

In a city with plenty of quirky, offbeat galleries and art spaces, Providence's Po Gallery stands out as one of the quirkiest of all. Though Po has been at its current location on Dorrance Street for nearly a decade — and though the gallery itself has existed in one form or another for a decade beyond that — I'll bet that many local art lovers have never heard of the Po Gallery, let alone been to one of its shows.

As it happens, now is a particularly good time to make Po's acquaintance.

The reason? An exhibit of about 20 paintings — all portraits — by Harold Baumbach, a New York artist who came of age during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism but whose

true allegiance belonged to an earlier generation of (mostly French) figurative painters, notably Henri Matisse and Pierre Bonnard. As a result, Baumbach's specialty — lyrical, semi-abstract portraits, interiors and landscapes rendered in softly smoldering colors — was often overlooked in the rush to find the next Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning.

At the same time, Baumbach, who died in 2001, was hardly a traditional portraitist. In painting after painting, he serves up the same kind of figure — thin, willowy, mostly female but otherwise anonymous — outlined against feathery veils of color. Sometimes the colors are so close that figure and ground nearly merge. That's what happens in *First Love*, where the grayish pinks and mauves

of the figure's face and blouse almost fade into the smoky lavenders of the background. (At moments like this, Baumbach comes to the Color Field painting of his close friend Mark Rothko.) On other occasions, the color combinations are more jarring. A good example is *Serenity*, with its palette of sooty blacks and grays laced with streaks of neon orange.

Though hardly a household name, Baumbach deserves to be better known. So, for that matter, does the Po Gallery.

*Through June 9 at the Po Gallery, 10 Dorrance St. (2nd floor) in Providence. Gallery hours: Thurs.-Fri. noon-5, Sat. noon-4. Phone: (401) 273-9144.*