



ART REVIEW: Will Barnet Paintings offer Context to AbEx, and Some Questions

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by Peter Malone

“Will Barnet: 1950s Works on Paper” at Alexandre Gallery is the latest in a string of recent shows delving into less familiar and esoteric aspects of the New York art scene circa 1950. By filling the blank patches of the historical map that once appeared like an aura around the bigger names so often associated with the New York School, the fuller perspective of these shows helps to enrich a narrative that is too easily considered already complete.

To name just a few of these recent exhibitions: [Audrey Flack](#)’s precocious take on AbEx, shown in June 2015 at [Hollis Taggart Gallery](#); the engaging [John Ferren](#) show in November 2015 at [David Findlay Jr. Gallery](#); an exhibition of [Pat Passlof](#)’s early work at [Elizabeth Harris Gallery](#) in October; and now [Will Barnet](#)’s small paintings at [Alexandre Gallery](#).

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These shows have brought into the spotlight the work of artists who travelled through and were affected by the same cultural influences that spawned and fed the [AbEx movement](#). Within the art world’s current (and relative) inclusiveness, a closer look at Will Barnet’s relationship to AbEx, which is the subtext of the Alexandre exhibition, is both timely and historically significant.

At first glance, the work on view at Alexandre seems a straightforward reiteration of Barnet’s lingering in the same ideographic territory that [Motherwell](#), Gottlieb and others had moved on from by 1950. That he stayed with this kind of vision for another decade is a mystery in itself, made all the more intriguing by the fact that he came out of it a figurative painter.

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In its scale, the time he devoted to it, and especially in the odd sense of privacy he maintained around the existence of these tiny paintings, a picture emerges of an independent spirit who was struggling in his resistance to more popular trends.

As the exhibition's generalized title suggests, the 36 smallish frames that line the gallery walls are presented as being consistent with the larger abstract canvases Barnett was exhibiting between 1945 and 1960. The installation of the 4-foot-high *Abstract, White & Black*, 1960, near the entrance makes that clear, and the general similarity the small pieces share with such larger canvases is indisputable.



"Abstract, White and Black" by Will Barnett, c. 1960. Oil on canvas, 48 x 42 inches.

Nonetheless, these little paintings were a secretive exercise, hidden in his studio for years. As such they seem to express something other than an effort to produce studies for larger pieces, especially since only one among those exhibited, *Untitled*, c. 1957, resembles a larger, finished canvas. And even that particular assessment, according to the gallery's Marie Evans, is considered tentative.



"Untitled" by Will Barnett, c. 1957. Watercolor on paper, 7 x 4 7/8 inches.

All are painted on discarded items used for communication. Though a few are executed on cut sections of art school memos, and others over typed, printed, or handwritten notes, most of them are painted on the address side of a 4 x 6 postcard, arranged in predominantly vertical format. Each is composed in the ideographic mode. This segmented compositional method was favored briefly among New York painters following influential exhibitions held at [MoMA](#) in the early 1940s that concentrated on Pre-Columbian and Native American pictorial conventions.

Because these tribal patterns and symbols were related with the work of [Diego Rivera](#) and [David Siqueiros](#), both held at the time in high esteem by their struggling New York colleagues, they carried a potent political and aesthetic message.

Untitled, c. 1954-59, contains all the requisite elements of what had become by 1948 a set form: isolated sections delineated like irregular puzzle pieces, in this instance offset by an abstracted totemic figure. Yet unlike earlier versions by [Gottlieb](#) or [Pollock](#), Barnett's pieces are composed of

improvised variations on motifs suggested by other shapes in the same painting, not individually improvised symbols.



“Untitled” by Will Barnett, c. 1954-59. Mixed media on paper, 6 1/2 x 4 3/4 inches.

The artist seems to have paid particular attention to the postal markings, like a poorly aligned address label or a stamp’s perforated edge. Barnett seems to have had little interest in the Jungian idea of the collective unconscious that so intrigued the AbEx painters. He trained his eye instead on the formal compositional properties of each shape, not on the open ended concept favored by Pollock.

Untitled, c. 1956, for instance makes it clear that the distinct reds and blues of the shapes hugging the perimeter of the painting were relied upon in producing the washed-out violet that fills the remaining shapes in the center, indicating a small palette of limited variety and duration—a palette that was predetermined and adhered to as long as it lasted.



“Untitled” by Will Barnett, c. 1956. Mixed media on paper, 5 7/8 x 5 inches.

Although Barnett is not known to have acted on the connection, there is an engaging similarity between the limited palette and image dimensions and the later movement known as Process Art. Combined with the evidence that many unused postcards were found in the box along with the paintings, it might be assumed that the whole series was ongoing and consciously kept to within strict parameters, quite the opposite of what Harold Rosenberg called “action painting.”

Given that Barnett’s abstract canvases from the same period display a respect for how the parts of a picture fit together, none of this is very surprising. He felt ideas about component parts had been abandoned erroneously by the AbEx artists, who replaced pictorial organization with spontaneous gesture. Even the proto minimalism of Barnett Newman declared its subject matter as an attempt to “bust” the geometry, or what one might consider the expected compositional order of his large canvases.

Barnett’s small studies, on the other hand, keep to the idea of harmony and balance, to the notion that a final picture is to be a resolution, not a gesture or an expression of existential disarray. Even

so, there is still a question about his near furtive treatment of the series.

Why were these pieces kept so small and so private? His widow discovered them in a box in his studio several years after his passing in 2012. Were they meant as a commentary on the heroic canvases preferred by his AbEx competitors? Does their diminutive presence express a lack of confidence in the path he had chosen for himself? Was he perhaps wrestling with the appeal of gestural painting? The seductive power of that path was clear, as evidenced by the way it affected the work of younger painters one way or another, from [Robert Rauschenberg](#) to [Joan Mitchell](#).

There may never be a clear answer to these questions. But there is an unmistakable sense of conflicting emotions in the intense intimacy of each small painting, especially when they are contrasted with the now legendary works of the same period executed by the Abstract Expressionists as part of one of modernism's more bombastic movements.

By 1961, more or less at the point where the series ends, Barnett had finally moved publically into the figurative mode with a seminal work called *Mother and Child* (echoed incidentally in the exhibition's proto figurative *Untitled*, c. 1954-1959). This piece was in its every aspect a direct and unambiguous challenge to Abstract Expressionism and its many offshoots. That Barnett took a full decade of hovering around the ideographic roots of AbEx before making this leap seems to stem from more complex motives than just an expression of fear or timidity. There seems to have been something in the method of improvisation within a structured space that he could not abandon.



"Untitled" by Will Barnett, c. 1954-59. Mixed media on paper, 5 5/8 x 3 3/8 inches.

And perhaps the tension he felt in holding on to this notion at a time when it was not all that popular—a notion that was to become central to his figurative work—is where the choice of postcards begins to make sense. A postcard is an intimate message passed unsealed through a public space—a fitting metaphor for an artist whose breakthrough canvases were depictions of friends and family members.

BASIC FACTS: "Will Barnett: 1950s Works on Paper" is on view April 14 to May 27, 2016 at Alexandre Gallery, 4th Floor, 724 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10019. www.alexandregallery.com.

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