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Art in America

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.

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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, Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg (who was married to Feitelson). 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 harkened back to Mondrian, encompassed a wide range of sensibilities and represented a cool rationality in the post-Abstract-Expressionist era...

...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 multi panel 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 hardedge 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.