

FREDERICK HAMMERSLEY: DRAWING CLOSER

Picasso once said, “There is no abstract art, you must always start with something. Afterwards you can remove all traces of reality.” Frederick Hammersley’s figurative drawings are a start, becoming pathways to his pioneering hard-edged abstract paintings. The drawings are not only studies, but also sensitive expressions of how direction and weight of line generate movement, shadow and light form geometries and create mood, and dramatic value scales evoke psychological and visceral responses.

There are many thoughtful portraits and nudes in this show, but the drawings that most attract my interest are six small spontaneous portraits hanging in a line on the wall opposite the entrance. These works evoke Picasso’s words and refer to the statement by the great Italian art historian Giorgio Vasari, “In art, drawing is the necessary beginning of everything.” All six sketches suggest concerns addressed in the artist’s abstract paintings.

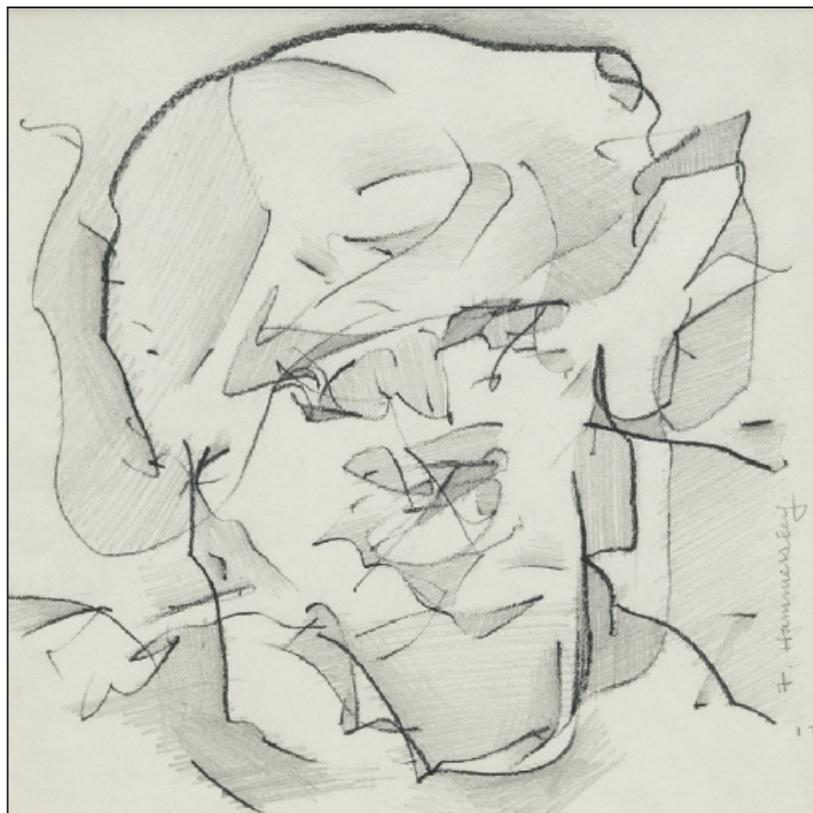
The contours of each face in *Outward* (1965) and *Agreed* (1975) are defined by a scribble-like fluid line, with dark strokes. Patches of smudged pencil within these linear borders become planes that float forward in space, giving each expression volume and density. Strong gestural lines determine the topology of the face in *Yes* (1974). These dark tangles live on the inside and outside of the contours, creating a paradox, the same type of paradox that one finds in Hammersley’s paintings. Form is contained and liberated at the same time.

Succinct (1975) is the most minimal of the small portraits. Three curvilinear charcoal lines enclose the face. A jagged lightning-like mouth and a tiny triangular eye suggest tremendous energy and abandon in this asymmetrical meditation. Ink dots connected by linear sweeps articulate and punctuate features and their relationships to one another in *Stuffed Shirt* (1980). This little ink portrait is extremely spare, yet bursts with spontaneity and expression, another paradox when considering the title and subject matter. The final drawing along the wall, *Madam* (1975), also dances with ink. Angles and curves are broken, carving a multifaceted space, but poised perfectly to viscerally portray the persona of a woman with a forceful personality.

The drawings throughout the show have been framed by the artist, who has thoughtfully designed, carved, and colored each one to create a harmonious dialogue with the enclosed artwork and bring a dynamic equilibrium to the entire body of work.

Kudos to Charlotte Jackson for presenting an exhibition of Hammersley’s drawings at the time of his ninetieth birthday. It’s an insightful tribute and offering, but it’s risky. Jackson is presenting private reflections never exhibited before. Yet it’s uplifting to enter an unexpected and intimate realm that expands our knowledge of the range and complexity of Hammersley’s works.

SUSANNA CARLISLE



Frederick Hammersley, *Outward*, pencil on paper, 7½" x 7½", 1975