

← Back to Original Article

ART & ARCHITECTURE

## His Specialty: One-Liners

*Frederick Hammersley's drolly abstract pairings of pictures with words have made him an L.A. legend, despite spending the last 30 years in New Mexico.*

August 22, 1999 | HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

Frederick Hammersley has lived in Albuquerque since 1968, but he is still considered one of L.A.'s four Abstract Classicists, along with painters Karl Benjamin, the late Lorser Feitelson and the late John McLaughlin. All are recognized today for breaking ground in their decision to practice hard-edge geometric abstraction in the late '50s, when many painters were still in the thrall of the Abstract Expressionists' brushy moves.

Hammersley seems to consider himself almost forgotten by his former hometown. When called to arrange an interview for The Times, he responded, "How completely unexpected!"

Yet, it isn't so unexpected. His work has been exhibited consistently since the 1950s, and last spring he was the subject of a small survey organized by Santa Fe's Museum of Fine Arts, now on view at the art museum of the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, through Sept. 5.

Joseph Traugott, curator of 20th century art at the Museum of Fine Arts, titled the show "Visual Puns and Hard Edge Poems," because, as he notes in the catalog, the artist "systematically unifies visual and verbal imagery through his paintings and poems." The cross section of work from 1947 to the present includes figure studies, hard-edge and biomorphic abstract paintings, lithographs and photographs, with the titles acting as one-line poems.

Hammersley titles even the most reductive compositions according to a process of free association. A stunning 1972 canvas of white and black rectangles is titled "You're Just Like Your Mother, #6"; a lovely little 1988 oil of curving shapes in lime, turquoise and red is called "Peter Pays Paul." Hammersley keeps a notebook filled with lists of words from which the titles are drawn, and he drolly admits that his abstract compositions are "the worst kind of paintings to show the American layperson." With the titles, he adds, "it's like I'm giving them an opening wedge to get into the painting."

Responding to the quirky titles and the unpredictable paintings, critic Malin Wilson-Powell wrote in Journal North, "Hammersley's work disarms me with its complex combination of elegance and funk, work-a-day practicality and whimsy, game theory and intuition."

Hammersley, 80, remains a confirmed bachelor and lives in a small adobe in a verdant neighborhood of Albuquerque. He has painted each room of the house a different color, with the kitchen receiving a special treatment: pale blue with white clouds. The bathroom is wallpapered with his own black-and-white checkerboard silk screens. Each room is a gallery devoted to his paintings, drawings and photographs ranging from his years as an art student in L.A. to the present.

"My favorite indoor sport is looking," he quips. "I enjoy looking at things. Rearranging them."

In his home gallery, he gives nearly equal weight to his father's photographs, also framed and hanging on the wall, including a snap of young Hammersley and his sister atop an elephant at the London Zoo. The only elaborate furniture in the house is an Italianate secretary bearing a blue porcelain clock inherited from his Swedish mother and English father, who met on an ocean liner coming to the United States.

Hammersley has a hawkish profile, hooded hazel eyes and a wittiness that betrays his British heritage. Comfortably turned out in tennis shirt and denim shorts, he offers a visitor a glass of sherry before settling on a sofa and explaining his circuitous route to New Mexico.

Hammersley's father worked for the U.S. Department of the Interior, a position that brought him to Salt Lake City, where Frederick Hammersley was born in 1919. The family was transferred to Idaho and back to Salt Lake City before being transferred, once more, to San Francisco, where Hammersley first studied art. His 1937 study of a boat on choppy water, from that era, hangs in the living room next to a geometric study of royal blue and black.

In 1940, he moved to L.A. to study commercial art at Chouinard Art Institute (now CalArts) but soon switched to fine art. The \$99 bequeathed by his grandfather only slightly eased the burden of \$350 tuition.

He lived in a boarding house on Rampart and 7th Street for \$35 a month and recalls, "It was the happiest time of my life.

"There was only one freeway, from Pasadena. It was so exciting taking that road from one city to another. We used to go there to paint."

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Hammersley was taught to draw by "teachers like Lawrence Murphy and Herbert Jepson. Sketching was considered to be something like knitting. You could do it, but it didn't really mean anything."

Drafted into the Army in 1942, he was stationed as a sergeant in Paris. "That was marvelous for me, really. One day, the USO posted a sign offering trips to Picasso's studio. I went with three other GIs and a French woman. We couldn't speak to him much, so he went out on his balcony and brought in one of his doves to show us. I took pictures of his dog, and I was very impressed by the cow skin he had on his bed."

Hammersley returned four more times to Picasso's studio, absorbing what he saw. When he came home to L.A. in 1946, the GI Bill of Rights subsidized his studies at Chouinard for a year, then at Jepson Art School from 1947 to 1950. "There were a lot of GIs there and during the coffee break, they'd all argue about drawing and painting, never about girls or sports."

In 1953, he was asked to teach at Pomona College for the princely sum of \$7.50 an hour. He exults, "I thought it was heaven!" He soon met fellow teacher Benjamin, who saw his work in a faculty show and said, "You paint like I do. Hard-edge. We should have a show."

"The term 'hard-edge' was invented by Karl Benjamin," Hammersley insists, "though many critics have tried to take credit for it."

It was also Benjamin who got Feitelson and McLaughlin, two of the other geometric abstractionists in town, to join the show, and involved British critic Jules Langsner as curator. Langsner named the 1959 show "Four Abstract Classicists." Initially, Hammersley protested, "Jules, that's too polysyllabic. How about

hard-edge?" Langsner answered that it was not sufficiently descriptive.

After opening at the San Francisco Museum of Art, the show traveled to the L.A. County Museum of Art, the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and Queen's University in Belfast, Ireland.

Peter Walch, director of the University of New Mexico art museum, writes in the Hammersley catalog, "For perhaps the first time, Los Angeles artists had stolen a march on their New York contemporaries: Minimalism (or Post-Painterly Abstraction) only came to be recognized in New York in the period 1963-65. . . . Hammersley is in the history books as one . . . who [supposedly] paved the way for the slicker, more polished L.A. Look of the late '60s."

Hammersley calls his work "hunch paintings," because he allows his intuition to determine the choice of shape and color, though he methodically executes them first in a notebook, then as a small work on paper, finally as a full-scale painting. This serial approach to abstraction has characterized his painting since he dismantled a 1947 still life into a collection of simple, though related, geometric forms.

"I never liked Mondrian. What a bore!" Hammersley says. "I didn't understand until I saw a McLaughlin painting that worked. It just shocked me!"

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After "Four Abstract Classicists," Hammersley's career soared, with shows at L.A.'s Heritage Gallery and various museums. One day in 1968, he went into the studio but found that he had nothing to say. "I'd used up my fund," he says. In distress, he went to Dana Point to visit his friend McLaughlin and asked, "John, do you ever feel like you don't want to paint?"

"Sure," replied the painter.

Encouraged, Hammersley asked, "How long does it last?"

"Oh, two or three days sometimes."

Shaking his head, Hammersley recalls, "Well, I got the hell out of there fast."

Around that time, he was offered a teaching position at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. "It was the best thing for me," he says. "There was nothing here. No galleries, no museums."

For a year, Hammersley used a computer to generate geometric patterns and kick-start his return to painting.

"I didn't know that there were cycles," he says. "It's a painting principle that there is something and then there is nothing. It's natural."

When he was asked to take on the responsibilities of a full-time professor in 1971, he quit teaching. "The paperwork, the committees! I wanted to paint. I consider the '70s one of my best periods for painting."

By 1981, painting once more seemed a chore. He devoted a couple of years to gardening and taking life-drawing classes at the university. To his surprise, after

decades of painting geometric patterns with a palette knife, he picked up a brush and began painting loopy, organic forms. "The most remarkable thing is to draw something you've never seen before, but you understand it. I try to let my paintings happen," he says. Pointing to his temple, he adds, "I turn this department off and make these marks."

These small paintings have been his focus for the last 15 years, with periodic returns to the geometric compositions. For example, hanging over Hammersley's fireplace is a recent vibrant lime and lavender cross titled "Joan of Arc." With its irreverent colors and simple design, it could fit happily into any of the recent exhibitions devoted to the eye-candy painting of twentysomethings. Does it signal a final decision to return to geometric abstraction?

"There is no decision," he says. "It's like a cafeteria. I think, I'll have Jello this time. I just play it by hunch. The Hammersley tradition is this way, but I like to go into left field."

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Keeping his options open, he says, is his way of staying on course.

He tells a defining story from his teaching days at Chouinard. "Do you know what discipline means?" a girl asked him.

"Well, I associated discipline with punishment, with the Army," the artist recalls. "She said, 'Mr. Hammersley, discipline means to be the disciple of.'"

"Oh, I think that is lovely. That turns everything upside down. I am a disciple of painting, gardening and cooking."

With that, Hammersley offers a tour of his garden overgrown with lettuces, melons, tomatoes and corn. He picks a couple of zucchini, offering them with these simple instructions: "You just steam and eat them. It's like taking a bite out of baby's arm!" \*

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"VISUAL PUNS AND HARD EDGE POEMS: WORKS BY FREDERICK HAMMERSLEY," University Art Museum, University of New Mexico Center for the Arts, Albuquerque. Dates: Through Sept. 5. Hours, Tuesdays-Fridays, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Tuesday evenings, 5-8 p.m.; Sundays, 1-4 p.m. Price: Free. Phone: (505) 277-4001.