

RHODE ISLAND

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HAROLD BAUMBACH: AN AMERICAN MODERNIST: SELECTED PAINTINGS

Every once in a while you stumble upon an artist whose work was overlooked by the power brokers and trend-makers who steer the culture in a certain direction. Such is the case with Harold Baumbach, a self-taught painter born to parents from Austria and Hungary, who grew up in the neighborhood of his father's upholstery shop on the Lower East Side of New York City before moving to Brooklyn, where he spent most of his life.

Select paintings at Po Gallery form a loose chronology of his work and give a fair impression of Baumbach's remarkable transformation and maturation. Early paintings are narrative in nature, detailing immigrant life and New York street scenes from the 1940s and 1950s. Works from the 1960s and 1970s place emphasis on experimental, liquid abstraction, featuring wild, aggressive color and psychedelia. A significant shift to a more expressionist abstraction occurs throughout the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in his landscape work in which shapes are more defined but retain mystery and ambiguity.



Harold Baumbach, *Landscape*, 40 x 50", 1985.
Courtesy of Po Gallery. Photo: David Wilcox.



Harold Baumbach, *Two Figures with Cat*, 54 x 50", 1979. Courtesy of Po Gallery. Photo: David Wilcox.

People and nature fueled Baumbach's passion for painting. In *Watching the Unseen* (1953) a boy sits sideways in a chair at a table, staring at something off-canvas. The strange perspective, painted at an angle about 45 degrees behind the boy, adds to the jarring sensation of not knowing what he is looking at or why he is sitting there. As if trapped between the wallpaper and the tablecloth, the boy is presented in poignant pose, suggesting the artist's flashback to his own childhood.

The Logic of Trees, *Early Autumn*, and *Angel Trees*, all from the 1980s, can each be seen as an exceptional example of impressionistic and expressionistic landscapes, showing dynamic and organic shapes in shadowy voids, and dissonant color that seems somehow just right. The isolation of selected trees creates an evocative mood and suggests that Baumbach, the lifetime city dweller, found solace in the small green spaces that were available to him in Brooklyn parks and gardens.

Even though Baumbach studied nature, he never lost his fascination for people. In dress and activity, Baumbach's figures seem to carry the torch for a culture that was disappearing in New York before his very eyes. In *Game of Cards* (1981) the players appear molded into their seats. In *Orange Stripes* (1986), *Red Scarf* (1990), and *Tarot Cards* (1990) an oval-shaped woman (each with a different hairdo) is given personality by accessories—two vertical, crooked orange stripes that look like prison bars, a scarlet scarf and headband, and tarot cards. The figures are haunting and dramatic.

In this retrospective, we see an artist whose world opened up over time, from one of crowded streets and claustrophobic interiors to the elemental and eternal landscape, where the salvaged scene is both personal and universal.

Doug Norris