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**Los Angeles Painting in the 1970s**

**By Peter Frank**



**Karl Benjamin**

*#2,* 1977

oil on canvas, 35" x 25"

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Photo: Gerard Vuilleumier

The decade of the 1970s saw an explosion of art across America--everywhere, of every kind, by everyone. Nowhere did this explosion have more resonance than in Los Angeles; during the decade the city flooded with artists, newly graduated from Southern California's many art schools and departments or attracted by the city's growing cultural sophistication and complexity. And nowhere more than Los Angeles did the anomalies of 1970s artistic discourse make themselves powerfully felt.

In the wake of Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and the proliferation of "Media Arts" (video, performance, artists' books, etc.), many proclaimed the death of painting. But painting flourished--and, in response to the moment's heady sense of experiment, the discipline mutated, fused with other practices, and generally metamorphosed as if emerging from a chrysalis. In LA, in fact, painting seemed to emerge from a mad scientist's laboratory, a de-domesticated creature able to adopt many guises and absorb many substances. Many pictures were all but invisible. Many "paintings" lacked paint. Things hung on the wall as if on a coat rack or shelf--or they didn't hang at all. Paintings, paint-things, non-paintings, and un-paintings could be produced as readily in a tool shed or car repair shop as in a studio.  Such willingness to stretch the definitions of painting almost to the breaking point could be found all over America, but this disregard for painterly tradition was particularly acute in Los Angeles. Unlike New York, say, or San Francisco, LA had never been much of a painting town. Its major creative industry favored image over object and tended to regard the act of painting as a backlot-workplace job rather than a sacred ritual. The end product was the goal, and if the end product bespoke the process of its making, that process was one of material fabrication rather than personal expression. (Most nominal "expressionists" prominent in Los Angeles were in fact more concerned with political than with personal issues.) Given its growing surfeit of art schools and art departments, however, LA was a place where one could learn, teach, and make good painting--and where one could tinker with painting, expanding its techniques and tweaking its definitions without concern for the disapproval of an entrenched establishment.

Still, it's hard to generalize about painting in 1970s LA, if only because, once the stylistic floodgates opened, everyone seemed to try everything--including personal expression. Several trends in painting can be traced through the so-called "amazing decade," and some seem surprising in their traditionalism. Others, however, are equally surprising in the unprecedented, and unanticipated, conception and production invested into them.

Some of Southern California's most important and most experimental artists in this period were painter--perhaps committed to painting, perhaps simply adept at it, but willing and able to drive home their ideas with painting and thus secure (or rather, re-secure) for painting an enhanced regard as a viable realm of experiment. Those who made pictures exploited painting with authority equal to those who made objects or visual fields. Those who worked with oil gained no more or less respect from their peers than those who worked with newer pigmented media. Those who applied pigment to paper were not regarded as lesser painters than those who applied it to canvas. Those who manipulated the shape and surface of their supports were as welcome to do so as were those who worked within the rectangular contours of the western tradition.

Individual artists--notably teachers--might challenge other painters to try it their way or to study particular methods and models in greater depth; but there was no blanket condemnation of any particular practice on the basis of any aesthetic ideology. The mocking dismissal coming from "post-studio" artists and theorists then in ascendancy was enough to unite figurative painter with finish fetish, color-field with photo-realist, in a "rear-guard" defensive action that, in the end, was neither rear-guard nor defensive. Painters held their own--and wound up commanding respect from and dialogue with even the most extreme conceptualists. At a certain point, in fact, it occurred to some conceptualists that the most extreme their practice could get was... painting.   If painting could finally establish itself in Los Angeles as a reflexive practice and a site of mediumistic experiment as of the 1970s, it did not devolve into pluralist disfocus--although, by positing itself alongside local non-painterly practices, and also alongside contrasting painterly practices in other American cities, the very fact of LA painting's emergence added to the pluralism of American art at the time. In Los Angeles itself, several trends could be identified. The first kind of avant-garde painting in Los Angeles to have come to international prominence was Hard-Edge abstraction, a significant harbinger of Minimalism--and, as importantly, a significant precursor of Finish Fetish and Light and Space art, which manifested in painting no less than in sculpture or installation. In turn, the "de-materialization" of painting in these contexts led to a reconsideration of painterly--and non-, quasi-, and post-painterly--materials and the appearance of a "materialist" abstraction just as mediumistically reflexive as performance, video, et. al. And all the while, approaches to representational subjects grew in number and in depth.

The four artists centrally associated with "Abstract Classicism"--John McLaughlin, Lorser Feitelson, Frederick Hammersley, and Karl Benjamin---were *eminence grises* in LA art throughout the decade. McLaughlin and Feitelson died and Hammersley moved to New Mexico, leaving Benjamin, an influential teacher at Pomona College, and semi-figurative hard-edger Helen Lundeberg the vital proponents of this direction. In their wake, younger geometric painters in the later 1960s turned to a more elemental, color- and even perception-oriented approach, realizing structurally and coloristically ambitious work. Among these were Judy Chicago's sprayed acrylic on acrylic panels of the early '70s, Ron Davis's *tromp l'oeil* geometries and Norman Zammitt's gradated "sunrise" abstractions, which he produced in that decade as well as the previous. In turn, these anticipated the emergence of monochrome painting--the ultimate on-canvas minimalism--later in the decade, practiced by such as James Hayward, Roy Thurston, Edith Baumann, Alan Wayne, David Trowbridge, Sam Erenberg, Patsy Krebs, and a host of others.

Such monochrome works took at least as much, however, from non-painterly models proffered by finish fetish and light-and-space practitioners such as Larry Bell, James Turrell, and especially Robert Irwin--and from the example of an artist (and teacher) like Tony DeLap, who found he could challenge notions of perception as easy in painting formats as in sculptural. Conversely, a number of abstract painters explored the grid as both a structural armature--as in the mid-'70s work of Doug Edge--and as a means of establishing a "virtual monochrome," a way of "disappearing" compositional incident, as in the paintings John Miller produced after 1975.

In their reliance on incessantly repeated units, Edge and Miller overlapped with more painterly, and certainly more self-consciously decorative, pattern painters such as Merion Estes and Kim MacConnel. Estes, an early presence at the Women's Building, was one of a number of artists inspired by feminism to employ pattern (as well as materials associated with domestic environments) as a way of asserting feminine experience in experimental practice. MacConnel, in turn, participated in the circle of artists who had galvanized at the University of California San Diego around critic Amy Goldin's theories on non-centric form and its social implications.   Both Estes and MacConnel employed eccentric, non-traditional materials as supports for their pattern painting, and in this they intersected with a generation of artists whose teachers--including Irwin, DeLap, Hans Burkhardt, Karen Carson, Peter Plagens, and, notably, Craig Kauffman and Ed Moses--had closely examined the relationship of material (traditionally artistic and otherwise) to form and inspired the same sort of curiosity with and delight in physical, even chemical process. The "material abstraction" this generation produced included the paint-based process works of such artists as Jerrold Burchman and Charles Arnoldi and the non-paint-based formulations of Charles Christopher Hill (known for his decayed collages of rags and newsprint), Patrick Hogan (who embedded shapes described with rope in thick, almost volcanic surfaces), and many others.  To be sure, figural practices also flourished in a number of different modalities, ranging from the traditional to the eccentric to the Pop. Photo-realism and other forms of hyper-representation took aim at the Southern California landscape and lifestyle in the stylized palm trees of Laurence Dreiband, for example, and the snapshot-like figure groupings of DJ Hall. The knowing neo-primitivism that would receive the approving rubric of "bad painting," precursing Neo-Expressionism, had been practiced by Charles Garabedian, Eduardo Carrillo, and several other artists (notably associated with the artist-run Ceeje Gallery) since the '60s, and was taken up in particular by a number of younger Latino painters including Gronk, Patssi Valdez, Frank Romero, and Gilbert "Magu" Lujan. The work of Ruth Weisberg, Joyce Treiman, Charles White, and several other prominent teachers--and not a few of their students--depended on a naturalism rooted in Renaissance, Baroque, and even 19th-century academic practice.

Then, of course, there were painters such as Burkhardt, Carson, Marvin Harden, Scott Grieger, Tom Wudl, and Maxwell Hendler whose work changed notably from one end of the 1970s to the other, metamorphosing from one style, or medium, to another or even synthesizing available styles and media into practices at once emphatically eccentric and eminently logical. These painters were claiming for themselves the right to evolve, reverse course, and change their minds--a right that the open artistic atmosphere in Southern California, sourced not in commercial galleries but in the vital, contentious intellectual milieu of art schools and university art departments, only encouraged. (It may seem contradictory, if not absurd, to describe academe as a "vital milieu," but when schools are good, they are precisely that. California's postwar educational explosion was peaking in the 1970s, and, in the absence of any other significant support structure, the schools were where artists were educated, where they were employed, and even where they could exhibit.)  Painters working in and near Los Angeles in the 1970s spanned sociological as well as aesthetic distinctions, personal backgrounds as well as artistic approaches, yielding a dizzying array of visual experience ranging from the narrative to the perceptual, sensual experience to conceptual experience. Painters back then were helping to define a discourse marked less by permissiveness than by tolerance; because their primary--often only--audience was other artists, these artists felt they had to perform at the top of their game, and they could get away with something recondite or nutty but not something lame. Some were veterans, maintaining clear--cut modernist traditions and painting as a site of exemplary form and image. Many others, members of the emerging or recently emerged generations, were forging new paths, eager not so much to contradict their elders as to build outward in every direction from their postulates. If the older artists had been challenged with "That's no way to paint!," then the younger ones heard "That's not painting!" and responded to such reaction with precisely the same nervy defiance.  Artists, painters in particular, are not hothouse plants. They may grow in hothouses, but they flourish in the wild. Southern California in the '70s was a wilderness in that regard, poor in areas of exposure even while rich in areas of spontaneous growth and cultivation. As a result, painting exploded in and around Los Angeles, its various manifestations madly mutating and cross-breeding. Sometimes it didn't look or act like painting at all. Sometimes it did. Sometimes it did and didn't, even when it stuck to the "rules" of painting. It was still painting, but it had become something else as well, something that could be painting and something besides painting at the same time. In the 1970s, whatever it did elsewhere, painting re-invented itself in--and arguably because of--Southern California.