

ART REVIEW

The beauty of geometry

A Karl Benjamin exhibition highlights the colorist's great wit and inventiveness.

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
Times Staff Writer

The new Claremont Museum of Art made just the right choice for its inaugural exhibition. Tightly organized and lovely to look at, the 42-year survey of 42 paintings (and one drawing) by Karl Benjamin honors the leading artist of the museum's home city.

Benjamin arrived in Claremont in 1952, a young public school teacher who had recently begun to paint, and in 1994 he retired from Pomona College and Claremont Graduate University as the schools' most distinguished art professor.

In between, he was one of four artists in the landmark 1959 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that coined the term "hard-edge painting," now in common usage for geometric abstraction that relies on color as a primary subject. (The others were John McLaughlin, Lorus Fietelson and Frederick Hammersley.) Color is the engine of perceptual experience and visual knowledge, and it's the platform on which the radical Light and Space art of the 1960s was built.

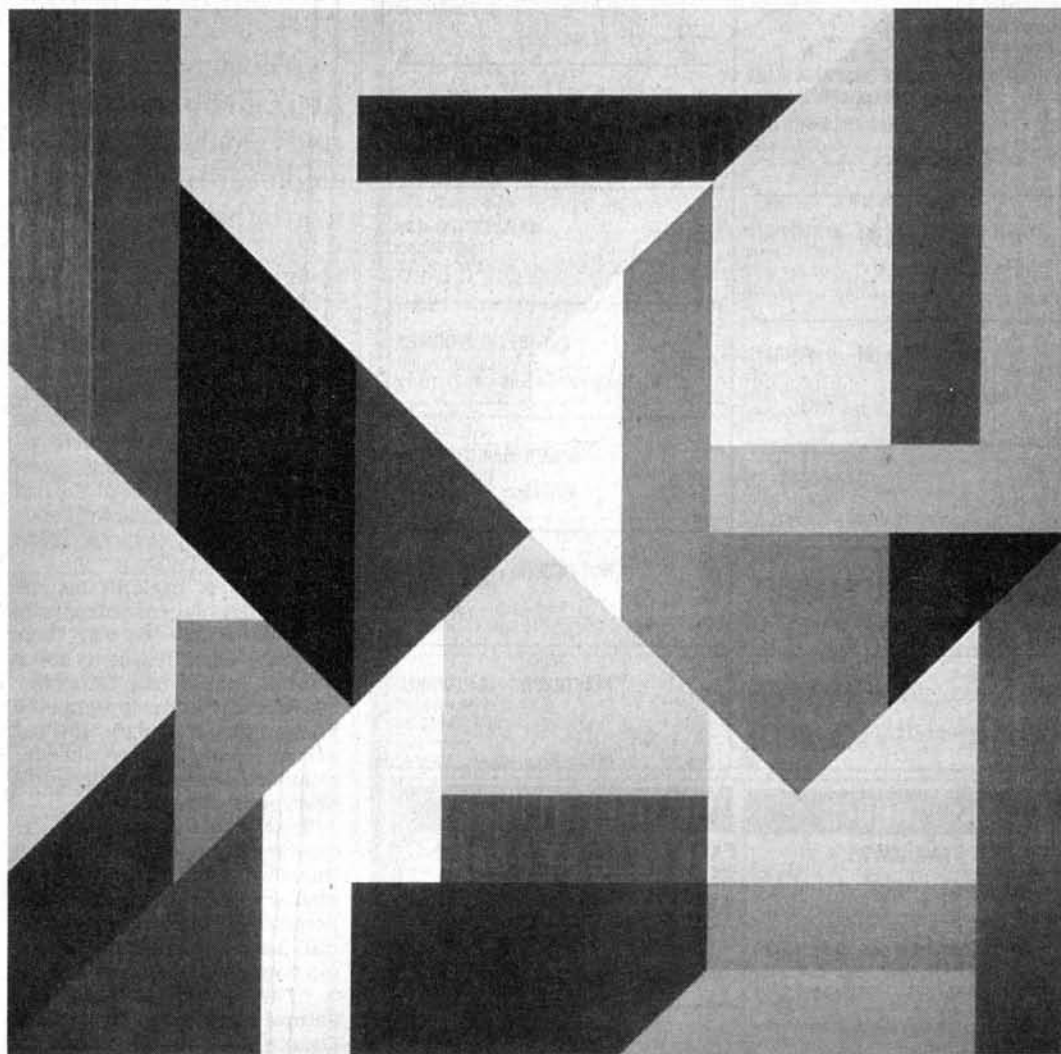
The 1959 show, which traveled to San Francisco, New York and London, represents the first international export of a distinctive artistic style generated in postwar California. With the addition of Helen Lundeberg and June Harwood — two women whose careers had familiar struggles in a male-dominated art world — these artists have since been convincingly grouped as the Los Angeles School.

In the handsome if modest galleries of the museum, Benjamin emerges as a colorist of great wit and inventiveness. How, for example, does a checkerboard-patterned painting of 576 colored rectangles, each crisply painted a single flat color and abutted edge-to-edge, appear lumpy and organic?

Perhaps the answer is structural. The painting in question — "#4," dated 1972 — is a rectangle 51 inches high and 68 inches wide. The ratio of height to width is repeated in each of the little colored rectangles from which it is composed. Those colors span the spectrum, including a variety of reds, yellows, blues, purples, greens and browns.

But the sequence of colors doesn't appear to have been applied systematically. Instead, the distribution feels intuitive — hues placed so that no repetitive pattern is detectable, yet randomness is out of the question. The overall surface of the canvas remains stubbornly two-dimensional, which couldn't happen by accident. The equilibrium is finely tuned. Any illusion of three-dimensional space is strictly local, depending on the optical effect created by juxtaposed rectangles of color.

As your eye scans the painting, some sections seem to bulge,



SUSAN EINSTEIN Claremont Museum of Art

CONTRAST: Karl Benjamin's oil on canvas "#3" (1989) demonstrates his use of colors in stark geometric patterns. The survey covers 42 years with 42 paintings and one drawing.

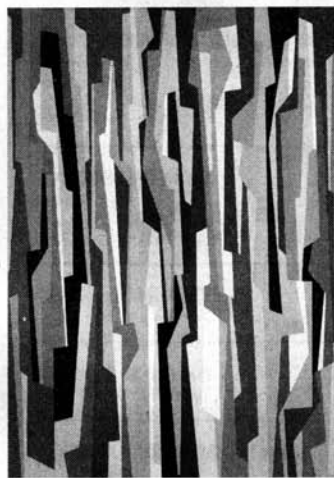
while others dissolve. Still other areas lie perfectly flat. What's uncanny is that none of those sections is stable; as the rods and cones in your eye get saturated or fatigued, the differences between space and form shift.

The painting is supremely sophisticated. When Benjamin began to develop this direction nearly 20 years before, Abstract Expressionism ruled the roost and art was driven by a narrowly restrictive idea of linear progress. But neither autobiography nor the outward expression of an interior psychology — both hallmarks of Abstract Expressionism — has any place in his work. That absence made Benjamin's work appear provincial.

But now that the Modernist ideal has collapsed, it's the utopianism of its program that has come to seem quaint, not Benjamin's worldly art. He's a little master of hard-edge painting.

The exhibition begins in an unlikely place, with a 1953 painting (and pencil sketch) in sun-bleached colors showing several buildings on a small-town street. Titled "Bud's Bike Shop," it melds the friendly atmosphere of older American Scene painting with a nascent sense of older Cubist space, here rendered as faceted forms of architecture.

Those forms are quickly unhinged from describing recognizable objects. The syncopated planes and shapes of geometric color that result seem like distant cousins of Stuart Davis, except for an underlying sense of almost mathematical order. "Yellow, Ochre, Umber," a widely



Claremont Museum of Art

ANGLES: "Yellow, Ochre, Umber" resembles canyon walls.

reproduced 1959 painting that was in the pivotal LACMA exhibition, splinters those hues into tall, angular shards of light that are like sunshine ricocheting off the crevices of a canyon wall.

The remainder of the show, which was ably organized by Claremont curator Steve Comba, is divided into groups. Benjamin typically worked in series, until he had exhausted the apparent possibilities for a given structure. His range of invention is impressive.

One startling result is that virtually identical compositions are installed side by side, their only difference being the chosen palette. The choice of cool colors for a striped format might make one painting seem to drift off into vast, almost dreamy spatial

Karl Benjamin

Where: Claremont Museum of Art, 536 W. 1st St., Claremont

When: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Mondays

Ends: July 4

Price: \$3

Contact: (909) 621-3200

depths, while the warmer colors in the one next to it come blaring at you like a brass marching band. Color as a subject is effortlessly conveyed.

Color's boundless capacity as a material is also on display in the survey of fluorescent light sculptures by Dan Flavin currently illuminating LACMA. The principal difference is in Benjamin's use of the traditional tools of paint and canvas rather than non-art ingredients like light-pans and bulbs that Flavin developed in the 1960s.

But what goes around comes around. In a catalog essay, critic David Pagel (a regular contributor to The Times) points out Benjamin's inescapable relevance to a lot of art made in a design idiom today and specifically centered in Southern California. Jim Isermann, Pae White, Jorge Pardo, Darcy Huebler, Tim Bavington, Bart Exposito — the legacy of Benjamin's work is rich and influential.

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