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Lay Up, 1970

Acrylic on canvas

38 by 18 inches (91.4 x 45.7 cm)



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Signed '© Ernie Barnes' lower right

Provenance: Estate of the artist
Private collection, Los Angeles
Private collection

Exhibition: Los Angeles, UTA Artist Space, *Ernie Barnes: Liberating Humanity From Within*, November 11 – 28, 2020, illustrated

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A beloved icon among American artists, Ernie Barnes earned popular acclaim in his lifetime, renowned for his paintings of sports and genre scenes celebrating African American life in the late 20th century. Only recently in the decade since he passed are we coming to terms with the larger, transcendent humanity of Barnes' artistic achievement.

Vertical in orientation and intimate in scale, *Lay Up*, 1970 depicts a gravity defying figure, representative of the distinctive vision for which Barnes is so revered. Painted in Barnes' self-described *Neo-Mannerist* style, an approach to representation inspired by the dramatic distortions of the late Renaissance *Mannerists* as well as his own life experience as a professional athlete, *Lay Up* evocatively captures a thrilling moment of physical grace. "Being an athlete helped me to formulate an analysis of movement, ... And movement is what I wanted to capture on canvas" (Adam Bradley, *Millions Saw his Paintings on TV. In the Art World, His Work Still Went Unnoticed.*, New York Times Online, September 15, 2023)

Lay Up is a premiere example of an important variation on a theme

Barnes returned to throughout the 1970's and 1980's, a basketball narrative featuring a slender, solitary black youth; barefoot, dressed in faded denim and a simple white tee, practicing the fundamentals of the sport. The setting is rural, non-specific to an exact time or place but most assuredly conjured from the artist's memory of his rural North Carolina youth. The court, an improvised earthen field, the goal an ingeniously contrived peach-basket hoop, mounted on a weathered board affixed to an impossibly tall wooden pole. In *Lay Up*, the youth leaps and twists skyward toward the basket, soaring above a low horizon, over a weathered clapboard house. His elongated limbs stretched high against a pale sky as the basketball rolls from his fingertips, and hangs midair, a moment before dropping into the basket.

There is strong poetry to the scene, revelatory of an essential magic of Barnes' artistic achievement; one that contains an affirming delight in movement and the physicality of being but tempered by a searching sense of reality. Barnes' development of an artistic perspective grounded in physicality resonates as a realized personal truth. There is much more thought to his project, an almost sacred-art task, searching for a truthful bearing of witness. As Thomas Merton wrote, "the integrity of an artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it."

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Born in Durham, North Carolina in 1938, Ernest Eugene Barnes Jr. was raised and educated in the segregated south. In his memoir *From Pads to Palette*, he graciously acknowledges the critical moments of community and adult guidance that nurtured his interest in art and taught him to appreciate the discipline of sport which was so essential to his career. Barnes studied art at what is now the North Carolina Central University on a full athletic scholarship. Drafted into the NFL, he played professional football for over half a decade before turning full-time to painting. While his athleticism deeply informed the development of his art, the novelty of his career trajectory (professional football player to fine artist), compelled him to forge his own artistic path, which he did with remarkable courage and success.

Lay Up was included in the highly regarded exhibition *Liberating Humanity from Within* which Ernie Barnes helped plan and curate and was posthumously realized in 2020 at the UTA Artist Space in Los Angeles. Important surveys of his work include *Ernie Barnes: A Retrospective* California African American Museum in Los Angeles 2019 and *The North Carolina Roots of Artist Ernie Barnes* at The North Carolina Museum of History in 2018 – 2019. Noted public collections in which Ernie Barnes artworks can be found include *The Sugar Shack* at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, and *My Miss America* at the California African American Museum, Los Angeles.



Ernie Barnes, *The Sugar Shack*, 1976, the Houston Museum of Fine Arts



Ernie Barnes, *My Miss America*, 1970, the California African American Museum, Los Angeles