

BIGGER BEDROOMS

ORGANIC AND GEOMETRIC

In 1987, there was a show of Frederick Hammersley's paintings at Artists Space, then located at 223 West Broadway. I had heard about Hammersley's more recent organic paintings and had probably seen a few reproductions, but this show was the first time I saw his newer paintings in person. Their small sizes, handmade frames and suggestive forms reminded me of the paintings of Forrest Bess, a painter from Bay City, Texas. How had the precise geometric painter, whose work I knew from his time in California, turned into such a different painter after his move to New Mexico?



To find out more, and perhaps to learn a little of what Hammersley was like as a person, I attended a talk he gave one afternoon during the show. A few folding chairs and a screen had been set up just past the entry desk. As I remember it, in the darkened half-light



of this awkward hallway space, Hammersley himself projected slides from a carousel. Kind and dignified at 67, beautifully dressed, he seemed unconcerned that only three of us had come to hear him speak. Lawrence Markey, whom I met then for the first time, asked good questions. Hammersley was clear, concise and articulate.

Although parts of my notes are mysterious to me now, I've included below everything I wrote down on a half sheet of paper during the talk. I've only added a few words in parenthesis to clarify what I now think he meant after reading other interviews and statements. I hope these notes give a flavor of Hammersley's epigrammatic style.¹

What is the most important tool?

7 tools (for the painter).

Shape and value most important.

Forest Lawn – as lights change.

Hunch Paintings.²

McFee: "Build a painting." "Every part must be alive."³

Landscape and Degas.

Very puzzled what function the mind has.

Value and color?

Joke: 2 for 1.

Color to part of the body: Black and white to other place.

Color intuition.

(Painting) turned to the wall.

Painting: no resistance to the eye.

Intuition and time interval.

In his talk, Hammersley spoke of the formal means he used and the psychology of his working process. I found his phrases coming back to me as I wrote this essay.

ABSTRACT CLASSICISTS

When he gave his talk, I knew of Hammersley's paintings primarily in relation to the work of the other painters with whom he had been grouped early on: John McLaughlin, Karl Benjamin and Lorser Feitelson. The show that brought these artists together in 1959, "Four Abstract Classicists," was organized by the critic Jules Langsner and began its tour at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It went on to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and two additional venues in Europe. Helen Lundeborg and June Harwood, two other painters from California, could have been included in this show but were not. When I think of the "Abstract Classicists" now, I include their work.⁴

My interest in this group of artists began about the same time as this show, when my family visited my Aunt Rosemary and Uncle O.P. Reed in their rented bungalow on the beach in Malibu. My sister, Pamela, and I swam and hung out on the beach with our cousins. A black and white painting by McLaughlin was stacked with other paintings behind a bunk bed in the guest bedroom where my sister and I stayed. The painting mystified my parents. This, of course, made me, a pre-teen, especially interested.

When I began to study painting, it was hard to find information about the work of McLaughlin and the other Abstract Classicists. I searched for catalogues and articles, and I later checked out any shows or individual paintings that I could find. When I thought of the Abstract Classicists as a group, I always wondered who was the best. At first, for me, it was McLaughlin. I thought he was the most serious and experimental. But my view of who was the best would shift over the years. In the early '90s, when Karl Benjamin's work began to appear again, I saw some shows in Los Angeles, and his early work was a revelation to me. For a time, he became my favorite. The period-style color and referential form that had before made his work look less serious, even kitschy, suddenly seemed prescient, filled with meaning, and related to many later developments in California painting. Now,

knowing more about all these painters and able to look back over time, I see them as very different, with each as having his or her own unique strengths. I now feel I was foolish to ever think that one was better than the others. Los Angeles will have an artistic history and a visual culture when one of its museums has a series of rooms with a permanent installation of paintings by these artists. Such an installation would allow for comparisons and changing opinions. Together, their work stays alive.

HUMOR AND EMBODIED SURFACES

It wasn't until 1999, long after the show at Artists Space and after I saw several important shows at L.A. Louver Gallery in Santa Monica, that I finally saw a full retrospective of Hammersley: "Visual Puns and Hard-Edge Poems" at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. When I saw this show, I was finally able to have a more complete understanding of Hammersley's work. I appreciated his wit and humor. His humor is unusual in that it is always playful and generously open. It is so natural that at first I took it for granted and did not realize its importance. One could say that in some ways



it is a touch ironic, but it is never bitter or angry. I first became conscious of this humor through the puns and word play of his titles: "Savoir pair," "In two the fray," "Ebb tied," "Small change," "Knew to me," "Savings and loan." Many of his titles are verbal puns, but there is more to the humor. Often there is a connection between the meaning of the title and the forms in that particular painting (a verbal to visual pun). **Joke: 2 for 1.** In "Savings and loan," for example, one form seems to escape the others. Or in "Ebb tied," two forms, the black on the top and the white on the bottom of the painting, are mirrored and slide apart to reveal a uniting and inclusive shape between them. It is remarkable to me how well these two kinds of puns match in each painting. The pleasurable mental flip that one experiences as one understands the puns in the titles is like the mental flips that occur as one sees the paintings seem to change, both visually and in meaning,

as they are viewed. At first, the black forms in “Altered ego” seem to be the positive forms, then the black form on the top and after it the bottom black square become negative forms, making the white vertical shape a positive form and thrusting it upward. I find this a surprising movement every time I see it. Which is the positive and which is the negative shape in “Me and thee,” the green or the orange? It keeps changing back and forth. **Very puzzled what function the mind has.**

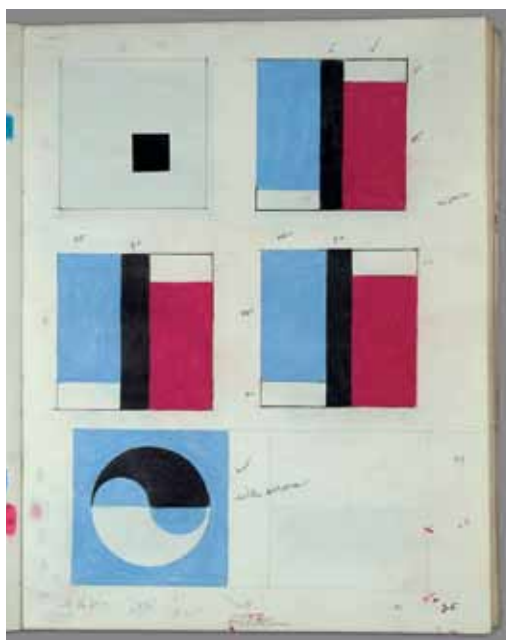
Hammersley preserved the sheets of paper he used to free-associate and find his titles. On the sheet with “Adam and Eve” circled, there are several rejected alternatives. In descending order above “Adam and Eve,” the rejected titles are “Two,” “Bio,” “Cliché,” “Old hat” and “Matchmaker.” He was thinking about couples, but he worried about conventional meanings. In this painting, the pale blue and red colors on the opposite sides of the central black band look like a color-coded gender pun to me. These two colors do not stay in place. Unstable, they keep trying to move around the central black column because of the white slots at the upper right and the bottom left of the painting. On the sketchbook on one page, there are three images in which Hammersley tries out various widths for the central band. He chose the width that caused this unstable movement. The “Adam and Eve” of the title could be a description of two characters, male and female, in an abstracted narrative, or this title could describe the painting’s relation to a viewer’s body. The color-coding could also imply that different aspects of gender are interacting within each of us. We don’t interact with the black and white of this painting as we do with the colors. The black and white forms are there to make the color move, to keep us from a comfortable identification. The surface of this painting is unusually hard and enamel-like, increasing this effect. **Color to part of the body: Black and white to other place.**

Hammersley usually applied paint to the geometric paintings in multiple layers with a painting knife, scrapping and then repainting until the surfaces

have a hard/soft, solid/absorbent quality that makes the color seem especially embodied and physical. He does not use tape. Instead, the edges are hand painted up to a pencil line that can sometimes still be barely seen. The organics are painted with brushes, and in them it is easier to see the different densities of paint. The way he paints the surfaces and his witty play with forms make his geometric and organic paintings especially sensual. He signs both kinds of paintings in the same way, by scratching his name carefully in script into the still wet paint. His paintings are embodied and fully human.

Now, I see Hammersley’s geometric and organic paintings as more similar than different, but his work did

not go through the usual slow and continuing development of a singular modernist style. A number of other artists as varied as Jo Baer, Lee Lozano and Philip Guston also had breaks and splits in their work as they reacted to pressures at the end of Modernism. The modernist goal of developing a consistent style seemed to them more and more prescriptive, even confining. They had to break out. What gap there is between the geometrics and the organics for Hammersley is a healing separation. **Intuition and time interval.**



WESTERN LIGHT: CONTRACHROME

Hammersley’s paintings have a very specific relation to the harsh light of the American West. (This includes both the light in Los Angeles, where he began painting, and in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he later lived.) In the Western landscape, there are strong contrasts of light and dark. Hue is always there because of the powerful blue of the sky, but the hues in the rest of the landscape, both natural and man-made, are often barely visible in the dark shadows and sun-blasted highlights. Desperate to hide the cruel reality of this environment, much of the architecture and decoration in the West attempts to apply pale but strong hues to camouflage reality. **Forest Lawn – as lights change.** Experiencing this harsh light led Hammersley to

structure many of his paintings around a separation of hue from value, color from black and white.⁵

Hammersley often makes paintings in which there are one or two hues in combination with black and white. He does this in both the geometric and organic paintings.

Value and color? It is one of the strongest formal links between these seemingly different categories. In the organic paintings “Self starter” and “Just so” and the geometric paintings “I agree” and “Adam and Eve,” for example, the contrasts between black and white and hue match almost exactly. The forms are very different, but the color structure is the same. **Shape and value most important.** Hammersley often uses red as the only strong hue in a painting along with black and white.⁶

The relation between hue and value works in a very different way in Abstract Expressionist painting. Barnett Newman, for example, seldom uses black and white together with a hue. Sometimes, he will use white or black alone with several hues but very seldom does he use both. Instead, to create a range of value, he often uses several variations of a hue, for example, different blues, of different values, together: ultramarine and cobalt blue, or cobalt blue and cerulean. In this way, he can expand color possibilities away from the monochrome. I think of this color strategy as multichrome. Instead, Hammersley separates value from hue, contrasting black and white with hue. I think of this color strategy, also used by other Abstract Classicists, as contrachrome.

The goal of multichrome is often an integration of the body, our physicality, with the environment: Value and hue are treated together. The strategy of contrachrome reflects a more anxious relation to our body and to our place in the environment. **Color intuition.** From a 1984 catalogue statement by Hammersley: “It seems that black and white evokes a response in the intellect, then the emotions. Color evokes a response first to the emotions, then the intellect.... The painter ... must engage the whole of himself to produce a meaningful work.”⁷ Because of the use of contrachrome in Hammersley’s

paintings, we experience the contradictions of being both a part of and apart from the world, with feelings of both belonging and discomfort.

BEDROOMS AND HOMES

Hammersley developed his ideas about painting in a place and at a time when there was a strong relation of painting to the larger culture. Elizabeth Armstrong’s exhibition “Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury” at the Orange County Museum of Art in 2008 put Hammersley and the other Abstract Classicists within this larger cultural context, which included music, television and film ani-

mation, as well as architecture and design. I was especially struck by one of the rooms, in which design and painting were combined. The room seemed so right, so familiar. Growing up in San Diego, in a modernist home, I experienced a sense, common in those postwar years, that the most progressive culture, including architecture and painting, could be a part of our middle class lives. Ordinary people with aspirations could live with art of the highest level. Nicholas Wilder, a painter friend in New York who had earlier been a gallerist in Los Angeles and represented



John McLaughlin, introduced me to the phrase “bedroom painter.” He said that often people who bought paintings by McLaughlin hung them first in their living rooms and then moved them to their bedrooms where they could live with them more intimately. As soon as Nick used that phrase, “bedroom painting,” I knew that that was my ambition in life. I know now that growing up when and where I did is why I have this desire.

Hammersley’s house in Albuquerque has been thoroughly documented through photographs. While looking at photographs of the interior, I was struck by how strong the light is that comes in through the windows. There is a great contrast between the strength of this light and the shadowy interior. The photographer had to try different exposures to figure out how to make his images. He could either underexpose to capture the way

the light looked coming through the windows, leaving objects in the interior barely visible, or overexpose to make objects visible in the rooms, leaving the windows blasted out with light. Our eyes automatically adjust for these extremes, but photography can't show us how it really looks. Painting has a chance to portray this relationship in a way that photography cannot. We can see both the strongest contrast possible between black against white, as well as hues, in the same painting. Abstract painting can make a world that is more realistic to our experience of Western light than what can be captured in a photograph. **Painting: no resistance to the eye.**

In the photographs, one sees how the rooms are organized and functional, but comfortable: Hanging from the inside of a doorjamb on the inner surface of a doorframe between two rooms are a brush and a bag. The bag must be a toy for his cat. Perhaps the brush is also. His brushes and tools hang on the sawhorses that support the table in his studio. Art is everywhere. It is to be lived with, a constant inspiration for thought and enjoyment. Examples of his own work are mixed together, emphasizing continuity: Early and

late abstract paintings, prints and drawings are mixed with self-portraits, and figurative drawings and cubist still lifes. In one of the photographs, a book on a table stand shows a reproduction of a painting by Chiam Soutine. In the photograph of his bedroom, I think I can see on the wall opposite the bed the etching by Rembrandt that Hammersley owned. Hammersley often placed postcards and prints of old master paintings on the walls.⁸ There is a Native American weaving covering the door to the bedroom and a pair of owl vases by Picasso on a table. He also collected paintings by his teachers and colleagues. It's clear that Hammersley saw his paintings as a part of the larger culture around him. **Landscape and Degas.**

Beneath the coffee table in the living room is a Navajo rug that relates in an uncanny way to the forms and colors of his painting "One," which hangs over the

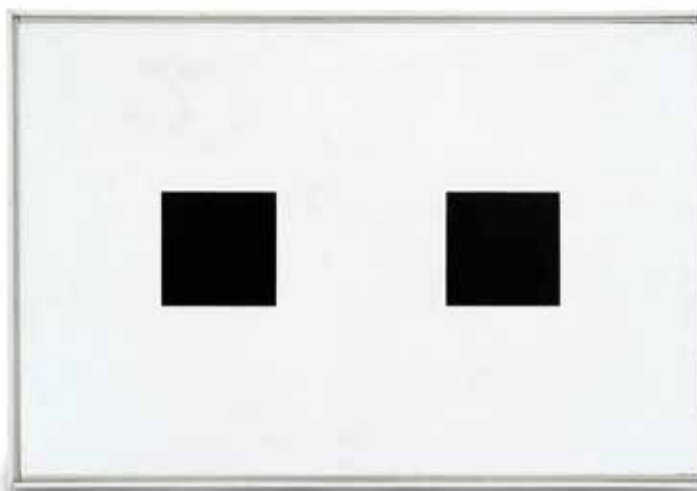
fireplace. The title of this painting is another of his jokes. This painting has an unusually simple structure. There are two black six-inch squares on a white background: two, not one. The two squares are lined up in a horizontal band, nine inches from the top and bottom of the canvas. This same distance, nine inches, is also the distance between the squares. The distance between the outside of the squares and the edges of the canvas is an off-measurement of seven and a half inches. Because of this unusual spacing towards the side of the canvas, the squares seem unstable, ready to slide together or apart. If they each slide together a distance of one and a half inches, they would be six inches, one square apart, and the distance to the sides of the canvas would then be nine inches, the distance to the top and bottom of the

canvas. If they were to slide apart one and a half inches they would then be, twelve inches, two even squares apart. And the distance from the squares to the edge of the canvas would be the width of one square. Sliding this distance of one and a half inches in either direction would situate the squares onto a six-inch grid and make the squares stable. The tension

one feels because the squares are away from the six-inch grid cause the squares to fluctuate in their location, ready to move at the same time, together or apart, if given the chance. This is why these two squares seem like one unit. Along with the joke about "One" being really two, there is another pun in the title. The squares want to move into place on the grid implying all the other possibilities Hammersley would find with various moves within the grid in other paintings. This painting feels like the original "one," the painting in which Hammersley demonstrates how he could generate all the others. It is appropriate that this painting has the place of honor at the center of his house. Abstract painters from Kasimir Malevich to Blinky Palermo have had similar feelings about the generative power of the black square. Hammersley doubles this black square and then demon-



strates this belief. The setting is domestic, but the painting is generative, looking outside of itself, looking to multiply. David Pagel, writing about the influence of Hammersley on a younger generation of California artists, says that Hammersley's "... shapes scream, sing, and stamp themselves out in the shared social space of the visible world."⁹ "One" demonstrates this. **Joke: 2 for 1.**



Describing the difference between Abstract Expressionists and Abstract Classicists, Dave Hickey writes that the work of the Abstract Classicists "is more theater than drama." "Thus, if an Abstract Expressionist painting may be considered an 'icon of the self,' hard-edge paintings propose themselves as 'icons of the other.'" Hickey continues, using the same phrase I heard from Nicholas Wilder: "John McLaughlin called this kind of painting 'bedroom painting,' which he defined as an order of objects designed to be as intimate, opaque and unattainable as the ones we love, painting to be lived with in the flow of things rather than looked at on high-art occasions."¹⁰ Hammersley's paintings began in his domestic environment, but they long to act out their theatrics on other stages, through other viewers in private and public. A bedroom is intimate, but it is also where one can connect to the world. As they say, all changes begin in the bedroom.

David Reed, June 30, 2011, New York City

1. Hammersley's teaching notes have been included recently in an exhibition: "Lists, To-dos, Illustrated Inventories, Collected Thoughts and Other Artists' Enumerations from the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art," curated by Liza Kirwin, Lawrence A. Fleischman Gallery, Washington D.C., Feb. 5 - Sept. 27, 2010, traveled to: Morgan Library and Museum, New York, June 3 - Oct. 2, 2011. I'm relieved to see that his notations in their brevity resemble my notes. I have written out all of my notes as they were with the addition of two words in parenthesis to show that he was referring to painting.
2. This is the term Hammersley used for some of his paintings – especially those of a certain type done between 1950 and 1965.

3. Henry Lee McFee (1886-1953) was a painter of modernist still-lives, and he was Hammersley's teacher at the Chouinard Art Institute in 1940-41.

4. Helen Lundeborg's paintings are more figurative, but to me this brings out the strong relation to the California landscape and the sense of Western light in all of their work. June Harwood's paintings, especially the later ones, are less "hard edge" than those of the other painters, but to me this demonstrates how their common concerns could be developed in a more painterly vocabulary.

5. Karl Benjamin uses separation between black and white and hue less often in his paintings, but he often uses a particular magenta that I feel is the color of the after-image on the inside of one's eyes when they are closed in bright sunlight.
6. John McLaughlin most often uses blue alone with black and white.
7. From catalogue for "Poles a Part: An Exhibit of Black and White Paintings," March-April 1984, Hoshour Gallery, Albuquerque.
8. Communication in email forwarded from Kathleen Shields, Executive Director & President of the Frederick Hammersley Foundation, June 15, 2011.
9. David Pagel, "Catching Up With Frederick Hammersley," *Frederick Hammersley*, ed. Sarah S. King with Diane Armitage, Publication of Art Santa Fe Presents (Santa Fe, N.M.: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2009), p. 131.
10. Dave Hickey, "Frederick Hammersley: Painter," *Frederick Hammersley*, ed. Sarah S. King with Diane Armitage, Publication of Art Santa Fe Presents (Santa Fe, N.M.: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2009), pp 24-25.



Born in San Diego in 1946, David Reed studied at the New York Studio School and moved to Lower Manhattan in 1971, where he continues to live and work. His recent exhibitions have been at Peder Lund in Oslo (along with photographs by William Eggleston) and Galerie Schmidt-Maccollek in Cologne. Recent publications include *Rock Paper Scissors*, (Kienbaum Artists' Books), 2009.