

A small, yet powerful, tribute

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"hard-edge" painting.

The show's sweep of three decades demonstrates how long this type of painting endured in Los Angeles, and it implies how influential it was to be on subsequent artists of very different means. However, guest curator Dave Hickey has dispensed with

the established term "hard-edge" painting, and it's easy to see why. He wants to emphasize this art's emergence as a distinctly local idiom — as the vernacular dialect of postwar art in Los Angeles.

Langsner originally coined the term in 1958, in an essay for an exhibition called "Four Abstract Classicists" that stood as a stark contrast to the gestural, painterly qualities of Abstract Expressionism. Since then, however, hard-edge has been absorbed into wider critical discourse as a generic description for a painting method, typified

by such artists as Ellsworth Kelly and Kenneth Noland. By contrast, calling it the Los Angeles School stands in sharp distinction from the New York School.

The Otis show employs savvy installation design to articulate the work. The gallery walls are painted a deep taupe-green, rather than standard-issue white, and the color stops at a strip of molding several feet below the room's high ceiling. Three cubic alcoves have been built within the rectangular space of the room so that each artist is separate and can be seen as a distinct voice. The alcoves are placed in an asymmetrical pattern (two on one wall, one on the other). No labels interrupt the walls, but a printed handout maps the installation for a visitor.

In short, the installation divides the planar space of the gallery with color, creating a dynamic equilibrium, while text is subordinate to perceptual experience. Design is elevated as a value. These are intrinsic qualities of Los Angeles School painting, and they drive the extrinsic environment in which they are being displayed. From there it's a short hop, conceptually speaking, to the Light and Space art of Robert Irwin, Doug Wheeler and other artists who are a legacy of the show's hard-edge painting.

The paintings by the six artists are installed in suggestive pairs, opposite one another in the room. McLaughlin holds one end-wall, with the equally pure abstractions of **Frederick Hammersley** at the other. Lundeberg is opposite **Karl Benjamin**, whose interlocking forms suggest architectonic landscapes rather than her organic ones.

Finally, intimations of motion and expanding space created without traditional devices of illusionist painting describe the final pairing of canvases, by **Lorser Feitelson** (1898-1978) and **June Harwood**. In their work, surface shapes kiss, peel away and twist in space, solely through calibrations of color, scale and design.

"The Los Angeles School" is a fully satisfying exhibition, not least because it resonates against the provocative abstract painting being made today by such younger artists as Monique Prieto, Kevin Appel and Darcy Huebler. Still, it cries out for a full-scale retrospective consideration by a major museum; the Los Angeles School, Light and Space art and recent Abstract painting describe an important, if overlooked aesthetic arc over the last half-century.

Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, 9045 Lincoln Blvd., Los Angeles, (310) 665-6905, through Jan. 22. Closed Sundays and Mondays (and Thanksgiving weekend), www.otis.edu

AROUND THE GALLERIES

Staking a claim for an idiom of Los Angeles

By **CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT**
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With just 24 paintings — four each by six artists — "The Los Angeles School" is a thumbnail sketch of a powerful period for Abstract art. On the 40th anniversary of the landmark survey exhibition, "California Hard Edge Painting," organized in 1964 for the old Newport Harbor Art Museum (now the Orange County Museum of Art) by the insightful and influential art critic Jules Langsner, the Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College of Art and Design has assembled the show as a small but potent homage.

The earliest work is an untitled 1952 geometric composition by **John McLaughlin** (1898-1976), which uses squares and rectangles of flat color to divide planar space into a field of dynamic equilibrium. The most recent painting is a 1983 work by **Helen Lundeberg** (1908-1999), whose flat, undulating shapes in tones of gray and peach recall a quiet landscape populated only by the observant viewer. (The painting is titled "Wetlands II," and it does suggest a watery marshland stretching toward the distant horizon beneath a

flat gray morning or evening sky.) McLaughlin's pure abstraction and Lundeberg's allusion to the visible world are both achieved with uninflected color laid down in crisp, clearly defined shapes — hence the term [See *Galleries*, Page E18]

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Ruscha emerged on the Los Angeles scene at the instant when, in the words of Dave Hickey, "art in Los Angeles became Los Angeles Art." That is to say, while Ruscha went on to become L.A.'s first emblematic artist, he wasn't the first here to develop a style unique to the Southland. That distinction belongs to artists of the previous generation, the artists of the 1950s who chose not to follow the lead of New York and instead developed their own response to European modernist models. While back East the touchstones were surrealism and expressionism leading to abstract expressionism, out here surrealism mingled with geometric abstraction, and the result was something radically different—a pared-down geometry that from one angle could be entirely non-objective construction, but from another angle could be seen as a highly stylized rendition of infinite recessive space and/or an entirely inward, Asia-inflected contemplation of the void.

There were painters around the world who also worked in this manner; but in 1959, four such painters showed here and in Europe as a new Los Angeles school, identifying an "abstract classicist"—or "hard-edge"—tendency in American painting that gave context to East Coasters like Ellsworth Kelly and Agnes Martin and gave credibility to L.A. as an art center. Critic-curator Hickey has commemorated that moment by bringing the four—all male—together with the two female painters who worked alongside them. As Hickey's selection stands here, the work of Helen Lundeborg and June Harwood hangs together with that of Lorser Feitelson, John McLaughlin, Frederick Hammersley and Karl Benjamin.

Hickey could have selected the show any number of ways, emphasizing that 1959 moment, tracking the development of the six painters since then (half of them are still alive), or zeroing in on specific bodies of work in the oeuvre of each. Hickey has opted pretty much for the latter, given his preference for what looks good over what best comprises a history lesson, but he has chosen not to be consistent. Hammersley, for example, shows four late-1970s canvases in which sharp, flat color areas interlock in a constant pattern, while McLaughlin, always the Zen-est of the bunch, is represented by even starker, purely rectilinear compositions spanning two decades.

For Feitelson and Harwood, Hickey samples two bodies of work each. A mid-'60s Harwood, all romping, scalloping curves, accompanies three Harwoods from earlier in that decade, elegantly intricate interplays of slightly tilted bars and boxes. Two rhythmic black-and-white Feitelsons from 1952 only hint at the intoxicating color and voluptuous sinew of his two other canvases from the early '60s. Especially here, it's tempting to wonder why Hickey didn't simply go with the majority Harwoods and the sexier Feitelsons. Given the gallery's limited space, he could have zoomed

in on a single body of work for each artist, but why Monday-morning-quarterback a strategy that wins the game anyway? *The Los Angeles School* makes its basic point—this was the first artwork that looked Southern-Californian—by looking clean, handsome and self-possessed, but not self-contained.