

Review: Frederick Hammersley at LA Louver Gallery

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Organics and Cut-ups, 1963-1965 On View through October 18

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One of the most invigorating aspects of the Getty Foundation's massive [Pacific Standard Time](#) project has been a rediscovery of the key role that the [Santa Barbara Museum of Art](#) played in offering early recognition to outstanding modern artists working in Southern California. For example, in 1965, while under the directorship of legendary curator Thomas Leavitt, the SBMA presented the first solo museum exhibition of paintings by [Frederick Hammersley](#). As one of the four artists included in the groundbreaking 1959 show *Abstract Classicism*, Hammersley had already established himself as both a skillful innovator and a rigorous thinker. His "Geometrics," a series of paintings characterized by the flatness and asymmetrical regularity of their simple shapes and bold colors, made Hammersley a logical companion for Piet Mondrian, whose "boogie-woogie" grids were also shown by the museum in that same year. The current *Contemporary/Modern* exhibition, which remains on display at the SBMA through January 4, includes two excellent paintings by Hammersley from the museum's permanent collection, one of which belongs to a very limited series of works known as "cut-ups" that the painter executed in two bursts, once in February of 1964, and then again a year later in January and February of 1965.

Frederick Hammersley *Agnes*, 1965 oil on chipboard panel 29 1/4 x 24 1/4 x 1 1/4 in. (74.3 x 61.6 x 3.2 cm) framed Copyright Frederick Hammersley Foundation. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

These unusual "cut-up" paintings and the "Organics" series which served as their source material are the subject of a fascinating and powerful exhibit now on view at LA Louver Gallery in Venice Beach through October 18. LA Louver has done a magnificent job of researching and documenting Hammersley's multifaceted career, and, as more becomes known about the specifics of his process, it seems likely that Hammersley will assume a commanding position as one of the most prescient and durable figures in the history of modernism. [Organics and Cut-Ups, 1963-1965](#) makes a great place to start with Hammersley because it finds him responding to the demands of a rising reputation with a singularly heroic gesture that also happens to result in 16 utterly captivating images, several of which were included in the 1965 SBMA show, but most of which have not been widely seen since then.



A consummate draftsman who spent many fruitful hours throughout his career sketching from life, Hammersley the abstract artist loved to experiment by introducing specific constraints on his work. The gorgeous, lyrical paintings in the "Organics" series are the product of one such decision in which Hammersley limited himself entirely to shapes that could be produced by curves. These "topographical" images hold up remarkably well today, and there are many to admire in the LA Louver show, including such masterpieces as "Circle one, #31" from 1963-1964, an abstract composition in red, pink, green, and blue that rivals Matisse in its sheer formal ecstasy.

For the "cut-ups," Hammersley took existing organics and literally sliced them into neat squares of approximately 4 inches. He then shuffled them and rearranged them on a grid, reconstituting images that had been created on the horizontal as "landscapes" as checkerboard patterns in portrait orientation. Then he gave several of these puzzle-like

images enigmatic, portrait-style names such as “Agnes #9c” and Alice #4c.” Far from reducing the lyrical qualities of their source works, these remixes succeed miraculously in amplifying them. What was beautiful in the “Organics” becomes mysterious and even prophetic in the cut-ups, as we see what would become the two competing systems for rendering images digitally — the vector and the bitmap — coming together and harmonizing. In 1969, Hammersley would become among the first artists in the world to use computers to create images, and in this exciting show, one can see him operating on similar design principles in advance of the technology that would make them commonplace.

For more on the show, visit [the gallery's website](#).

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