Karl Benjamin’s Colorful Resurgence

By Jori Finkel

The painter Karl Benjamin designed his studio, a low-riding post-and-beam structure in his backyard, to match his midcentury house here. Outside, near the garden, leans a placard: “[Noam Chomsky](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/c/noam_chomsky/index.html?inline=nyt-per) for President.” Inside is a mix of work tables and desks. One table is covered with a mess of slides and plastic sleeves. Another holds a can full of brushes.

Mr. Benjamin’s bold, color-loaded paintings — some striped, others popping with squares or triangles — fill wooden storage racks and hang on the walls. Many are so bright they look as if they were made last year.

Except for the immaculate condition of the brushes, there is no sign that the artist, now 81, stopped painting in 1995. A bad back, a bad hip and “years of drinking too much,” he said, made handling the canvases difficult. “I started getting too creaky to haul these things around.”

Now he uses the studio as an office and informal gallery. “I never thought this would happen,” he said. “Poets don’t fade away. Poets don’t retire.”

However frustrating, retirement has forced Mr. Benjamin to focus less on the production and more on the reception of his work. For decades he had been painting prolifically and selling sporadically, all the while teaching nearby at Pomona College and Claremont Graduate University. But in the last few years he has become more careful about where he exhibits, and local curators and critics have been reconsidering his contribution to the history of California art.

This summer, the Claremont Museum of Art reopened after a 20-year hiatus with a retrospective of Mr. Benjamin’s paintings. Two critics, Dave Hickey and Peter Frank, recently organized separate group exhibitions featuring his work. The curator Elizabeth Armstrong has included 10 of his early canvases in “Birth of the Cool” at the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach, opening Sunday. And Louis Stern Fine Arts in West Hollywood opened its third and most ambitious Benjamin survey, “Dance the Line,” on Sept. 29; it runs until Dec. 22.

Mr. Stern has chosen 51 paintings from 1954 to 1995, more than will fit on the gallery walls. He started with 18 and plans to rotate others in later. “Karl has never really gotten his due,” he said, “so we felt it was important to show a diversity of works” — including several never before exhibited.

Ms. Armstrong calls the material “fresh” for another reason. “When I first saw Karl’s work five or six years ago,” she said, “I thought it was a new painter who just got out of school, someone trying to look retro.” She chalks up her mistake to the fact that many younger artists, like Tim Bavington and Jorge Pardo, are also mining the imagery of American postwar design.

A self-taught artist, Mr. Benjamin began painting in 1950 while working as a grade school teacher. His principal started it all by asking him to add 47 minutes a week of art instruction to the curriculum.

“I bought some crayons and paper,” he said. “And the kids drew trucks, trees, mountains. That was boring, so I said, No trucks, no trees. And they said, What should we do? I said the right thing, even though I didn’t have any background in art. I said, Be quiet and concentrate.”

That exercise — ultimately a lesson in “finding the right color to put down next to another” — is not far from Mr. Benjamin’s own sense of composition. As he likes to say, “Color is the subject matter of painting.”

When school let out, Mr. Benjamin began experimenting with oils at home, at first imitating artists like Miró. He also got to know the Los Angeles art scene of the 1950s.

“The scene was so different then,” he said. “We were all painting, but not as a career. There were no M.F.A. programs, no colleges with decent art programs, no jobs, no market.”

There were, however, a few museums. In 1954 he had his first solo show, at the Pasadena Museum of Art. By the end of the decade he was talking with his fellow artists Frederick Hammersley, John McLaughlin and Lorser Feitelson about doing a group show, with Jules Langsner as curator, for the Pomona College gallery. When the gallery’s director, Peter Selz, decamped for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the show went instead to the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/l/los_angeles_county_museum_of_art/index.html?inline=nyt-org), which “was known more for its dinosaur bones back then,” Mr. Benjamin recalled with a laugh.

“Four Abstract Classicists” traveled to London, where the work was more accurately called “hard-edge painting.” A reaction against the emotional excesses of Abstract Expressionism, the movement offered a Californian counterpart to geometric work by [Ellsworth Kelly](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/k/ellsworth_kelly/index.html?inline=nyt-per), Frank Stella and the New York Color Field painters; it later included other California painters like Helen Lundeberg and June Harwood.

It was a loose movement, according to Mr. Benjamin. “We never really thought we were alike,” he said in his studio, facing a densely patterned painting with a bright, Skittles-like palette. “We just knew we were not Abstract Expressionists.”

Mr. Benjamin’s version of hard-edge meant saturated, often sunny colors, playing off or resonating with one another in geometric designs. And all sorts of contrasting colors did the trick, from fruity yellows and oranges to deep purples and blues. The colors gave shape to various designs: assorted triangles, lozenges, squares, pyramids and vertical stripes, along with some pixelated and tiled patterns that anticipated computer effects.

He sometimes followed simple mathematical rules or progressions instead of his intuition, as with the large checkerboard-style painting from 1972 that hangs in his living room. His first step for this composition, 24 rows of 24 rectangles, was to choose eight colors, each with three different values. Then he assigned a number to each hue and wrote those numbers on 24 tickets. “My teenage daughter pulled the tickets out of a jar to determine the sequencing of colors,” he said. He overruled chance, he said, only “if the same color came up twice in a row.”

But no matter how he generated the pattern, his technique remained remarkably consistent. He rarely created the illusion of depth in his work and consistently eliminated all signs of brushwork, using a broad brush to spread paint evenly after it was applied. He used masking tape while working to create those hard edges between colors.

And he stuck with oils. He tried acrylic paint for a few months in the 1960s but thought the color looked flat. “You can tell why by looking under a microscopic,” he explained. “An acrylic will look solid, opaque, where oil looks like little red or blue jewels suspended in the medium. You can see the light going through it, like the effect of stained glass.”

Mr. Benjamin’s devotion to geometric abstraction has never wavered. Not even when abstract painting has come under fire for lacking political relevance. Despite the pro-Chomsky and antiwar signs around the house, the artist likes to keep his politics out of his work. With maybe one wry exception. When artists on the faculty at Pomona wondered where his social content was, he gave one series from the ’80s the nickname “Viet Cong,” as its shapes resemble interlocking V’s and C’s.

Now that his work is getting more play at Louis Stern Fine Arts, Mr. Benjamin is taking that, too, in stride. “As an abstract painter, you’re always flying in the face of your country’s values,” he said. “All of a sudden Louis is selling a lot, but I’ve never made a lot of money. That’s not what it’s about. It’s about getting the colors right.”