

Essay: Frederick Hammersley
Catalogue of exhibition
Artists Space, New York
Merle Schipper, 4/20/87

In Fred Hammersley's abstract painting organic and geometric do not exist as polarities, nor do they flourish side by side. Appearing in cycles--black-and-white similarly alternating with color; right angled configurations with oblique--each nourishes and supports the other as it emerges in turn. Over a career that has been in stride for more than thirty-five years, Hammersley's work asserts the spirit of inquiry and appetite for discovery through exploring captured in a course of work in which fluid transitions are expressed with ease and naturalness, from one to the other with ease and elegance, authority and authenticity.

This is demonstrated by the two groups of work in the exhibition at Artists Space, the large geometrics, 1973-1981 and the small-scale organics, 1984-1986. Yet, Hammersley's identity as a *hard-edge* painter, achieved with work like the polished, rectilinear *Hide & speak #12* (1973), might seem to be undermined by the series beginning with *Pride #5* (1984). In the latter, a complex image of brush-textured forms veers away from the regularity, although it evolved, paradoxically, from that source.

The small paintings, none of which measure over 12 inches in length or width, have their basis in the same grid structure underlying the earlier, larger canvases, but precise order is overtaken in the latter by an intuitive venturing out of geometry's bounds. The cursive elements of *First born #1* (1986), mirror the seed that is their origin, enriching the work with implications of figure and landscape. Indeed, the very recent *Chorus* (1986), continues to subvert a basic grid, with sensuously hued, freely conceived images of a dream landscape.

Adventure beckons Hammersley's palette no less than his shapes, revealing the joy found in potent, evocative hues, whether resonating in a swirl of blues and browns on *Rhyming #12* (1986), or the swab of orange on the purple swelling on *Nerve #18* (1986). Hammersley's is an unfailing eye for harmony, and more, in the magic that he creates with color through his innate *knowing*. "If you mix a color and it feels like there's a light inside then that's the right one."

Hammersley's mastery of visual phenomenon that won him a place in MOMA's *Responsive Eye* exhibition in 1965 carries on here from the alternating shape and field that occurs between the broad plane of white and the black and red bars of *Hide & speak #12* (1973)--typical of provocative truth-in-wit titles, discovered through free association--to the radiating energy of ochre and brown of *2 for one #6* (1986), with images performing a similar exchange. The latter work also reveals his unnerving capacity for endowing even neutral tones with the richness of

3

chromatic hues, asserted earlier by the "army-blanket" brown that warms the field of *Company Policy* (1980), visually compelling for the dynamic tension of its red triangles; at one moment flat at the surface, at another, stretching back into illusional depth.

The curvilinear shapes of the more recent painting did not emerge unprecedented, but recapture the freeflowing spontaneity of Hammersley's early "hunch" paintings, a series which came about in 1950 to mark the beginning of his career as a hard-edge painter. A protégé of Rico Lebrun, the figurative expressionist who was the leading figure in the southern California art scene of the 1940s and early 1950s, Hammersley was abstracting from still lifes and self-portraits when he emerged from Jepson Art Institute in 1950. It was then that he found his direction, when, beginning a self-portrait for which he had divided the canvas into sixteen rectangular units, he painted a blue shape that appeared in his mind's eye, following it with others in similarly intuited hues, then completing the series. "The whole thing came without thinking, and I thought if I could paint without thinking, then that's for me, and so for this whole period, "hunch" paintings were done just on hunch; no drawing, no preconceived notion."¹

The "hunch" paintings, executed with a palette knife for a variety of surface textures, evolved to works employing more precise geometry, dominated by circles and rectangles, as surfaces smoothed to a strokeless polish in the later 1950s, a .

¹ This and all following quotations were stated in an interview with author, Albuquerque, N.M. April 17, 1987.

time Abstract Expressionism was making inroads into the conservative artistic climate of Los Angeles. Hammersley was then one of a rare breed; artists untouched by that impact but painting in a radical departure from prevailing styles. Working in relative isolation and unbeknownst to one another, four of those painters made history in 1959. That occurred with the exhibition *Four Abstract Classicists* organized by the Los Angeles County Museum. Joining with Hammersley were a younger colleague, Karl Benjamin, and two older artists, the already distinguished Lorser Feitelson and the yet unrecognized John McLaughlin, whose reputation as a master would be bestowed only after his death. Their work proclaimed a new, original and vital contribution to the course of modernism and the concept of *hard-edge*, the term which the critic Jules Langsner coined and defined in the catalogue essay for the exhibition

....Abstract Classicist painting is hard-edge painting. Forms are finite, flat, rimmed by a hard clean edge. These forms are not intended to evoke in the spectator any recollections of specific shapes he may have encountered in some other connection. they are autonomous shapes, sufficient unto themselves as shapes.²

² See Langsner, Introduction to catalogue, *Four Abstract Classicists*, (Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles County Museum and San Francisco Museum of Art, 1959). The exhibition opened at the San Francisco Museum of Art, July, 1959, Los Angeles County Museum, September, 1959.

Hammersley abandoned circles in his work soon afterward, but pure, unblemished surface of precisely angled geometry continued, in a continuing evolution in which transitions might be accomplished with ease and fluidity within a single year. That occurred in 1979. First, right angled frontality of the vibrant *Cleave #2* (1979), gave way to the dramatic illusional depth in oblique configurations based on nine-unit grids. Then, the restrained white, black and pale yellow of *Buy Itself #9* (1979) emerged, frontality overtaking the three-dimensional illusion marked by the sensuous purple and mysterious black of *Like as not #8*.

Since moving to Albuquerque in 1968 where he taught for three years at the University of New Mexico, Hammersley's choice of remaining somewhat apart from the mainstream in an unpressured environment has undoubtedly contributed to the unconstraint and latitude demonstrated by his work. He starts each painting by "thinking out loud" in the form of 1½-inch color drawings, freely conceived shape/color configurations in a notebook. "If it's a good one, I put it in another book to scale and paint it with oil colors." In the latter, they are executed at about twice the size of the first, the second book serving admirably to document the final work executed on canvas. Indeed, the just-right hue does not come instantly, but occurs over a period of trial and error: a number attached to each title suggests the artist keeps count of the trials undertaken. He explained his process of finding his harmonies.

I mix the color and I go farther than I want it, and then I get too short. I knew when I was getting loose when the color was not bad but I knew that when I put that color there all the others would be not good enough, so I worked until I got that color, and it was right. That would breed the next color and that would be good because it would be in relationship to it.

Although the change from geometric to organic configurations was not abrupt, the reduction of scale occurred accidentally. Feeling some discomfort about transferring the images in his notebook to his customary scale, the discovery of some small slabs of birch, as ideal surfaces for such ideas that were already "little paintings." Then, experiencing a visit to an exhibition "drawings the size of your face," by Leonardo, he was convinced of the way to go for the intimate confrontation the new works invited.

Hammersley's explorative spirit finds its fullest release in drawing. A foray into computer graphics executed during his teaching sojourn, marking him as a pioneer in that field, were exhibited internationally. but he has found that freehand gestural sketches both liberates his spirit and enriches the painting. Elegantly contoured figure drawings executed after the model "open the gate" to unleash inner stirrings, while

spontaneous automatist drawings in which strange mysterious heads emerge, put him in touch with his unconscious.

Hammersley's work offers a presence that rewards the viewer with a rich experience even within miniscule size. His paintings, both geometric and organic, are themselves organisms in growth, flowing from the rewards of a tireless search for visual form that mirrors mirrors a spirit always looking to the future in joyous anticipation. Indeed, it is youth that permeates Hammersley's painting, youth that is undiminished in its promise with ideas still to reward the viewer who will share in the artist's joy.