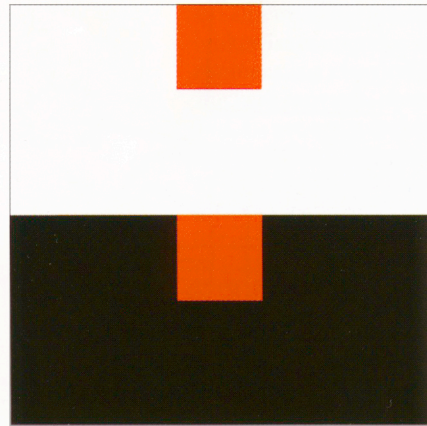


Frederick Hammersley

AMERINGER YOHE FINE ART

Frederick Hammersley,
Costume Change,
1981, oil on linen,
40 x 40".



For all their formalist rigor, and however judiciously proportioned they may be—all the planes are in “measured” relationship to one another—Frederick Hammersley’s paintings offer up contrasts that are generally unresolved. His works may be geometrical—Hammersley is one of the founding fathers of so-called hard-edge painting, which

originated in 1950s Los Angeles partly in reaction to the apparently ill-disciplined messiness of New York AbEx, replacing it with something of the clarity of De Stijl—but they are geometrically uncanny. That is, they subvert compositional harmony even as they evoke it.

In *Costume Change*, 1981, for example, the canvas is bisected horizontally into two broad planes, one black and one white; at the top edge of each plane, Hammersley has centered a small red square. He thus implies the shapes’ unity but ensures that they remain polarized nonetheless. The work’s symmetry suddenly seems asymmetrical, resulting in a sort of skewed icon. The light

is above the dark the way sky is above the earth, and never the twain shall meet. The landscape metaphor may seem farfetched, but Hammersley’s blackness is heavy with gravity, his whiteness buoyantly light. In *In Two*, 1977, sky blue infiltrates the geometrical scene, and one cannot help but wonder whether the New Mexico environment in which the artist lives and works informs his paintings.

Hammersley often seems to be playing the familiar game of dimensional confusion inaugurated by Cubism. Sometimes the planes in his paintings seem to recede, forming an illusionistic space, but they always snap back to the surface, which remains resolutely, triumphantly flat. This is particularly the case in *Exact Change*, 1977, and *Devoted Two*, 1979. The diagonal seems to move in and out of space, demarking a geometrical structure, but the planes quickly reassert their flatness, reminding us that the illusion of depth is precisely that—an illusion. There’s a hint of perspective—the diagonal is in effect an orthogonal—but its construction is incomplete. For all the spatial ambiguity, the surface—an intarsia of planes, often square, as in *Seem Same*, 1979, indicating a debt to Suprematism—remains graphically simple. And for all the drama generated by the change from light to dark (reading from left to right), with brown as an intermediary—gray serves the same function in *Devoted Two*—the surface remains unruffled.

The same holds true in *Altered Ego*, 1971, in which there is no mediator between the extremes, making for an abrupt contrast. We are invited to fit the black square into the white slot. There is a sense of bated breath, of thwarted expectation here that is the key to Hammersley’s paintings: It gives them their tension, and with that their aura of inconclusiveness. It saves their flatness from platitudinousness. It saves them from designer emptiness. It gives them an intensity that sidesteps facile harmony. Two never become one in these paintings—synthesis never convincingly happens. The artist is always in a situation of *Either Or*, to borrow the title of a 1960 painting, stuck on the horns of a dilemma. But it is this that gives his abstractions their invigorating uncertainty.

—Donald Kuspit