

The sleeper hit of the art season

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PROVIDENCE — You won't find Harold Baumbach's name in most of the standard histories of 20th-century art. While many of his friends and colleagues were busy putting Abstract Expressionism on the map in the 1940s and '50s, Baumbach favored a more realistic painting style based on Post-Impressionist masters such as Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard.

For a look at two other art shows and a list of lectures this weekend, see Page 18.

Later, when the art world turned its attention to the media-wise and more realistic styles associated with Pop Art, Baumbach's work became increasingly abstract. Then, in the 1970s and '80s, the artist's stylistic compass shifted again — this time to a kind of dreamy poetic realism that is both a synthesis of his earlier work and a quantum leap beyond it.

Now in his early 90s, Baumbach is the focus of a small but sparkling new show at the Po Gallery in downtown Providence. Called "Harold Baumbach's Century," it features about 15 paintings, ranging from a series of portraits and interiors from the 1930s and '40s to the luminous landscapes and flower studies that the artist has been making since the mid-1970s.

The result is the sleeper hit of the season. Baumbach doesn't have the emotional firepower of a Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning or the cosmic sweep of his one-time friend, Mark Rothko. But he does have a quiet intensity, an insistent, even stubborn belief that painting well is not only an end in itself but the only thing that really matters.

You can see this mix of dreaminess and determination in works like *The Logic of Trees* from 1988 and *Orange Fever* from 1991. On the surface, these are fairly simple paintings — two trees outlined against an empty field in the first and a trio of smudgy, trumpet-shaped flowers in the second. There are no backgrounds to speak of, and almost no detail.

But look closely and the paintings turn out to be full of life. Though nearly abstract, Baumbach's trees and flowers cling to their real-world identities with the tenacity of drowning victims fighting for a breath of air. It's the artistic equivalent of the survival instinct: They refuse to be swallowed up, refuse to go gently into that good night.

The two trees in the *Logic of Trees* are especially good. Nearly balanced between realism and abstraction, they look like they might dissolve or simply evaporate at any moment. Yet far from losing the battle of appearances, they seem liberated by it. Their brightly colored trunks and limbs seem to flare out of the background with the intensity of just-struck matches.

The show also illustrates just how fickle the art world and its attendant dealers, collectors, critics and curators can be. Baumbach isn't a great artist, but he is a good one. He paints well, has a fine sense of color and obviously cares deeply about what he's doing. He's also picked some good role models, including Cezanne, Matisse, Bonnard and Vuillard.



HAROLD BAUMBACH painted *Madonna* in 1958 in a realistic style at odds with the abstract work of others. Later, when realism was in favor, he moved in the opposite direction.

Unfortunately, in today's all-or-nothing art world good doesn't count for much. Unless you're a teenage prodigy or an acknowledged Old Master, you might as well not exist. True, Baumbach's work can be found in some of the top museums in the country, including the Whitney and Brooklyn museums in New York and the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington. But by zigging when the art world zagged (and by continuing to paint, and paint well, into his 80s), has made it much harder to get the recognition he deserves.

Still, you get the feeling that Baumbach wouldn't have it any other way. Born in 1904, he grew up on New York's Lower East Side where his Austrian-born father owned a small upholstery shop. Some of his early paintings hint at the stresses and strains of family life. The dark, cramped rooms of *Interior Life* from 1939 and *Sewing Machine* from 1942, for example, have an air of oppressiveness that's as much emotional as it is physical.

On the other hand, there are works like

Mother and Child from 1948 and *Madonna* from 1958 that hint at happier times.

Though largely a self-taught painter, Baumbach attended the Pratt Institute in New York and later worked for the WPA's famed public art program during the Depression. He taught painting from 1946 to 1966 at Brooklyn College and later, from 1975 to 1977, at the University of Iowa. He currently lives in New York.

What's remarkable about Baumbach is that his paintings have only improved as he has grown older. Because our culture is obsessed with youth — and teen prodigies are inherently fascinating — we tend to assume that all artists make their big breakthroughs early in life. But Baumbach reminds us that the creative spark doesn't die out at age 40 or 50 or even 90. As long as the body is willing, that spark will last as long we do.

"*Harold Baumbach's Century*" continues through Dec. 30 at the Po Gallery, the Arcade in Providence. Hours are 11-6 Monday-Saturday.