

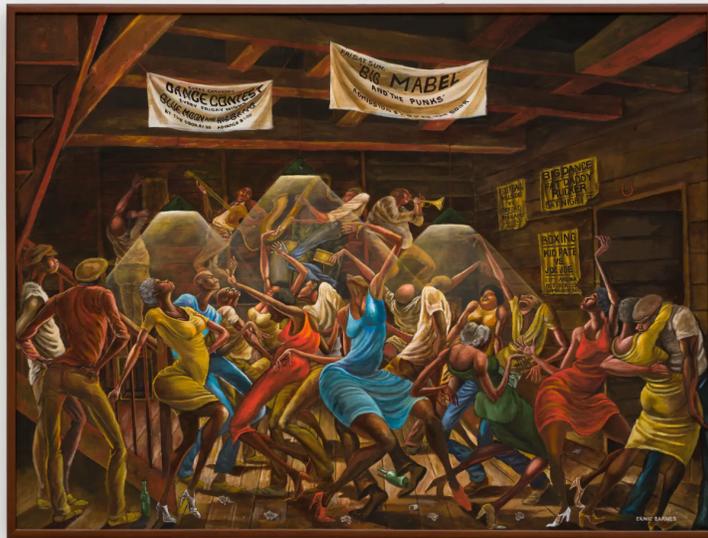
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CRITIC'S PICK

Ernie Barnes Paints What It Feels Like to Move

The artist, who once played professional football, captured the anatomical and experiential details of bodies in motion in an expansive survey at Ortuzar Projects.



Ernie Barnes's "Full Boogie," 1978, at Ortuzar Projects. via the Ernie Barnes Estate, Ortuzar Projects and Andrew Kreps Gallery



By **Will Heinrich**

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The second thing you notice about an Ernie Barnes painting might be its vibrant color scheme. Anchored in earthy reds and browns, it perfectly complements the artist's virtuosic, almost musical mastery of space and composition. Or it could be the overflowing warmth with which he depicts Black American life that catches your eye. If the painting is "The Sugar Shack," you might recognize it from an appearance on the 1970s sitcom "Good Times," where it was shown during the closing credits; from the cover of Marvin Gaye's 1976 album "I Want You"; or from its [dramatic sale for more than \\$15 million](#) in 2022. You may also have encountered one of the thousands of posters and prints which, throughout his career, he made available at modest prices.

The first thing you notice about an Ernie Barnes painting will be the distinctively sinuous way he renders human beings.



“Dead Heat” 2004. in which Barnes models every quad muscle on each of three straining sprinters separately, as if for a medical diagram. via the Ernie Barnes Estate, Ortuzar Projects and Andrew Kreps Gallery

Barnes, [who died in 2009](#) at age 70, called his style “[Neo-Mannerist](#)” after the 16th-century Italians, and you can draw connections to 20th-century artists, too. (I personally think of Chagall.) What I hadn’t realized till seeing “Ernie Barnes: In Rapture,” an expansive and generous five-decade survey presented at Ortuzar Projects in Manhattan, in collaboration with Andrew Kreps Gallery, was just how precisely Barnes’s unique lines capture the anatomical and experiential details of bodies in motion.

In “Dead Heat,” Barnes, an athlete himself who played professional football before getting a job painting the New York Jets, models every quad muscle on each of three straining sprinters separately, as if for a medical diagram. The same kind of exaggerated specificity reveals the grace behind gestures and expressions which, in real life, would pass too quickly to catch: the toes pointed like a dancer’s, the neck craning toward the finish, the chest that arcs itself forward to break a billowing, ornamental line of bright blue tape.



Ernie Barnes's "Street Song," 1971. via the Ernie Barnes Estate, Ortuzar Projects and Andrew Kreps Gallery

Paradoxically, all this exaggeration comes with subtleties of its own. One gesture Barnes uses again and again is a straight arm, often with its hand bent at the wrist — but every time it's different. The front-row fan in "We Love Our Team" has his fist clenched in what looks like self-righteous anger, while the boy in "Shootin' the Breeze," lobbing a basketball toward a peach basket, is just working on his shot. The woman raising her arm in the air on the left side of "Room Ful' A Sistahs" looks just a bit more performative or self-conscious than the left-most young man harmonizing in "Street Song," and not only because of the other women dancing and posing all around her. It's the angle of the arm itself, the bright highlights that give it the buoyant upward tension of a bowstring.

Two lanky men leap up toward a rim with no net, on a dirt field, in "Protect the Rim." They're even more like dancers than the sprinters in "Dead Heat," with long, bowed legs and impossibly curved backs. But consider the man on defense. His left arm is nearly as long as his entire body, and almost half of that is wrist. In this instance Barnes is no longer showing you what a body looks like. He's showing you how it *feels*.



Ernie Barnes "Protect the Rim," 1976. via the Ernie Barnes Estate, Ortuzar Projects and Andrew Kreps Gallery

Just as children draw faces with giant eyes, enlarging the features that loom large emotionally, Barnes emphasizes his subjects' most focused gestures to communicate their intensity directly to you in a way that affects you viscerally as well as visually. And while sports probably gave him some extra body awareness, Barnes hardly limited this technique to pictures of athletes. Look at "The Maestro," and you experience the taut excitement of a conductor just before the symphony; stand in front of "Full Boogie," and you'll probably find that you can't stand still.

Ernie Barnes: In Rapture

Through June 15, Ortuzar Projects, 9 White Street, Manhattan; 212-257-0033, ortuzarprojects.com.