



Looming Large

BARNET'S CARDS

BY JOHN GOODRICH

Few, if any, artists have as lengthy exhibition histories as Will Barnet (some 75 years and counting). More impressive still, few have so regularly renewed their art with wholesale changes of style. The large retrospective exhibition of his work currently on view at the National Academy Museum provides a luminous overview of his evolution through stages of Social Realism, Synthetic Cubism, hard-edged abstraction, lyrical realism and back to abstraction. By contrast, Alexandre Gallery's current exhibition provides an intimate view of a seldom-seen portion of his oeuvre: the small works on paper from the '40s and '50s.

Like his canvases from the period, these nearly 20 mixed-media works are taut, abstract patterns inspired by Native American motifs. But unlike his paintings—which possess a certain edgy poise, thanks to their deliberate line and color—these small works radiate a playful spontaneity. For them, Barnet employed a familiar palette of earth colors, typically oranges and reddish-browns punctuated by green and blue-gray notes. These are applied freely, as if there were no gap between his impulses and marks. Could this be explained by the casualness of their facture? All were executed on old postcards and gallery announcements, sometimes (according to the informative essay in the National Academy's catalog) when the artist was engaged in telephone conversations. One imagines the artist cleaning out a drawer, and realizing, mid-way to the trashcan, that the old cards had one last use.

And quite a use it is. These are no doodles; they have the vigor of complete, independent artworks. Bits of original handwriting and postmarks inspire intense, jostling patterns of totemic shapes. An announcement card from the Delacorte Gallery, with its name circled, is covered with horizontal notes of ochre, sienna and green, rising in tiers around a

central vertical vein, as buoyant and resolute as a seedling. On another card, a kind of cartouche circumscribes the address, which has been overlaid by a stick figure with dramatically lifting arms.

Peek into the gallery's larger room, where a group show includes one of Barnet's larger paintings from the same period. Over 3 feet tall, it features the same racing, angular shapes and modulated hues, but committed to the canvas with studied care. Though tiny in their dimensions, the compulsive designs of these cards feel almost as big.

Will Barnet at 100

Through Dec. 31, National Academy, 1083 5th Ave., 212-369-4880, www.nationalacademy.org

Will Barnet: Works on Paper from the 1940s and 1950s

Through Oct. 15, Alexandre Gallery, 41 E. 57th St., www.alexandregallery.com.