

Rarely Seen Ernie Barnes Paintings to Appear in L.A. Exhibition at UTA Artist Space

By [Alex Greenberger](#) December 20, 2022 8:00am



Ernie Barnes, LATE NIGHT DJ, 1980. Photo Jef McLane/Courtesy UTA Artist Space and the Ernie Barnes Estate

Next February during Frieze Los Angeles, paintings by [Ernie Barnes](#) that have rarely been shown to the public will head to [UTA Artist Space](#), where a survey of how he represented music will be on view.

Titled “Ernie Barnes: Where Music and Soul Live” and running from February 15 to April 1, the show will include 30 works that span street scenes, portraits of musicians, and images of dancers in nightclubs. Some of these pieces are coming from private collectors who have never exhibited these works publicly.

“Music is what first brought him into the Durham Armory” — a dance hall in North Carolina, where Barnes lived — “which started everything,” said Luz Rodriguez, the manager of the artist’s estate. “This whole show is about what he saw, musically, because he painted from his own experiences.”



It won't be the biggest Barnes show to alight in L.A. recently — that would be the California African American Museum's 50-work survey in 2019. And it won't even be the first staged by UTA, which mounted a Barnes show in 2020. But it is the first major Barnes survey since one of his paintings because a surprise hit at auction earlier this year.

In May, during a marquee contemporary art sale at Christie's, Barnes's 1976 painting *The Sugar Shack* sold for \$15.3 million to the film producer Bill Perkins. The painting, which had been given a high estimate of \$200,000, had appeared in the opening credits of the TV series *Good Times* and is considered one of Barnes's defining works. That painting will now appear in the UTA show after having previously been exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston in Texas.

Barnes, who died in 2009, was also known as a football player, played professionally for teams such as the Denver Broncos and the San Diego Chargers. Yet he had developed an interest in art from a young age and continued to pursue it after his sports career wrapped.

Many of his paintings feature Black men, women, and children whose bodies sway and curve as they dance, play sports, and more. His work developed a mainstream appeal after it appeared in *Good Times* and was not only confined to institution collections.

Zuzanna Ciolek, the director of UTA Artist Space, said that she wanted to echo this cross-disciplinary, unconventional quality with the Barnes show.

“He was an artist of the people,” she said. “The general public was aware of his work and excited about his work before the art world was, and I think that’s something that’s really exciting for us.”

The upcoming UTA survey will be staged in collaboration with the creative agency Playlab, which is tapped to design an atmosphere that Ciolek said would evoke the sensually lit nightclubs seen in Barnes’s paintings. Throughout the exhibition’s run, DJs will periodically pump live music throughout the galleries. The unusual gesture is about “really creating an environment where you could fully experience like how Ernie felt and how Ernie would want to see the works be shown,” according to Ciolek.

UTA’s show won’t be the only place to see Barnes’s work in L.A. this upcoming February, however. At Frieze, Andrew Kreps Gallery and Ortuzar Projects, both of which recently took on the Barnes estate, will show work by the artist.

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