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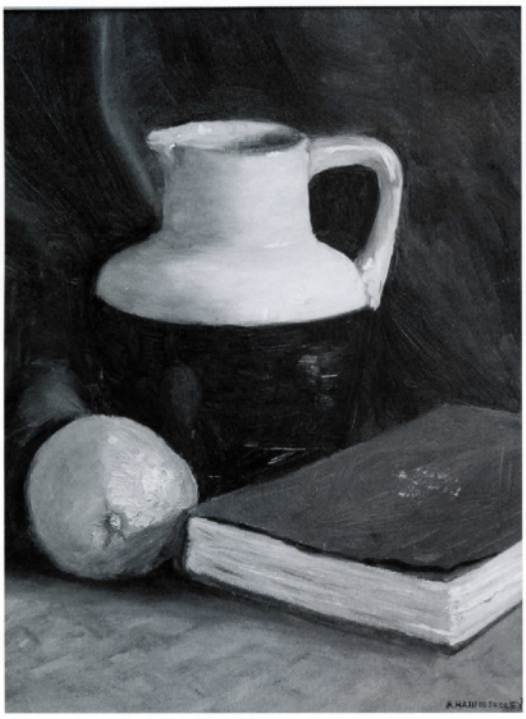
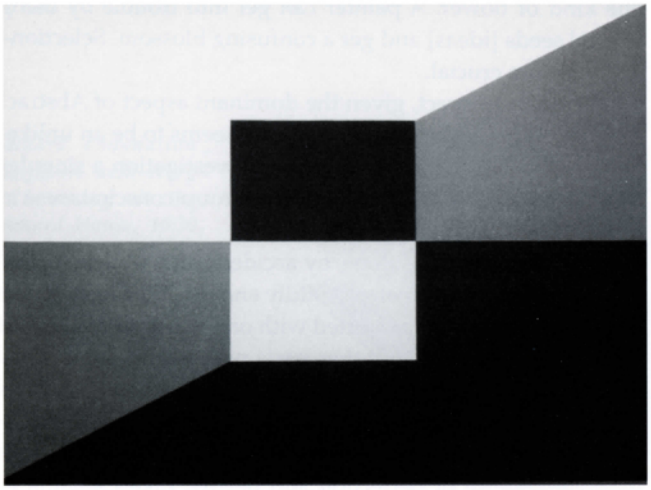
There's no point in starting another art school...UNLESS...

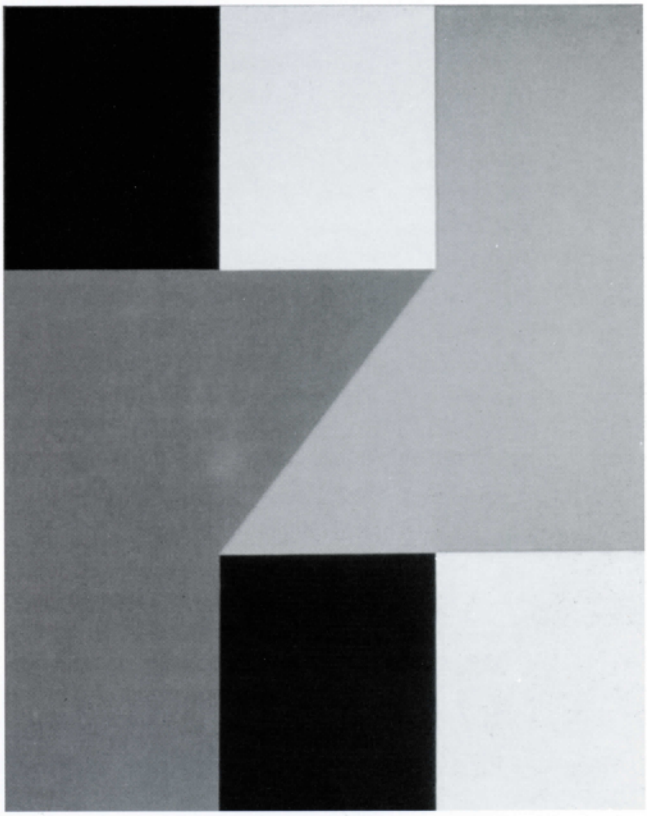
The Evolution of a Modernist:

Frederick Hammersley and the Hard Edge

– Dave Tourjé







Above left: Untitled still life, o/c, 16x12, 1937. Left: "Same Change," oil on linen, 22x30, 1960. Above: "Paired," o/linen, 30x24, 1961. Next page: "Red, Yellow, Black, and White," o/panel, 18x12, 1948

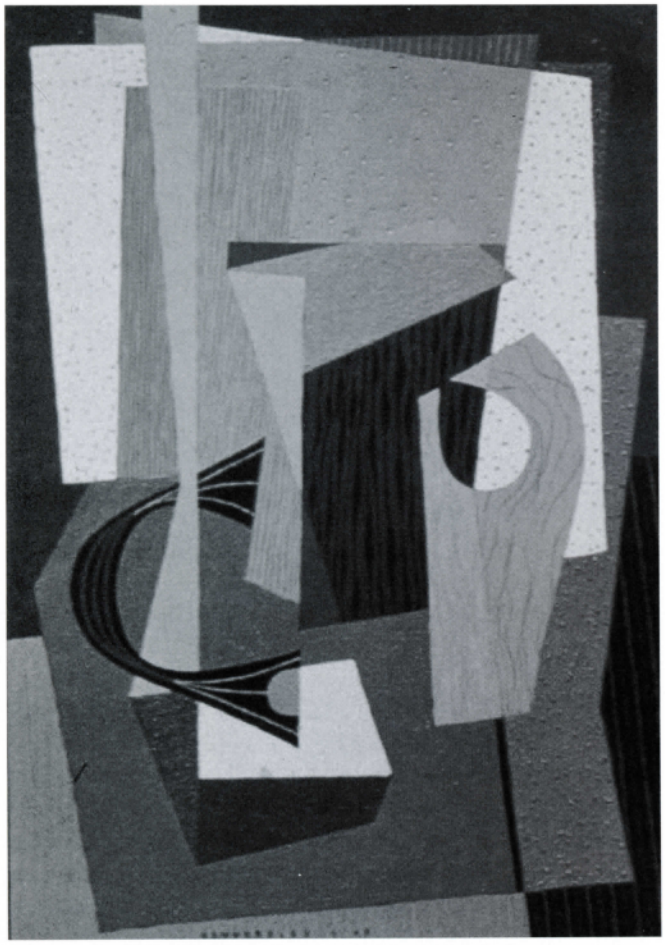
Frederick Hammersley joined the Chouinard Foundation Advisory Board in late 2000, enthusiastic about the potential of our project and hopeful of it's future. As an expression of this, he sent us several crates of artwork and art-related material, which form an intriguing historical backdrop to his much-credited contributions to American Art, the recognition of which has seemingly developed as slowly and surely as his style, one that has unfolded naturally over the last fifty or so years, led by a strong academic background and an infallible intuition.

Hammersley was born January 5, 1919 in Salt Lake City, Utah. His father worked for the Department of the Interior and the family moved often. At one point, they resided at an Indian Reservation in Fort Hall, Idaho where he took up studies at the University of Idaho. Having trouble with conventional studies, Hammersley took to art, taking a job for $1.00 a day painting signs. "I grew up lettering. We painted signs for the theater in Pocatello. I got very good at this".

In 1939 the family moved to San Francisco where Hammersley studied advertising and designed letterheads part time. In 1940, he moved to Los Angeles: "I went to Chouinard for two years, '41 and '42. Then I got drafted and served in WW2 from '42-'46. I was a draftsman and spent time in Paris, Frankfurt, and Berlin. While there I became the head of an art department. Eventually, I went back to Paris where I entered art school. I would visit Picasso and Bracque in their studios."

After the war, he returned to Los Angeles and re-

entered Chouinard at it's temporary location at 6th and Benton Way, along with all the other returning GIs. It was here he settled in, completing his studies at Chouinard and then at the Jepson School nearby, pursuing his painting voice, leading him to discoveries later to be known as "Abstract Classicism," then "West Coast Hard Edge." Here's our short telephone interview:



Hammersley, Roger Hollenbeck, and Mort Rabinowitz discuss a project at Jepson's school in the 1940s.

Tourjé: Who were your early influences at Chouinard?

Hammersley: When I came back to Chouinard in 1946 I was curious about color. The advertising people at the time were not interested in this. Henry Lee McFee, a marvelous painter, would say "You should look at your painting through a hole in your fist. Everything should look rich." I would do that. F. Tolles Chamberlain, a lovely old man, had a favorite pastime. It was 'looking'. Jepson used to hate going to lunch with him because he would stop and just look at the cracks in the sidewalk. Looking is so important. I followed Jepson, a marvelous draftsman, to his school where I met Rico Lebrun. Lebrun was a rather small man with eyes like Picasso–very black. Lebrun was dynamite. He used to implore "Don't try to make a good drawing–just tell me the facts!" Lebrun would intimidate many, including Jepson. He would say, "You never sketch, you DRAW!"

DT: Your early still lifes are beautiful. Toward the late '40s it appears that you began breaking down form into more severe simplicities, a seemingly early approach toward "Hard Edge." How did academic painting integrate into this process?

FH: My academic background was the background for my "Hard Edge" or abstract work. Both are the same in that each show parts that are different yet relate to one another. This is the thing that gives pleasure in the making, and the looking, at an image–one thing is made up of many smaller units that are of one family. A plant has the advantage over a painter in that instructions within its seed can produce only one kind of flower. A painter can get into trouble by using several seeds [ideas] and get a confusing blossom. Selection–legibility, are crucial.

DT: In retrospect, given the dominant aspect of Abstract Expressionism at the time, Hard Edge seems to be an unlikely or parallel development. Was this investigation a singular or a collective dialogue? Was there a group consciousness at play among the Hard Edge painters?

FH: It came to me alone, by accident, and was the opposite of what was done before. Oddly enough, the idea was the same…the painting was started with one shape which I could "see" on the canvas. No other parts were made unless they were "seen" which meant that the first shape was the father of the family of shapes that followed. No painter really influenced me. I'm influenced by painters when they give me a marvelous sense of perfection and beauty. Like Cezanne or Degas. When you see something great, you see the seeds of something great in yourself. Now, I didn't get AE at all and I remember it bothered Lebrun. It seemed the art world was very tired and I was never a part of the psychological or emotional makeup of AE. When I left Jepson's, I didn't know what to do so I rented an old garage for 10 dollars a month and began painting portraits and self- portraits. One day, I divided a canvas into sixteen rectangles. I just looked at it and saw one rectangle as blue, so I painted it blue. Then I saw another as yellow ochre and so on. These became my early "hunch" paintings, because I painted them by intuition only, without

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"thinking." I would look and "see" the shape. Then I squeezed the paint right onto the palette knife, then painted till it felt done. This taught me to have faith in logic and feeling. If you have an idea, go with it, as it is precious. You don't know where it will take you if you don't go with it. So, at the time, I had no contact with other painters at all. Later, when teaching at Pomona College, we had a faculty show. Carl Benjamin visited there and when he saw my work he said "Hey, I do that too! Come over and see." So, we became friends and I would stop by his place.

DT: Much has been said of the four major West Coast Hard Edge painters; yourself, Carl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson (also a Chouinard artist) and John McLaughlin. The show in 1959 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art which moved to L.A. County is now considered a pivotal moment in the Hard Edge genre. How did that moment come about?

FH: We came up with the idea as a group but we had no real contacts. We may have done the show at Pomona College or Long Beach. So we called Jules Langsner (L.A Times Art Critic and Chouinard Instructor) who became very interested in the idea. Through his contacts we ended up at the San Francisco Museum. We wanted to call ourselves "Abstract Classicists. I didn't care what it was called, really, but I remember walking with Jules saying that I felt the name was too long. I told him Benjamin called it "Hard Edge" which I felt fit. Later, Lawrence Alloway from the Institute of Contemporary Art in London called it "West Coast Hard Edge." That name stuck. After the show opened it seemed to just sit there, with no real attention given to it. It didn't seem to make any impact at all in L.A. either, but we became very well received in London.

DT: We've spoken before about taking time away from painting and how this contributes to the overall painting process. Describe this idea.

FH: The time you're not painting is as important as the time you are. The same thing happens every week–one works five days, takes off two. One works most of the year, then nothing (a vacation) for two weeks. One cannot have activity seen or felt without having one place where there is none. One cannot feel the impact of a red unless there are places where there is less or no red, and, a bit of the opposite –green, for example.

DT: Any other advice for artists?

FH: Yes. If you want to be a successful painter, plan on living a long time.

Frederick Hammersley now resides in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

For fifty years this woman turned kids into artists. Some of you knew her. Most of you hold her memory in deep respect, as do thousands of others who remember the LA school that bore her name. It's time now to solidify her legacy by helping us build the new Chouinard. On the back cover is a painting done by Nelbert Chouinard in 1919. For your **$1,000** donation to our building fund you will receive a special, **Cirrus Editions** serigraph of this oil painting, a numbered, limited edition of 375. Image size: 24 x 18. Paper size: 30 x 24

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