

Harold Baumbach, 98, a Painter Who Explored Color and Space

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Harold Baumbach, a New York painter of dissonant color and irascible temperament whose career began before most Americans had ever heard of his friend Mark Rothko, died on Saturday in San Francisco, where he lived since the mid-1990's. He was 98.

Mr. Baumbach, the son of an upholsterer on the Lower East Side who did not want him to be an artist, basically taught himself to paint. He first made a mark during the late 1930's as a figurative painter in the style of Bonnard and Vuillard, doing densely patterned street scenes and Brooklyn interiors.

During summers he painted landscapes, mostly in upstate New York and New England, then spent vaca-

tions in Provincetown, Mass., a thriving art community where Milton Avery, another friend, and, occasionally, Rothko also vacationed.

Mr. Baumbach's work became increasingly abstract, but figures — generic card players, people sitting in parks, cows in fields — were always present as dreamlike devices for explorations in color and spatial relations.

"His real subject was not the world outside of himself but the stuff and texture and light of paint," a review in 1975 in *Art News* magazine explained. "He always turned everything he saw into his own patterned and textured imagery."

He painted many portraits of family and friends. One of his son Jonathan, from the mid-1940's, is in the

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Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. Several American museums collected his works.

After an eye operation in the late 1980's he became legally blind, trying to paint for two years after that from memory before quitting.

In 1992 a late painting was included in the annual exhibition at P.S. 1, and he had a retrospective the same year at Brooklyn College Museum.

He was frequently described as an

intimist and was loosely linked with Avery during the 1940's as a modern American painter, but he never belonged to any group, being restless and without a signature style.

Strong willed, allergic to fashion even to success, he persisted in going his own way, refusing to sell to prospective buyers he thought did not admire the work properly and breaking off relations with galleries usually after only a show or two. He had 24 one-man shows in New York.

From 1946 to 1966 he also taught painting at Brooklyn College.

He is survived by his wife, Ida three sons, Jonathan and James, of New York, and Daniel of Fairfax Calif.; six grandchildren; and one great-granddaughter.