

ART SCENE

Bill Van Siclen

Born on Manhattan's Lower East Side in 1903, Baumbach came of age as an artist during the early years of Abstract Expressionism. He knew most of the movement's luminaries and was especially close to fellow New Yorker Adolf Gottlieb and to Russian-born painter Mark Rothko.

At the same time, Baumbach never seemed comfortable with his contemporaries' leap into pure abstraction.

Instead, except for a brief fling with abstraction in the 1960s, he largely steered a middle course — combining real-world subjects such as trees, portraits and interiors with a lyrical, even mystical, sense of color.

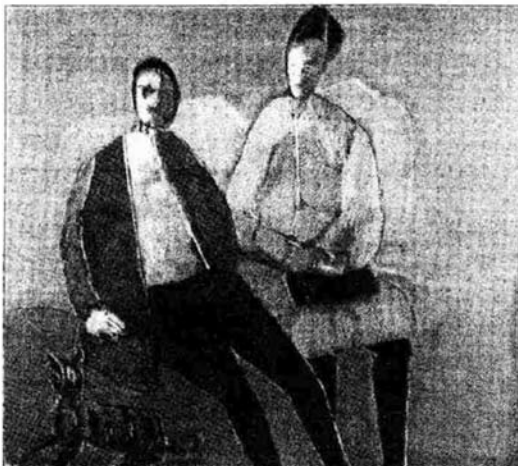
A good example of Baumbach's mature style is *The Logic of Trees*, a 1988 painting in which a pair of smudgy blue-black trees are highlighted with blazing strokes of red-orange. The result suggests a pair of giant kitchen matches just bursting into flame.

Baumbach achieves a similar effect in *Shock of Color*, a work from 1990.

This time, a single tree stands in a field edged with vivid shades of pink and lavender. Move the sun a little higher and the whole field would be flooded with light and color. Move it a little lower and all would be dark.

As it is, Baumbach focuses on the in-between moment when day is about to burst into light — or fade into darkness.

IN ALL, the Po show features about 25 paintings from the 1940s through the early 1990s. (Baumbach died in 2001 at the ripe old age of 98.)



RETROSPECTIVE:
Two Figures with Cat, a 1979 work by Harold Baumbach, is part of a retrospective of the late artist's work, at Po' Gallery, in Providence.

Like many artists, Baumbach started out painting what he knew best — in his case, the busy streets, shops and tenements of Lower Manhattan. Indeed, the show's two earliest works, *Perambulator* and *Bargains*, may have autobiographical roots: both depict what looks like the same neighborhood fabric store. (Baumbach's father ran an upholstery business.)

At the same time, it's not clear whether the two paintings are intended to evoke happy memories. On the one hand, the colors are drab: everything seems bathed in a permanent twilight. On the other hand, there are flashes of whimsy — notably the man's sport jacket at the top of *Bargains*, which appears to be reaching for a low-cut woman's dress.

Watching the Unseen, a 1953 painting of a young boy sitting with his back to the viewer, is more realistic but just as

enigmatic. Is the boy being punished, or just daydreaming? Since we can't see his face, it's hard to tell.

EARLY IN his career, such paintings earned Baumbach a reputation as an Intimist — a reference to 19th-century French artists such as Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard, who explored the hidden tensions and longings of domestic life.

In the 1960s, Baumbach adopted a more abstract style.

In *Abstraction in Green*, from 1963, thick streaks of green, rose, gray-green and charcoal paint are surrounded by a hazy olive green border. In *Image*, from 1965, Baumbach follows a similar pattern, although this time the dominant color is red.

In both cases, there's a sense of looking through a door or portal at something seething in the depths.

In the 1970s and '80s, Baumbach returned to figurative subjects, albeit with a new sense of freedom. Though still indebted to other artists — his portraits recall the work of early modernist painters such as Henri Matisse and Amadeo Modigliani — the paintings from these years are among the best of Baumbach's career.

Though not in the same all-star class as Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning, let alone Matisse, Baumbach deserves to be better known. Let's hope this show, which was organized with the help of the artist's son, Jonathan Baumbach, is a start.