

CHARLOTTE JACKSON FINE ART

PRESENTS

FREDERICK HAMMERSLEY: HARD EDGE



July 8 - July 30 2006

Frederick Hammersley is an artist who truly has faith in his intuition. It was intuition that compelled him, as an artist just out of school, about to paint a self-portrait in his tiny studio/bedroom, to paint one of the squares of his preparatory grid blue. The blue square “felt right” and after a quick inner debate (if he painted the square blue he couldn’t do a self-portrait and at that time money for canvas and paints was scarce) he followed his impulse. This was the start of Hammersley’s exploration of geometric abstraction. This July, Charlotte Jackson Fine Art is proud to present Frederick Hammersley: Hard Edge, an exhibition of both Hammersley’s Hard Edge oil painting and his computer drawings.

It was, perhaps, intuition that compelled Hammersley to participate in a unique pairing of computer and artists back in 1968 at the University of New Mexico. In this exhibition viewers will, for the first time, have a chance to see all seventy-two of Hammersley’s computer drawings, produced from 1968-1969 on the University’s IBM 14000 CORE main-frame computer. Using only the typographical characters available, Hammersley was one of the Art Department staff who participated in this experiment of making art by programming a computer (using the punch-card system of the day). These drawings, consisting of rows of letters, numbers, and symbols (commas, parentheses, etc.) of black ink on white paper are beautiful and subtle in their movements, extremely dynamic for all the constraints placed upon them by their medium. The drawings, Hammersley says, are a series. Beginning with the first he created and ending with the last (72nd) piece, they move from one to the next as an exploration of a single idea. This is the first time that the entire series will be hung together, allowing the viewer to see the genesis of this process from start to finish. These subtle pieces require attentiveness and encourage the viewer to step backward and forward as one scans from the details of typographical characters backward to view the whole, where the nuance of shape and movement become clear.

In addition to Hammersley’s computer drawings the gallery will be hanging a collection of his previously unexhibited hard edge oils. These paintings, with their striking colors, interaction of geometric forms (which he often calls “players”), and balance of surprise with a kind of inherent “rightness” will achieve a fascinating dialogue with the black and white computer drawings. Known as one of the founding members of Hard Edge painting, Hammersley was part of the famed 1959 exhibition of Los Angeles artists, “Four Abstract Classicists.” Jules Langsner, in the 1959 catalog wrote, “An Abstract Classicist painting ... represents a rational crystallization of intuitive experience.” When asked if he agreed with this statement, Hammersley agreed, “We were in the classical mode in the sense of everything was upfront.” Hammersley went on to add that indeed the feeling (or intuition) when making a work is vital. He describes bringing different shapes and colors together, assembled in one way they might be quite boring, or “dead” but moved around suddenly they will “feel” good. Says Hammersley, “The relationships of the various elements are a family, you can see somehow that there is a bloodline.”

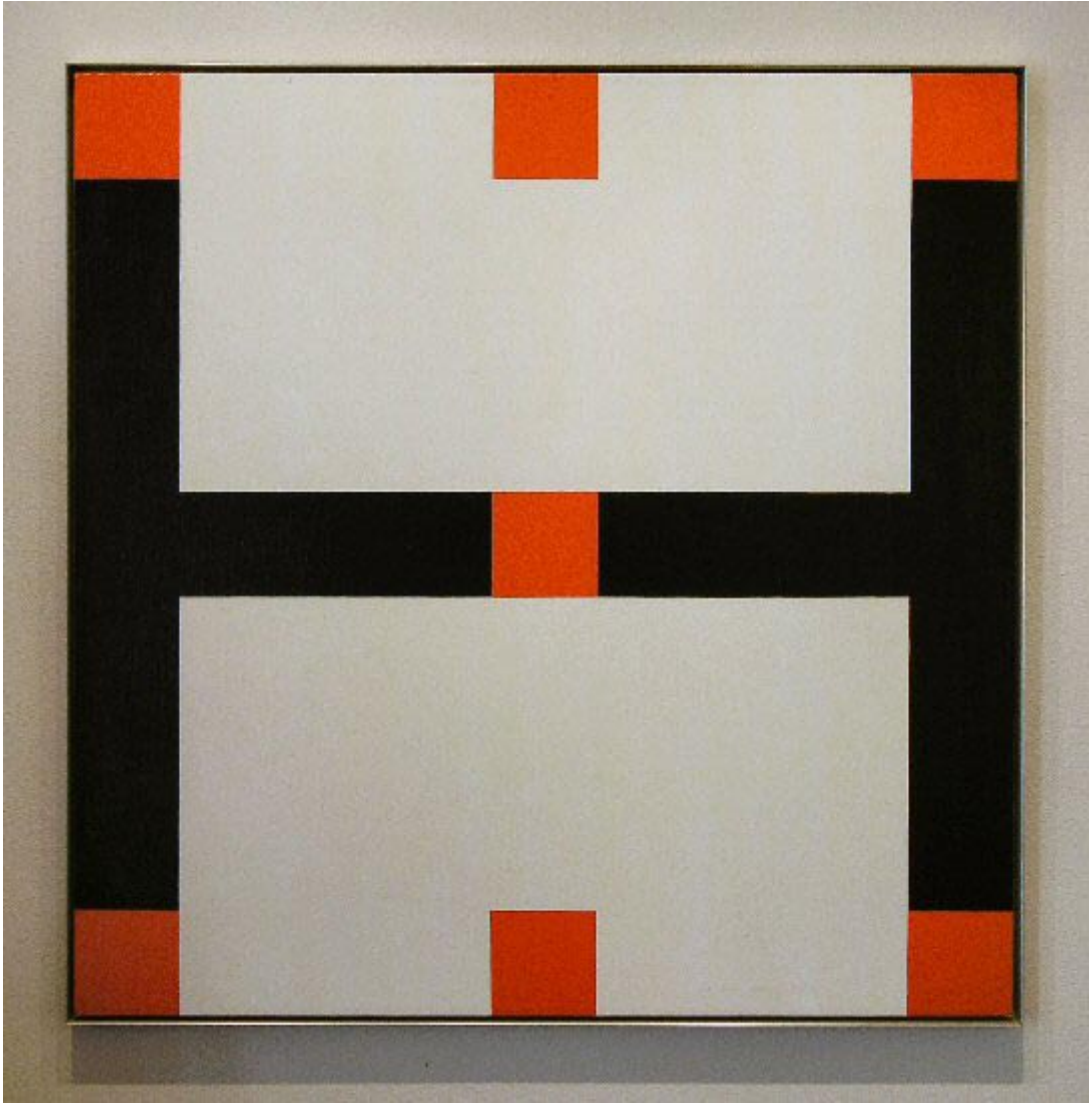
Hammersley’s technique of working with the hard edge oils also encourages his confidence in intuition: he uses a palette knife to apply the paint, rather than a brush. This method came about in his early “Hunch” paintings when he realized he did not want to waste time mixing paint and applying with a brush. When his instinctive insight came he wanted to be able to apply paint directly to the palette knife, thus eliminating a barrier between his action and intuition. Even through the use of his meticulously kept journals where he keeps lists of words that eventually become titles, sketches, and also miniature oil versions of what later become paintings on canvas, Hammersley insists that he is stimulating his intuition. As an example of just how much his instincts mean to him Hammersley quips, “Do you ever really want a fried egg sandwich?” He goes on to describe a particular night when, at 3 a.m., he woke up with a craving for a fried egg sandwich, which he dutifully got out of bed to make. “It was so good,” he says and in the wholehearted tone of his voice you can hear just how much of his life and art that this statement encompasses.

In the work of Frederick Hammersley the viewer is invited into an experience of intuitive “rightness,” where disparate elements come together like a family in a delicate balance and where you always find that the whole (the “big one” as Hammersley dubs it) is much greater than the sum of its parts.

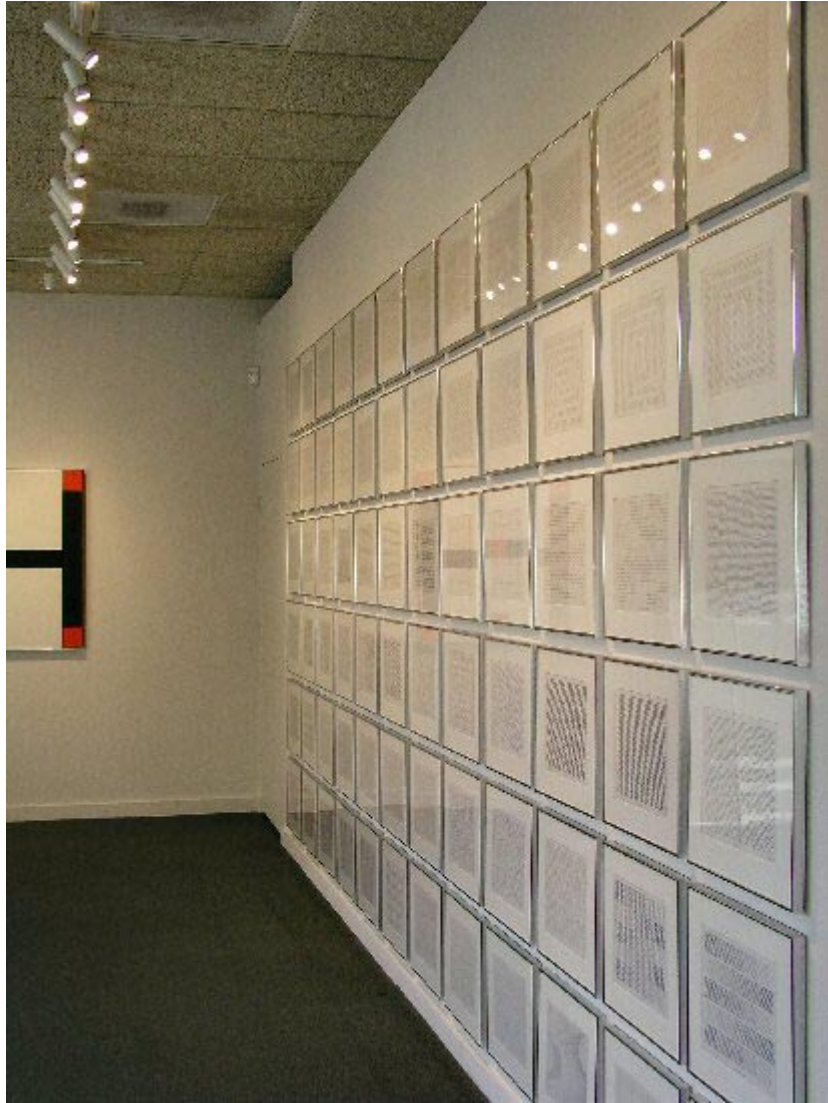
MAIN GALLERY:



Hot Cross, #5, 1994
Oil on linen, 24" x 24", FH0077



Hide and Speak, #12, 1973
Oil on linen, 40" x 40", FH110



Computer Drawings (set of 72), 1969
Computer prints, 16 1/4" x 14 1/4", FHCD1

Ahead of his time: Frederick Hammersley's Computer Drawings

In 1968, Frederick Hammersley came to Albuquerque to teach in the art department of The University of New Mexico. He was between periods of productivity with his painting (the time, he says, when the librarian in his head is eagerly cataloging everything he sees, hears, and discusses, collating the raw materials which will go into his next generative period) and looking for new ideas and inspiration.

The University of New Mexico had just upgraded their IBM mainframe 1401 Computer System. Dick Williams, a computer business owner and friend of Charles Mattox, a local sculptor and teacher at UNM, thought it might be interesting to see what artists would do with a computer to make art, which it was (of course) not designed to do. Mattox invited members of the art faculty to attend a computer class so they could learn how to make programs for drawing.

In 1968 computers still filled whole rooms with their banks of processors and programs for them were entered onto punch cards. A personal computer (especially one you could hold in the palm of your hand) was a barely imagined thing of the future, and no one would have thought that computers would become a prominent tool of the art-world through the use of digital imaging, photo-shop, the Internet, and advanced drafting and drawing tools. Not only that but computer-time was then at a premium. Records from the University show that fees for using their newly upgraded 14000 CORE IBM for data processing were between \$100-\$175 an hour (exorbitant now, all the more so then).

Imagine the keenness then that the University must have had in pairing a group of artists with this new technology. But the new and not-yet-imagined is always the province of artists. An intrepid group from the University of New Mexico Art department faculty learned how to prepare a computer program and transfer it to an IBM punch card machine. The alphanumeric characters that were available for them to use in drawing were: the alphabet, ten numerals, and eleven symbols (punctuation like periods, commas, dashes, etc.)

Frederick Hammersley was one of the inquisitive staff members who started work on the computer. Working only with the available characters, Hammersley spent weeks creating a dictionary which would show the values from dark to light of the various characters and combinations of characters (they could be printed one on top of another, two deep). By combining different layers of letters, numbers, and symbols, he was able to create a variety of shapes and values (light and dark). For example an "H" layered with an "I" had an interesting look. A "1" layered with an "=" would look very different from a "1" overlain with a "+".

When he had his dictionary, Hammersley was able to use this assortment of characters to create drawings of shapely beauty. He would spend all morning writing up sets of instructions which when entered onto punch card could then be executed in minutes. He

would specify which areas on the rows and columns to print. A set of instructions might be, for example: columns 1 to 15, 20 rows deep with “A”. The areas printed with two characters in the same spot look almost painted.

The artists working on the computer were all exploring the medium in different ways. Hammersley began in 1968 and worked solidly on computer drawings throughout 1969, ending with 72 distinct drawings in the medium. A group exhibit of the work was developed by Charlie Mattox that traveled to various organizations, including the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and a University in Ireland. Response was mixed; some commented that while the drawings were “interesting” they had nothing to do with “art”. However, this was a response Hammersley was used to as a painter working in geometric abstraction at a time when few people understood or supported the work.

Hammersley felt his excursion into the world of computer-generated art was valuable, bringing new insight to his painting when he returned to it in 1970 (when his desire to be back working with his hands and his store of ideas had been replenished). He feels that one of the most valuable lessons learned from this medium concerned values and how you can make very little moves to achieve action. For example the juxtaposition of a block of periods with a block of apostrophes creates an up and down motion. It is a natural event caused by the nature of the characters. An incredibly subtle difference creates a striking effect.

Since the late 1960’s Hammersley’s own painting grew in its exploration of geometric abstraction; he came to use fewer and fewer shapes, pairing down to basics that give us works of surprising sophistication. And of course, since the 1960’s computers have also changed, becoming smaller, faster, and more pliable. A computer can now be used in the art world for drafting, drawing, photo-shopping, and numerous other applications. Works can be created and printed that look deceptively like a traditional painting. However, in many ways the drawings done by Hammersley in the late 60’s seem more true to the nature of computers for their use of the simple contrasts of black on white, line and circle, and alternations of pattern, reminiscent and exemplary of the binary system that computers used to function.

It is amazing the varieties and subtlety achieved in Hammersley’s computer drawings. With such a limited palette of characters, space, and color, Hammersley was able to create nuanced drawings of movement, pattern and optical illusion. When you look closely at grouping of periods surrounded by a grouping of apostrophes the difference between them is miniscule, hard even for the eye to perceive. But looking at the whole drawing, the shift and shape is unmistakable. The drawings are maps that lead the eye back and forth between the general and the particular, the microcosm and macrocosm. They are remarkable, not only for their historical significance, but for the astonishing mastery of movement and form they display amidst limitation.



Come and Grow, #6, 1979
Oil on linen, 45" x 45", FH107

HALLWAY:



Watutsi, 21 February, 1951
Colored pencil, 5" x 7", FH103



Group Effort, 22 February, 1951
Colored pencil, 4" x 7 1/2", FH102



Pajamas, 1951
Colored pencil, 4" x 3 3/4", FH104



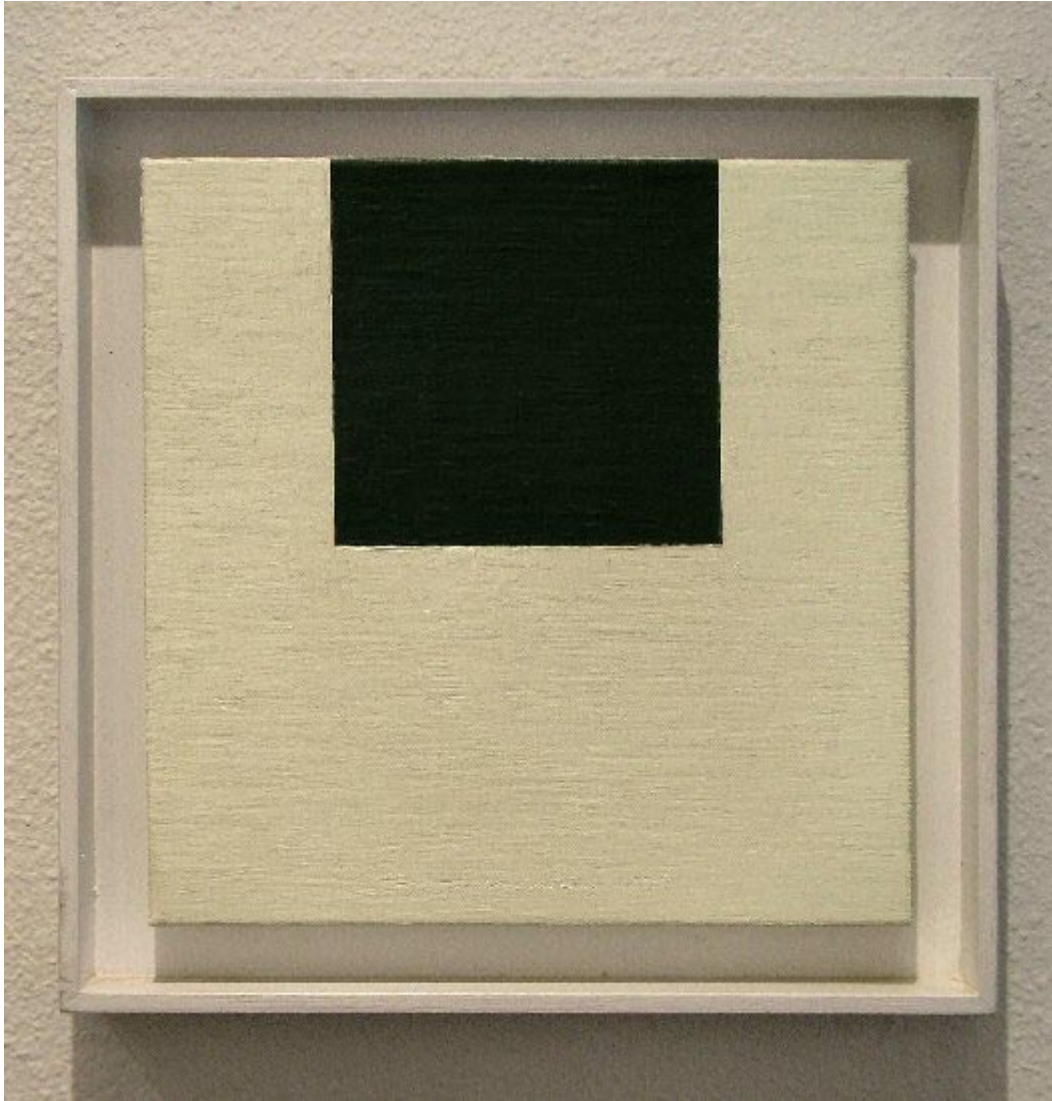
By Ear, 1 October, 1950
Colored pencil, 5" x 7", FH105



Abacus, 14 February, 1951
Colored pencil, 3" x 4", FH101



And, #13, 1962-63
Oil on canvas, 28" x 20", FH0097

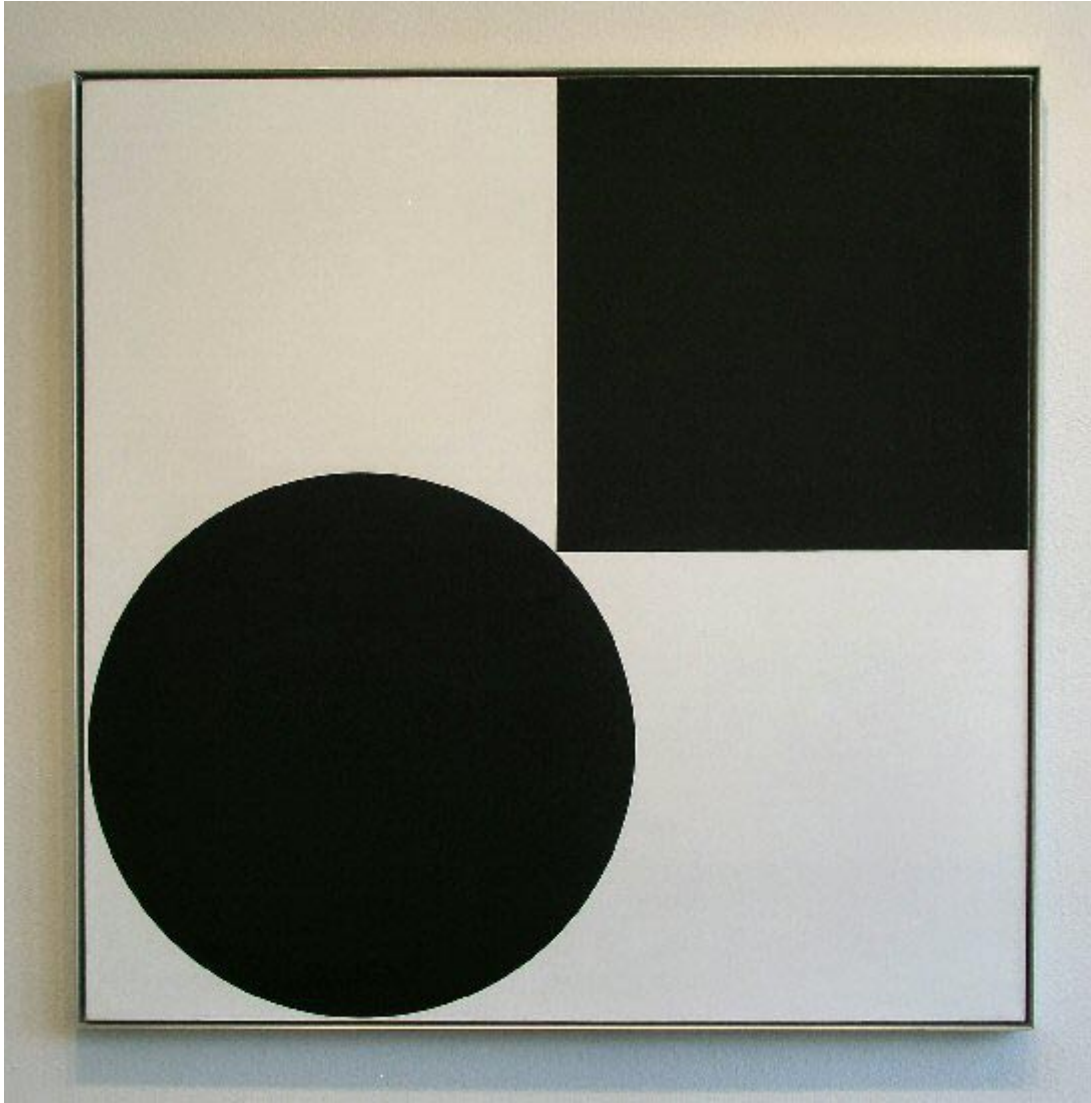


Silent Partner, #19, 1977
Oil on cotton glued to 9 ply panel, 9 1/8" x 9 1/2", FH106

GALLERY II:



Cross Reference, #10, 1980
Oil on linen, 45" x 45", FH109



Ambidextrous, #3, 1967
Oil on linen, 44" x 44", FH108



Share, #3, 1961
Oil on linen, 36" x 25", FH0089



To plus Two, #3, 1973
Oil on linen, 45" x 45", FH0096

SPOTLIGHT:

FREDERICK HAMMERSLEY

“Painting is just like living. After you make the first move, every other move is related to it,” Frederick Hammersley once remarked. In his life, as in his work, one thing has just seemed to lead to another. He describes the beginning of his artistic career, when he was still in his teens, as a stint painting signs for a movie theater, for the princely sum of a dollar for an afternoon’s work. After he received encouragement for this work, art school was the logical next step.

Hammersley subsequently attended Chouinard and Jepson in Los Angeles, and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, with time out in between to run the art department of the Information and Education Section Office of Military Government in Frankfurt and Berlin, during and immediately following World War II. The combination of classical art training and the opportunity to study at first hand the great works housed in the museums of Europe developed both his hand and his eye. It only remained for Hammersley to find his own individual vision. "I was painting art school studies, but I didn't really know why. At a certain point I just couldn't do it any more."

The resolution to this dilemma came about quite by accident, to hear Hammersley tell it. In fact it was a prime example of his willingness and ability to wait for the next "move" to appear, and to grasp the opportunity when it arose. He had decided to paint a self-portrait and had divided the canvas into 16 rectangles as a basis for the composition. Then, as he considered the next step, a solid blue shape presented itself to his mind as the "right" thing for one of the rectangles -- a shape and color having nothing to do with the painting of his face that he had planned. He vacillated, unsure of which course to pursue, but ultimately decided to paint the square as he saw it in his imagination. As soon as the new shape and color (or colorform, as the elements in his paintings later came to be called) were down on the canvas, an adjacent square attracted his attention. With less hesitation, he followed his impulse and filled in the "right" color and shape; before long, the empty canvas had become a painting and Hammersley had found the direction he had been seeking.

This direction has provided a rich field of inquiry. Hammersley has been particularly interested in resolving oppositions between contrasting colors and shapes. In pursuing this goal, he has developed a process that involves a notebook of initial ideas with rudimentary drawings and another notebook with more detailed drawings of ideas that appear promising; these notebooks are in themselves works of art. Once he has settled on an idea, Hammersley applies one colorform at a time to the canvas, waiting as long as it takes for the next one to appear clearly in his imagination as "right" for the painting. He calls these "hunch paintings" and compares the process to the structure of a pinecone, in which the shape and placement of each element is dependent on those that surround it.

This analogy applies equally to the course of his career. By paying attention to the immediate next step in developing his art, Hammersley has created a body of work that has been exhibited in major museums and is represented in important collections. He takes it all in stride, confident that his intuition will continue to supply him with the right next move.

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