THE HARD-EDGE SIGN

Employing flat color and geometric form, hard-edge painters developed an abundance of styles and a rich, if restrictive, esthetic whose legacy is still felt today.

by Stephen Westfall

THE TERM "HARD-EDGE" was probably coined in the late 1950s by Jules Langsner, then a Los Angeles Times art critic, in reference to highly finished, flatly rendered, mostly geometric paintings by Karl Benjamin, Fred Hammersley, John McLaughlin, Lionel Feinelson and Helen Lundeberg (who was married to Feinelson). The four male painters subsequently exhibited together in Langsner's exhibition "Four Abstract Classicists," which opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1959. (Though impeccably refined, Lundeberg's work wasn't as thoroughly abstract as the others, so it shouldn't be assumed she was excluded from this show because of gender bias.) A revised version of the exhibition, curated by Lawrence Alloway under the title "West Coast Hard-Edge," was shown in England and Ireland the following year. The term had migrated across the hemisphere and came to describe a certain look in abstraction that harked back to Mondrian, encompassed a wide range of sensibilities and represented a cool rationality in the post-Abstract-Expressionist era.

Benjamin (1925-2012) was the youngest of the original hard-edge painters, most of whom lived in or around Los Angeles (though Hammersley moved to Albuquerque in 1968). When Benjamin died last summer in Claremont, Calif., at the age of 87, it seemed like a good moment to take a fresh look at the legacy and future of hard-edge painting. For the purposes of this essay I want to consider Benjamin out of the original "Four Abstract Classicists" before moving beyond the American West to consider a range of painters whose work has employed the hard-edge sign.

Benjamin came to painting largely by accident. A native of Chicago, he moved to California after a stint in the Navy between 1943 and 1946. He graduated from the University of Redlands as an English major and had hoped to be a writer, presumably hard-boiled. In 1949, however, he found himself having to teach art as part of the general sixth-grade curriculum at the San Bernardino County school where he worked, and the task steered him in a new direction. He instructed his students to "fill up the space with pretty colors and don't mess around." Inspired by the work they produced and by modern art he encountered in magazines, books, museums and galleries in Pasadena and Los Angeles, he soon began making paintings himself. In 1952, he moved his family to the lively cultural community of Claremont. He taught at a grade school in Chino for more than two decades and eventually, in 1979, became a professor of painting at Claremont College. Living with his family in a ranch house designed by the local modernist architect Fred McDowell, and working in a studio out back, Benjamin
made hundreds of paintings that came to stand for the Los Angeles hard-edge esthetic. (How easy and pleasur-
able it is to imagine a Schindler or Neutra home with a Benjamin painting and Eames furniture.) This esthetic
was shaped in part by an embrace of the European geometric abstract painting style that would come to be
designated as seminal and inefficient by Minimalists such as Donald Judd and Frank Stella.

Languet, the L.A. Times critic, defined hard-edge painting as the fusion of shape and flat, uninflected color,
but he and the painters who touted the liberation of abstract shapes from conventions of representation were
never caught up in the absolutist drive for self-definition that Clement Greenberg, Judd and Stella had set as the
agenda of modernist painting. Benjamin represents an alternative modernist, abstract vision of plenitude. His first
flatly painted abstractions feature Miro-influenced flame shapes. His patterns then shifted repeatedly and included
right-angled geometry, diagonals, organic shapes and landscape references. He did not work toward some logical
end and sometimes doubled back to revisit earlier motifs. His colors are rich, like those in sign painting, bearing even
intensities but with the paint toned down a bit so that all hues seem to share a common light.

OLI SIHVONEN (1921-1991) was, like Benjamin, a Western hard-edge painter who came from points east: Brooklyn, in
Sihvonen’s case. He studied with Josef Albers at Black Mountain College from 1946 to 1948, and attended Taos Valley Art School
in New Mexico from 1948 to 1950. He committed himself to abstract painting in 1950 and never looked back. His work, along
with Benjamin’s, was included in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1965 Op art exhibition, “The Responsive Eye.” He moved back
to New York from Taos in 1967, prompted by a surge of interest in his work from East Coast institutions and New
York galleries, but he quarreled with his dealers and showed only sporadically after the early ’70s.

Sihvonen worked through nearly as wide a variety of compositional motifs as Benjamin did, but he didn’t revisit
them. The arc of his development runs from the simple to the complex. He made his national reputation as one of the
first hard-edge painters to come from points east: Brooklyn, New York in 1958 and three years later had a solo show at
Betty Parsons Gallery. In this exhibition, he showed a group of paintings featuring flat shapes, at once biomorphic and
emblematize-like, on canvases bolted to exposed wooden beams, which curve at the top as well as at the bottom. In subsequent
paintings, such beams were placed behind the canvas so that they tenued along its vertical or horizontal axis. With these
paintings Lukin became known as “the father of the shaped canvas.” He subsequently took the approach much further
into an abstract Pop territory, with curved panels that roll out from the wall like exaggerated tongues. The front and sides
of these protrusions are painted as unmodulated bands, and the palette is hot pastels and grays. The ribbonlike panels
can also be a black blockhead and lean in sagging loops against a corner of the gallery like a drunk against a lamppost.
By the late ’60s Lukin was flattening the forms back onto the picture plane as painted shapes, in ways that suggest coils of
ribbon seem in isometric perspective.

Two sides show in the last three years in New York, at Gary Snyder Project Space and Gary Snyder Gallery, have
helped renew interest in Lukin’s work from the 1960s and ’70s, placing it in the context of his recent paintings. Some of
these newer works utilize tree branches as stretchers for burlap. They recall Peter Young’s similar canvases from the
1970s, but Lukin configures more irregular, organic shapes with his twisted branches. Each piece of burlap is filled
with a painted color or a collection of colored shapes, though there are occasional glimpses of the raw burlap ground.

ANOTHER NEW YORK ARTIST whose work is decidedly under-recognized is Ward Jackson (1928-2004). Jackson grew
up in Virginia and, after moving to New York in 1952, studied painting with Hans Hofmann and George L.K. Morris. After
1960, influenced by Mondrian and Albers, he devoted his career to painting geometric planes in flat hues. This style
began with a striking group of diamond-shaped paintings. In most of these works, black and white shapes are organized along the supports’ horizontal and vertical axes, leading the eye to interpret cruciformity. Although a modest man, Jackson was admired by key artists. His diamond paintings were first exhibited in an important group show at New York’s Knoedler Gallery in 1964. The other participating artists included Stella, Judd, Sol LeWitt, Jo Baer and Jackson’s close friend Dan Flavin. Jackson’s career, however, was also closely aligned with the leading hard-edge esthetic featured prominently in his work. But Denny is more of a Romantic than Lukin and holds irony in abundance. In the late 1950s, while still studying at the Royal College of Art in London, he began to make paintings combining stark gesturalism and elements of collage that invoke Abstract Expressionism and the French Tachisme and Lettrisme movements. It was the Lettriste influence that appears to have been a bridge to his more geometrically ordered paintings of the 1960s and 1970s, which symmetrically position horizontal and vertical shapes resembling fragments of letters or numbers in the center of bright color fields. These configurations have an architectural feel, recalling archaic gateways. Denny was also keenly aware of Rothko, Newman and Kelly; the cool wing of postwar American painting, which he encountered in the late 1950s. You can see the incandescent mauves and grays of Rothko merging with hard-edge composition in a painting like Garden (1964–67). There is also a slightly cartoonish quality to the way that wide, colorful bands in Denny’s compositions serve not only as discrete forms but also as outlines of other, interior rectangles. In 1969, he organized an exhibition of American artist Charlie Biederman’s abstract geometric reliefs, a project that furthered his own thinking about hard-edge abstraction. Denny’s best paintings from this period are his larger canvases—as big as 8 by 6 feet—whose architectural compositions seem to envelop the viewer.

THE VISUALLY COMPELLING quality of hard-edge painting reflects its relationship to architecture. The hard-edge sign is meant to telegraph across space even as it draws us in to inspect the painting’s factura. Its clean, fast lines echo the lines where floor, ceiling and walls meet one another. The sign may mimic the luminosity of stained-glass windows, as in Benjamin’s work, but it also pushes forward into the room, rather than offering an escape from it. Lukin, Stihvonen and Denny purposefully address architectural scale in their larger paintings. In 1969, Lukin went so far as to install a phallic, 119-feet-long panel painting in the Empire State Plaza in Albany, which remains his best-known work.

Hard-edge painting seems to be intimately optimistic. But there’s a range in that optimism. Benjamin’s and Stihvonen’s paintings offer different kinds of brilliance, due to the artists’ distinct approaches to scale and material surface. Stihvonen tended to go for a softer, more abraded surface and a tangerine palette, creating works that suggest close-ups of finely woven, patterned fabrics. Lukin’s playfulness can be much more louche than Benjamin’s and Stihvonen’s, while also containing a touch of Warner Brothers cartoon insouciance. Compared to these three, Jackson and Denny are the true ‘classics,’ to the extent that within the hard-edge style they work toward clear, harmonic geometries. Denny is perhaps the most subtle colorist of these artists. Jackson is possibly the most wizardly with scale. Though his works activate a significant amount of space in a room, few have dimensions greater than 3 feet.

I selected these artists to write about precisely because they don’t constitute an actual group. They exemplify a level of mastery that has largely been overlooked, as well as an impressive range of affect, despite working in a style that most people tend to regard as purposefully restrictive. Today, a similar range can be found in the work of younger painters including, among others, Frank Badur in Berlin, John M. Miller in Los Angeles, and Winston Roeth, Gabriele Evertz and Li Trincere in New York. Badur produces richly colored compositions of austere, rectangular forms and softer grids, while Miller creates optically vibrant grids of hundreds of floating, precisely sized and spaced diagonal dashes. Such rigor is also found with Roeth, who, in multiple paintings, builds up layers of tempera pigment with intense, devotional care. Evertz dazzles with vertical-stripe patterns, and Trincere endows her angular-shaped canvases with Pop-Minimalist sass. All these painters demonstrate distinct, instantly recognizable sensibilities in works keyed to various aspects of the hard-edge legacy, which is far too big for any single artist to represent. The joy of this esthetic lies partly in the abstract otherness it invokes and partly in its open appreciation for its models in European modernism. Some might see the historical interplay of such painting as a limitation, but I see it as providing an ongoing, deep conversation—one continually enriched by new forms.