

## Ernie Barnes Estate Gets Gallery Representation Following Auction Surprise



BY ALEX GREENBERGER  May 19, 2022 12:01am



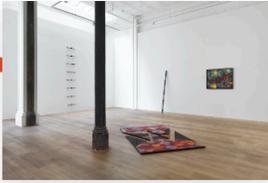
Ernie Barnes, *Cool Quarterback*, 1991.

COURTESY THE ESTATE OF ERNIE BARNES, ANDREW KREPS GALLERY, AND ORTUZAR PROJECTS

One week after a painting by **Ernie Barnes** became a **surprise hit at a Christie's auction**, the artist's estate has inked a representation deal with the New York galleries **Andrew Kreps** and **Ortuzar Projects**.

At a Christie's contemporary art sale last week, Barnes's 1976 painting *The Sugar Shack*, a rollicking nightclub scene that appeared in the opening credits of the TV series *Good Times* and on the cover of a Marvin Gaye album, sold for \$15.3 million, outpacing its \$150,000 low estimate 80 times over. The hedge fund manager Bill Perkins bought the work. At a Christie's day sale held less than 24 hours afterward, another Barnes painting sold for \$2.34 million, more than 24 times its \$100,000 estimate.

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While the sale of *The Sugar Shack*, which had figured in a 2021 **Andrew Kreps Gallery** show co-organized with Ortuzar Projects, may have marked some people's first major exposure to Barnes, the artist has been considered important to some for years.

"For a huge amount of people, it's not at all a rediscovery—quite the opposite," said Ales Ortuzar, the founder of Ortuzar Projects, adding that conversations about the representation of the estate began a year and a half ago, during the organization of the Kreps show.

"I am beyond grateful to have the expertise of two highly respected international art dealers help me navigate Ernie Barnes to his rightful place in the art world," Luz Rodriguez, Barnes's longtime assistant and a trustee of the estate, said in a statement. "Proper representation was always missing."

Barnes, who died in 2009, grew up in poverty in the Jim Crow South and later found fame as an athlete, playing as an offensive lineman for NFL teams like the New York Titans, San Diego Chargers, and Denver Broncos, as well as with the Saskatchewan Roughriders in Canada. In the mid-1960s, he turned his attention full-time to creating art.

Because Barnes was initially a football player who made art in his spare time, some may have viewed his painting practice as something akin to a vanity project. But Barnes's fellow athletes collected his art before many museums did, and it has wide visibility outside institutional spaces.

Andrew Kreps, the dealer who mounted the 2021 Barnes show in New York, said in an interview, "I have learned that for so many African Americans, he was the first artist that they knew about—which is pretty profound."

In Barnes's figurative paintings, slender Black figures twist and turn, creating dynamic compositions in which bodies interlock, overlap, and sidle around one another. Some of his paintings draw on his experience in the world of sports, though other works picture city scenes and spectators of various forms of entertainment.

Barnes's rise has been in part triggered by a series of shows. In 2018, there was a Barnes show at the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh, followed by a retrospective held at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles the year after. The UTA Artist Space, also in L.A., staged a Barnes survey in 2020.

Kreps recalled coming across Barnes's work for the first time during the pandemic. Once he came across a Barnes work on Google, "a whole world opened up," he said. "I was like, 'My goodness, this artist has this huge audience that the art world isn't a part of.'"

A Barnes show planned for 2023 at Ortuzar Projects is likely to raise his profile even further within the art world. But it was the *Sugar Shack* sale which brought Barnes a headline in the *New York Times* last week, and it is his rise in the market sphere that have generated newfound attention. When a Barnes painting comes up for auction at Christie's Hong Kong next week, it will be another test of how well his art will do on the secondary market.

"There have been a number of new inquiries about his work that we've received," Ortuzar said. "This has had a seismic effect on interest in his work."