

ALEXANDRE

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ART IN REVIEW

Will Barnet

'Figuration and Abstraction'

Alexandre Gallery

41 East 57th Street, Manhattan

Through Nov. 29

A painter, printmaker and teacher, Will Barnet, now 92, started out as a Social Realist in the mid 1930's. But he turned to abstraction around 1945 and for the next 15 years produced wonderfully orchestrated arrangements of biomorphic and geometric forms. Throughout much of the 50's, in fact, he was an active member of the American Abstract Artists group, devoted to geometric abstraction.

But around 1960 the figure came back into his work and, with exceptions, has remained there ever since. This show is out to demonstrate that figuration and abstraction are all of a piece in his work, that his segue from the nonobjective to the representational has not really been much of a stretch. Interestingly, it really hasn't been, as demonstrated by four paintings in the show, along with a number of drawings that give an idea of his working process.

"Mother and Child" (1961), for example, a flat, stylized portrait of Mr. Barnet's wife and young daughter, is all angles, curves and crisp

edges tightly integrated in Mr. Barnet's old abstractionist manner. It is also a representational painting of two figures with realistic facial features. Blot out the faces, though, and you have a fairly abstract painting. Still, something has happened in the transition, an off-putting slickness in the carefully negotiated relationship between the two modes. The realistic part of the painting — the facial features — do not seem to jibe with the rest of it. The portrait is appealing but without much character as such.

More interesting is a straightforward abstraction, "Enclosure" (1962-2003), a kind of totemic emblem in electric blue and olive green on a black ground that hints at some of the shapes in the portrait. In its color balances and arrangement of forms, it is a dazzler. The question of abstraction versus representation does not raise much dust today; but, alas, Mr. Barnet's representational work has become sweeter and more sentimental as the years have passed. The savvy abstract works he once produced are missed. GRACE GLUECK

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