

From the catalogue: Painting without Illusion- The Genesis of Four Works from the 1960s

By Patrick McGrady

In February of 1960, Will Barnet celebrated nearly fifteen years of abstraction in his work with an exhibition at Bertha Schaefer Gallery in New York. The twelve paintings on view represented the most recent manifestations of a highly deliberated approach that had characterized the artist's efforts throughout his abstract period. In response, critics clearly recognized that with these canvases Barnet had reached an unprecedented moment in his career. "There is a silent grandeur," noted Dorothy Adlow in the *Christian Science Monitor*, a hidden magic in these depictions in which color modulations are realized with exceptional sensitiveness." Lawrence Campbell, reviewing for *Art News*, found the new works to be the finest of his career, and Bennet Schiff of the *New York Post* concurred, writing:

This is Barnet's best show, and another example of that always thrilling efflorescence which sometimes occurs in the life of a mature artist at a certain, magical time, when everything he's learned up to a point becomes clearly cohesive and touched with the true poetry of inspiration. . . . It seems clear to me that, with this show, Barnet is unquestionably in the forefront of today's American painters.

Throughout his abstract period Barnet derived most of his compositions from the human figure. For the longest time, landscape had bewildered him. "I never felt quite ready to cope with such an enormous element as this big space," he has admitted, this tremendous scene, these millions of miles of space and planets that one sometimes can't even see or touch." In the late 1950s, though, the confidence garnered from the success of his latest figure-inspired studies encouraged him to address as well the vistas experienced during his travels. After spending the summers of 1958 and 1959 in residence at the University of Minnesota in Duluth, he initiated a series of studies based on the captivating views near his accommodations on the shore of Lake Superior. The resulting canvases, completed in his New York studio in 1960, synthesized his emotional reactions to the region's vast expanse and the various celestial bodies reflecting across the surface of the lake. In the most monumental of these paintings, *Big Duluth* (fig. 2), the arrangement of the abstracted forms facilitates a movement quite distinct from that found in *Singular Image*. The concentric bands enveloping the yellow disc in the uppermost section of the painting radiate elliptically to the left and right. The extrusive nature of the central color, however, particularly in juxtaposition with the increasingly complacent tones surrounding it, adds another dimension to the horizontal movement: outward, toward the viewer. Slightly fuller below, the emanating rings tug downward as well, approaching a brown banner that gently rises to greet the motion. The wedge-pierced form within this subjacent field echoes the curves of the encircling bands above, initiating a more powerful descent that cuts diagonally through inverted triangles of green and then sharper blue to the leg of the form furthest below. Glowing in chromatic harmony with the disc that heads the painting, this last image disperses the energy with an acute linear deflection to the right and, like its counterpart, out away from the picture plane as well.

Quite another reception awaited *Mother and Child* when it returned to New York and (still under the title *Elena and Ona*) joined several additional figural compositions in an early 1962 exhibition at Bertha Schaefer Gallery. In anticipation of the scrutiny this new direction was sure to provoke, Barnet issued an explanatory statement for inclusion in the exhibition's press release:

The same considerations which impelled me to work abstractly for the past ten years are present, though with a shift of focal reference, in this new group of paintings. There is no ambivalence for me in the fact that the figure has been profoundly transformed, or transposed, with closer reference to its original structure. Nor are there any so-called "humanistic" revelations for the present shift in my work.

My interest has been in developing further the plastic convictions which have been evolving in my abstract work; so that a portrait, while remaining a portrait, should become in this sense an abstraction: the idea of a person in its most intense and essential aspect.

More important than the opinions of professional writers, however, was the reaction on the part of friends and close associates, many of whom wondered as well whether the artist had begun to veer from an inviolable path. Throughout much of the 1950s, Barnett had been a fervent member of the Association of Abstract Artists, created in 1936 to support a fledgling non-figurative movement in this country. AAA tended to lean toward a wholly structured approach to abstraction, particularly during the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism, and this appealed to Barnett. He joined in 1954 and soon took on an active role within the group. In 1956, he co-edited *The World of Abstract Art*, a collection of essays issued to mark the organization's twentieth anniversary. He also authored one of the volume's more cogent texts, in which he argued strongly in favor of the kind of architectonic non-objectivity that was beginning to distill in his painting. So when, after years of heralding the AAA cause, Barnett turned so markedly to the figure particularly in the wake of producing such successful canvases under its banner he appeared to some to be abandoning abstraction wholeheartedly.

In fact, Barnett hadn't shifted all that much, for despite the introduction of perceptibly referential imagery, these new works remain highly abstract in composition. In *Mother and Child*, for example, nearly all of the painting's energy initiates near the upper right, with the mother's left arm. Moving across, the horizontal force lifts slightly at the shoulder, dislodging the head as the weight transfers, where cheek meets hand, diagonally through the right forearm. In tandem with a head now tilted slightly off axis, a wisp of displaced hair, a compactly arched brow, and an eye slightly askew all conspire to pivot the energy vertically as well, down the right drape of the mother's blackish brown robe and pooling in and around her lap. Complicit in this movement is the sweeping line that forms along the outer edge of the left arm above, and then switches behind the head to the inner track curves around the golden tunic. As this line trails off near the child's toes, a small wedge opening between the girl's heels and hindquarters briefly picks up its horizontal reach before spilling into the eastern-most expanse of the dark robe's gathers.

Mitigating the influence of the third dimension in his painting had long been for Barnett far more important than deciding whether to limit the referential properties of his forms. He first voiced such notions in a short essay published in 1950 titled "Painting without Illusion." The argument is certainly modern, falling well within the parameters of abstraction as it was generally practiced at the time. Given what we know of his work later in the decade, this should come as no surprise. He calls for a painterly space independent from the laws of nature, and, in articulating this space, he urges an approach that above all recognizes the tectonic potential inherent in the two-dimensional character of the canvas. "We must realize that the quadrangle on which we draw or paint," he wrote, "has basic dimensions and movements. It moves structurally according to its basic architecture, and the artist builds with the horizontal and vertical within the quadrangle's architecture."

