

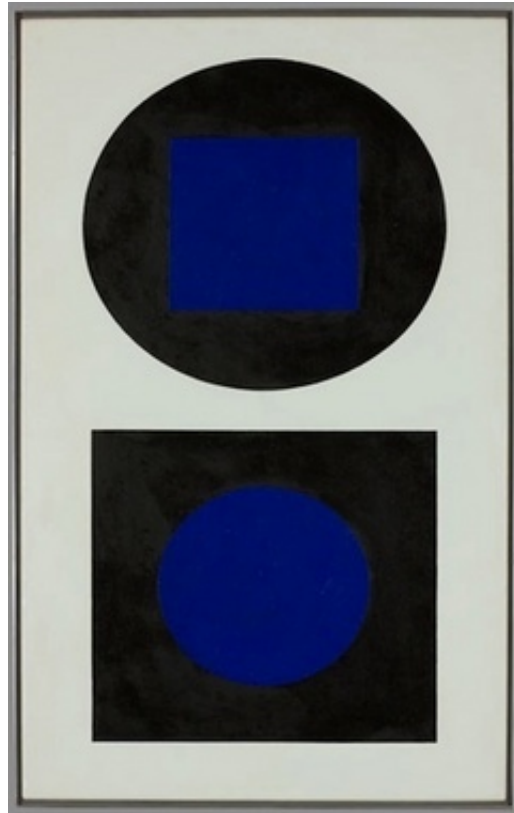
Frederick Hammersley

LA LOUVER GALLERY
45 North Venice Boulevard
March 22–May 12

Biographies and obituaries of Frederick Hammersley (1919–2009) invariably cite the artist's inclusion in LACMA's 1959 traveling exhibition "Four Abstract Classicists" as cementing his art-historical legacy as a West Coast modernist, a "hard-edge" painter of collagelike arrangements of cool, crisp forms. Less often noted is the fact that Hammersley also participated in the MoMA's 1965 optical art spectacular, "The Responsive Eye." His penchant for delightful retinal perplexity comes to the fore in this stunning survey, curated by L. A. Louver, which comprises thirty-six works made between 1949 and 1989.

One dozen of the works on view, part of a set that Hammersley termed "geometrics," are square oil-on-linen objects that play like rudimentary perceptual effects. Each taut, strikingly simple composition of solid rectangles, trapezoids, and/or triangles is structurally balanced, if not fastidiously symmetrical. Hammersley, however, upends the spatial equanimity with chromatic inversions; he often paints mirroring, usually adjacent shapes each in black or white, the contrast creating the illusion of pictorial depth and expanses that optically recede and push forward simultaneously. Interlocking shapes also appear as overlapping forms, while entire compositions visually flip and slide. Titles like *Black and forth*, #3, 1971, and *Here here*, #3, 1975, add to the winking fun.

A selection of early works shown here set precedents for Hammersley's quirky optical gamesmanship. Eleven lithographs from 1949–50 of three-inch-square grids are each divided into sixteen square units, which the artist further checkered or striped, suggesting coexistent, competing shifts in scale. In the canvas *Legacy*, #41, 1964, he offers a visual conundrum via a meeting of seeming equals, pairing a blue circle within a black square with a similarly sized black circle containing a blue square. Comparative coupling also pervades ten "organics" from the 1960s and '80s in which figurative nub and blob shapes nestle and abut, puzzlelike, in artist-carved frames. Again, Hammersley uses demarcated color—here refreshing, creamy pigments—to define space indeterminately, conjuring biomorphs as patch, protrusion, cavity, transparent gel, or perhaps even, in another act of doubling, a gaping mouth or an unblinking eye.



Frederick Hammersley, *Legacy*, #41, 1964, oil on canvas, 50 x 31".

— Kurt Mueller