paints and printed works marry bold shapes with blocks of expressive color and strongly outlined forms, has spent eight decades working and living in the city. His pieces have appeared in major galleries and museums around the world, so he says his National Academy Museum show, opening Friday, is not particularly novel.



Daniella Zalcmán for The Wall Street Journal

“I am used to it,” he says. “I have been showing since I was a young man, back in the Great Depression.”

100-year-old painter Will Barnet at his National Arts Club duplex in Gramercy Park.

“Will Barnet at 100” traces his artistic progression from the 1930s to the present, a trajectory that passes through social realism, abstraction and more figurative style before a return to abstraction in recent years

Highlights of the exhibition include *Idle Hands* (1935), a realistically rendered image of a seated man dressed in blue resting his head and hands on his knees, a newsboy cap covering his face.

Soft Boiled Eggs (1946) depicts a stylized version of Barnet’s wife and three children sitting around the kitchen table. Working in dark reds, blues and greens, flatly rendered elements abstract the figures by removing shadow and perspective.

In *Woman and the Sea*, (1972), Barnet uses monotone blues and blacks to depict a female silhouette on a balcony staring out at the ocean. The strong lines and flat expanses of color divide the canvas into the porch, sea and figure.

Barnet, who dropped out of high school to attend the Boston Museum School, arrived in New York from Beverly, Mass in 1931. The then-19-year-old's first stop in New York City was the apartment of painter Arshile Gorky, whom he knew through a friend.



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Will Barnet's oil paints and printed works marry bold shapes with blocks of expressive color and strongly outlined forms.

"I went to his studio and knocked on the door... and he took me for a walk," Barnet remembers. He worked as an artist and professor at the Art Students League (1941-1979), Cooper Union (1945-1967) and at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (1967-1992) and was acquainted with Louise Bourgeois, Mark Rothko and James Rosenquist—lions of the time.

"I knew them all but I was my own man," Barnet said.

His students included Cy Twombly, Tom Wesselmann and Eva Hesse. He once told Willem de Kooning to consider the structure and organization of his paintings. "It was the only the time he was ever challenged by anybody," Barnet remembers.

In his own paintings, he often ignored art world trends, speaking out against movements like Abstract Expressionism. His work evolved from urban social realism to careful abstraction with flat planes of color, and over the years, shifted between abstraction and the figure.

"My heroes when I was young were western movies, since I always thought of myself as one of the western cowboys," he said.

Scholars have noted this cowboy confidence in his work, pieces of which are in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Modern Art.

"I have worked on few artists who has such an extensive and long career," Bruce Weber, the senior curator of 19th and early 20th-century art at the National Academy Museum, writes in the exhibition catalog. "[Will] is very actively engaged in painting and doing new work that is a breakthrough for him in terms of returning to abstraction."

"There are certain elements that have remained continuous," Weber noted. "He has always had great respect for the old masters and he has learned from them in ways that are very modern and new and innovative."

Barnet continues to paint new works, exploring different ideas — right now, he says, he is toying with integrating a figure into an abstract work.

He wakes up early in the National Arts Club duplex he shares with his wife of 59 years, has breakfast and paints for several hours until lunch, after which he usually takes a nap.

"I like freshness, I don't want to repeat myself, that is the one thing I avoid," he says. "I develop an idea and I then I move on."

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