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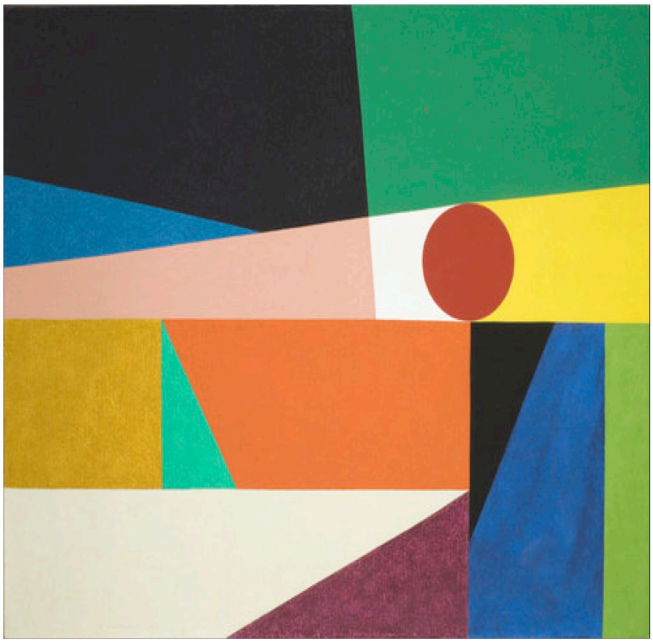
LACMA's Abstract Classicism tribute: Just call it 'hard-edge'

Critic's Notebook: Hard-edge vs. Abstract Classicism? When it comes to 'LACMA's Four Abstract Classicists,' only one term strikes the right note.



By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic

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Was there ever a worse stab at naming a movement in Modern art than Abstract Classicism? Talk about self-cancellation.

When the term was concocted in 1959 for a museum show of postwar Los Angeles painting, pure abstraction was just about as "avant" as American avant-garde art got. Turning abstraction into an adjective to characterize classicism, with its dusty air of venerable Greco-Roman plaster casts languishing downstairs in museum storage, was like trying to make the reefer madness of a bohemian underground sound safe for the martini-drenched suburbs.

In a small gallery at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, eight paintings from its permanent collection by John McLaughlin, Lorser Feitelson, Frederick Hammersley and Karl Benjamin were recently installed to commemorate the museum's original 1959 show. (Most date from slightly later than the original exhibition. They'll remain on view until the end of June.)

The original "Four Abstract Classicists," which was also seen in San Francisco, traveled the next year to museums in London and Belfast, Ireland, earning a place in the history books as the first international traveling show of contemporary L.A. art.

When it got to the United Kingdom, the show changed names. "West Coast Hard-Edge" was added as a subtitle. The term "hard-edge" was coined by the show's L.A. curator, art critic Jules Langsner — a savvy, evocative and concise description of the assembled work.

"Forms are finite, flat, rimmed by a hard, clean edge," Langsner wrote of the artists' various approaches to geometric abstraction. "They are autonomous shapes, sufficient unto themselves as shapes. These clean-edge forms are presented in uniform flat colors running border to border."

Langsner had a plain agenda in emphasizing the autonomy of the stacked horizontal bars of red, blue, white and black in Benjamin's "Bars #7" (1955), or the dynamic composition of rectangles and wedges of color closing in on a circle in Hammersley's "Around a Round" (1959). He was batting away common efforts to infer that figures or symbols were hidden in abstract art.

He had good reason to worry. Kooky Cold Warriors like L.A. City Councilman Harold Harby were fond of claiming that Communist hammers-and-sickles lurked within abstract paintings. Public paranoia was also reaching a fever pitch after the publication of "The Hidden Persuaders," Vance Packard's hugely popular 1957 book about Madison Avenue's manipulation of unwary consumers through submerged advertising techniques.

That book's cover illustration showed a fishhook hidden inside an apple — a secular revision of the biblical tale of Eve's treachery in the Garden of Eden. For the general public, abstraction already represented art's fall from grace.

Of course, however autonomous the shapes in hard-edge painting might be, fishhook-in-an-apple sexuality is hard to miss in Feitelson's wholly abstract "Hardedge Line Painting" (1961). At 6-by-5 feet, it's the largest canvas in LACMA's installation. Thin turquoise lines interrupt an orange-red field, the complementary colors setting off optical sparks as a curved, elongated line penetrates a splayed pair of curved, elongated lines.

And you thought "The Wolf of Wall Street" was racy.

LACMA's text information for the show says the term Abstract Classicism was coined by Langsner, but that's probably incorrect. Ditto for Helen Lundeberg, Feitelson's wife, as suggested in the Getty Museum's catalog to its 2011 Pacific Standard Time show.

Instead, I'd put my money on Feitelson himself. At 61 he was the show's elder statesman, having exhibited widely for more than 30 years. (McLaughlin was the same age, but he didn't have a solo show until 1952, in his mid-50s.) Appeals to classicism recurred throughout Feitelson's artistic life.

By 1919, when he was studying in Paris, Picasso was pulling back from the brink of pure abstraction, setting aside Cubism for Neoclassicism. Other avant-garde painters followed suit, including Feitelson.

When he moved back to New York after travels through Italy to study Renaissance and ancient art, he gave his own 1922 Neoclassical abstraction of the Roman goddess, Diana, to the Brooklyn Museum.

Flash forward to 1934, six years after Feitelson moved to L.A. Now declaring Surrealist art to be exhausted, he advocated replacing its idiosyncratic, subconscious dream imagery with such universal themes as the mysteries of life, love and death. He dubbed his new style Subjective Classicism.

Given that history, Abstract Classicism was merely the next plane coming in for a landing. Apparently it offered a logical — if leaden — verbal alternative to New York Abstract Expressionism, which dominated the 1950s.

AbEx works well as a two-syllable nickname, but AbClass ... not so much. The visually astute group of painters should have stuck with the verbally adept critic. Hard-edge entered art's general conversational lexicon, while Abstract Classicism is now pretty much the obscure answer to an imagined tie-breaking bonus-round in a TV game show.

Benjamin, the youngest of the four putative Abstract Classicists, was just 34 when LACMA's original show opened. A few years before he died in 2012, last of the group, he said of the name, "We're still arguing who to blame."

Benjamin was joking — I think.

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