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At 99, a Long Art Career, With No Compromises

Will Barnet, 99, has had 80 one-man shows. An exhibition honoring his centennial year is at the Art Students League.

By ROBIN FINN

Propelled by a scholarship to the Art Students League, Will Barnet, an aspiring artist with a portfolio heavy on seascapes and family cat portraiture, left Boston for New York City in 1931 with $10 in his pocket. It was summer, it was hot, and besides the Depression-era garbage rotting in the streets, the air was ripe with raucous political protest. He rented a room for a $1 a night, gorged on cheap baked beans at the Automat and started sketching the forlorn and angry faces he saw on every corner. He was 19 and "radicalized" by possibility.

"I felt like Gary Cooper," he recalled, "like a cowboy in a Western movie." He roamed the city the way his idol, Honoré Daumier, had wandered through Paris; it was his muse. His style: stark, brooding social realism.

Eight decades later, hard of hearing but still tart of tongue, Mr. Barnet continues to paint every day — abstract forms, oddly hued and, as ever, deeply felt. His evolution as a modern American painter is on display this month in "Will Barnet and the Art Students League," an exhibition that honors his centennial year and his influence on generations of artists, and includes works by renowned league students and colleagues like Louise Bourgeois and James Rosenquist.

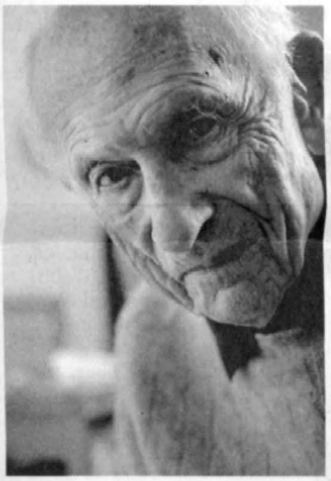
"I've seen it all but I want to see more," said Mr. Barnet, who lost the use of his left leg two years ago after a fall. "I have no opinion on what it means to be 99 except that it's different from being 19. I used to work 8, 9, 10 hours a day," he said. Now he paints three or four hours despite his inability to stand. "I didn't compromise, ever," he added. "The old masters are still alive after 400 years, and that's what I want to be."

Mr. Barnet, whose art career began with his painting self-portraits in his parents' basement in Beverly, Mass., "according to the way Rembrandt worked, with the light coming over my left shoulder," is a symbol of 20th-century American inimitability. He's the guy who abstained when the establishment went gaga over abstract expressionism ("Most of those paintings felt like accidents"). But his major works from the 1950s to '70s — abstract and figurative, Byzantine and Indian Space — now sell for up to $400,000. He has had 80 one-man shows, the most recent this spring at the Alexandre Gallery, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Guggenheim and the Whitney all have his work — usually in storage. ("They don't show artists of my nature; the Whitney hasn't shown my work in 30 years," he said.)

"He took a very independent route, often in contrast to what was the popular or easy direction, but it was the art world that was contrary, not Will," said Robert Kane, an expressionist colorist painter and former student of Mr. Barnet's whose work is included in the retrospective. "There's a quote of Picasso's that is, to me, the secret of Will: 'Some people make a red dot and it's the sun; other people make the sun and it's just a red dot.'"

A fan of Picasso, Ingres and Cézanne, Mr. Barnet wanted to be a modern American painter in a 20th-century American city: the league was a Mecca for modernists. Neither his parents' indifference (his father was a machinist in a shoe factory) nor the suicide of Jules Pascin, who was to be his first teacher at the league in 1931, deterred him. "I had to be an artist and not sacrifice myself for anything but art," he recalled.

Mr. Barnet knew no one in New York, but he arrived with a letter of introduction from a friend at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston who had an Armenian uncle in the city, the surrealist artist Arshile Gorky. Mr. Barnet hiked downtown to his studio unannounced. Standing on the sidewalk, he heard shouting. He knocked anyway. Turned out Mr. Gorky was infuriated because overnight, mice had destroyed a collage that included cheese among its media.



"I never wanted to repeat myself," Mr. Barnet said.

After calming down, Mr. Gorky took Mr. Barnet for an instructive stroll, at one point stopping outside a shoe shop with a fancifully painted business sign. "Young man," he said, "there's the future of art in America." Mr. Barnet kept his mouth shut, but he has never been a fan of what would become known as Pop Art. The closest he came to being a commercial artist were the poster editions of his 1970s prints ("Woman Reading" is the best known); some editions sold for $300,000, but there were no sequels or variants.

Over the years, Mr. Barnet's work morphed from social realism to a nuanced abstraction that used flat planes of color to convey emotion and depth; in his prime, he segued from pure abstraction to pure figuration and back. As a teacher, he elevated printmaking to an art form and emphasized to painters the difference between fine art and the transfer of object to canvas.

"I never wanted to repeat myself," he says. "And that drove some art dealers crazy. I love moving on and finding fresh ways to use color and form. That's been my excitement."

He was appointed league printer in 1935 for $15 a week, and taught art there from 1942 to 1979

Over the years, segueing from pure abstraction to pure figuration and back.

(Mark Rothko was his printmaking student in 1951). No canvas left his studio unless he had spent at least three years getting it absolutely, obsessively right.

"I had seen some of his paintings on the wall outside the classroom and thought, 'Here's someone who sees something no one else sees,'" said the urban muralist Knox Martin, whose work is also included in the exhibition, at the league's gallery on West 57th Street. "He was the first human being I ever met who could communicate what art was."

Mr. Barnet said he once painted Gypsy Rose Lee's portrait for rent money, though he has forgotten what she paid: $20, or maybe $50. His 1934 lithograph "Cafeteria Scene" was purchased by the league for its permanent collection. Philip Alexandre, who owns the gallery that represents him, said that over the past decade Mr. Barnet and his work have begun to experience a pleasant art establishment phenomenon — "a reassessment of value," noting: "Younger artists are discovering him, and that's key."

Mr. Barnet and his wife of 58 years, Elena, moved in 1982 from the Upper West Side to a duplex at the National Arts Club on Gramercy Park that includes his first genuine studio.

It has a full wall of two-story windows facing north. The other walls display paintings, some 15 feet high, like the austere winter portrait of his and Elena's daughter, Oona, and grandson, Will, on ice skates in Maine, circa 1980. The original pencil sketch for "Woman Reading" — a 1970 oil painting and later a popular poster — depicting Elena and their cat, Madame Butterfly, hangs in the living room. The reason for the bald spots on the walls: he lent several paintings to the league and to a show being presented at Montclair State University, where his son Peter teaches painting. Another son, Richard, is a sculptor who teaches at the league, and a third son, Todd, is a lawyer; all three were born during his 10-year marriage to Mary Sinclair, a painter.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA KRISTAL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Will Barnet in his apartment and studio at the National Arts Club in Gramercy Park. He continues to paint every day for three to four hours. A slide show is at nytimes.com/nyregion.

Mr. Barnet and his wife, Elena. "He took a very independent route," said Robert Kane, a former student of Mr. Barnet's.

Mr. Barnet mixes colors himself, and keeps a sheet of waxed paper over them to assure freshness. He sits beside his canvas in the wheeled office chair he relies on to get around the studio. A gigantic 150-year-old wooden easel looms behind him, unused; the wall, more accessible, now doubles as his easel. Hundreds of paintbrushes are guarded by a stuffed raven he refers to as "the early bird." He cannot climb stairs anymore, so he sleeps on a daybed in the studio; when he leaves the apartment to go out to dinner or to a gallery, he begrudgingly uses the wheelchair parked in the hall.

Mortality is on his mind.

"Let me tell you a story," he said, digging into a saucer of frozen Georgia pecans (his other favorite snack is 72 percent dark chocolate, which he discovered 50 years ago, way ahead of the curve). "My grandfather was 96 years old, and one foggy night in Beverly, Mass., he went walking and was hit and injured by a drunken driver.

"He was lying in bed dying of a fractured skull, and my father took me at the age of 6 to say goodbye to him. And I'll never forget what he said: 'Do you think it's easy to die at the age of 96?'"