

## Hard Edges, Soft Touches

June Harwood

[By Peter Frank](#)

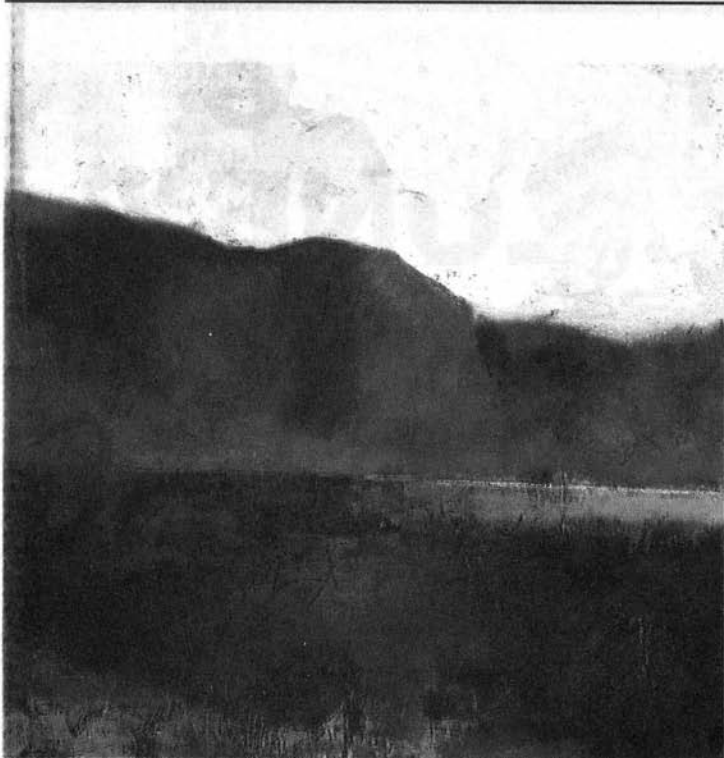
Wednesday, March 26, 2008 - 10:30 am

The “little sister” of Los Angeles hard-edge painting, June Harwood has evolved from hard to soft edges since the 1960s. Now she is fusing the two supposedly opposite tendencies, and making it work. The hard edges have effectively come loose from their moorings, acting less as borders for areas of color than as structural counterpoint to the colored planes. Harwood’s recent soft-edged, almost impressionist color fields maintain in those planes, serving to contrast with the linear geometries underscoring or interrupting them. It’s not an easy balancing act, especially as Harwood avoids what would be an easy balancing act, a merely tasteful arrangement of hard and soft, line and plane; instead, she seeks — and achieves — lively and unsettling relationships between the forms. *Louis Stern, 9002 Melrose Ave., W. Hlywd., Tues.-Fri. 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Sat. 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; thru April 5. (310) 276-0147*

The elevation of "abstract classicism" to historical status has led, among other things, to the rediscovery of '60s hard-edge abstractionist June Harwood. She's no longer hard-edge; hell, she's hardly even abstract. But her current paintings, for all their muted color and painterly mistiness, still have a powerful immediacy to them. They are not pictures of places; in the physicality of their surfaces and their dramatic shifts in tonality these views of mountains and bodies of water present a gritty, tactile surface. Harwood's approach to her subject matter remains abstract which is why the paintings don't (just) make you think of your last visit to Yosemite, or Maine, but bring the sensation of that kind of space, that kind of atmosphere, back to your skin. At Louis Stern, 9002 Melrose Ave., W. Hlywd.; Tues.-Fri., 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Sat., 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; thru Feb. 26. (310) 276-0147.

—Peter Frank

## AROUND THE GALLERIES



Louis Stern Fine Arts

**LANDSCAPE:** "Black Rock, Red Rock," acrylic on canvas, is included in an exhibit of June Harwood's work at Louis Stern.

## With just a touch of abstraction

By **HOLLY MYERS**  
Special to *The Times*

**June Harwood** began her career in the 1960s as a Hard Edge Abstractionist, producing sharp, brightly colored paintings in the vein of Lorser Feitelson and Karl Benjamin. (Her late husband, the critic Jules Langsner, coined the term "Hard Edge" in 1959.) In the 1970s — to sketch an admittedly reductive chronology — her forms began to splinter and swirl. In the 1980s the edges broke down and the forms mingled, and in the 1990s a gravelly texture entered in and the paintings developed a gestural feel.

Her show at Louis Stern Fine

Arts features paintings made from 2002 to 2004, and these come close to leaving the realm of abstraction altogether. Horizon lines have emerged, along with plain indications of clouds, mountains and trees. In basic structural terms, the paintings are clearly landscapes.

Their power, however, lies in their abstract roots. In each work, one senses Harwood zeroing in on the richest, most essential forms presented by the vista at hand: a jagged band of mountains above the horizon line; a mass of green reflected in a still lake below it; volumes of clouds and clusters of trees.

A few good, solid brushstrokes anchor these forms while fuzzy clouds of muted pigment spill out around them. Distinct edges appear occasionally, primarily along the horizon, but the energy they carried in earlier work seems to have diffused across the canvas into organic masses of gently modulating color.

They're beautifully confident

paintings — lush yet delicate, grounded yet spacious and compositionally sound yet gracefully atmospheric. Though relatively imposing in scale — most are 4 to 5 square feet — they have a gentle, affable presence and a generosity comparable, one imagines, to the environments they depict.

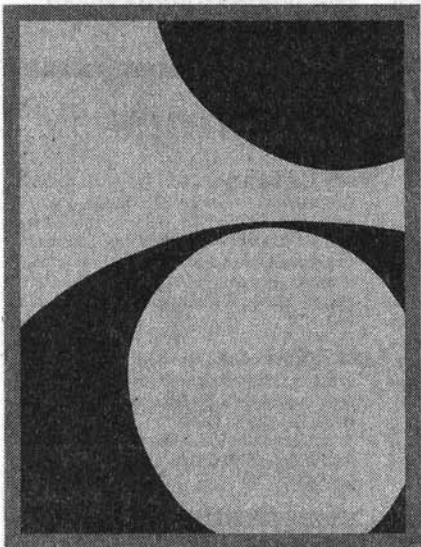
It's common to see abstraction developing out of or alluding to landscape — Kandinsky and Mondrian are two classic examples. Witnessing the reversal of that process — watching landscape emerge in the context of abstraction — is equally exciting and reminds one of the continuing relevance of that dialogue. Harwood, standing at the pinnacle of a 50-year career, appears to have distilled the best of both.

**Louis Stern Fine Arts**, 9002 Melrose Ave., West Hollywood, (310) 276-0147, through Feb. 26. Closed Sundays and Mondays.

Hard edge abstraction is what **June Harwood** has been associated with for decades, so the appearance of even a subtle shift in aesthetic is cause for comment and reflection. Thus dual color masses modulated by active brushwork and the suggestion of a horizon line explode into landscape and even narrative associations that initially seem out of character. But this injection of personality and subjectivity has to be regarded as a bold risk, and therefore significant given the late stage of an already notable career (Louis Stern Fine Arts, West Hollywood).

Feb. 2005

Art Scene Magazine



*NoHo Modern Gallery*

**A FIRST:** *"Rouge et Noir" (1965)* is in gallery's debut exhibition.

## June Harwood to the extreme

Paintings and a painted sculpture that span the decade in which June Harwood developed a style make up the debut exhibition for the NoHo Modern. The difference between the first and last painting in **June Harwood: California Hard Edge Paintings Revisited, 1959-1969** is like the contrasting extemporization of a jazz ensemble and amplified reverberation of an electric guitar.

— CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT  
Sept. 16, 2003

**June Harwood: California Hard Edge  
Painting Revisited, 1959-1969**

NoHo Modern

1125 Magnolia, North Hollywood

(818) 505-1297

Ends Dec. 1.

OCT. 31, 2003

AROUND THE GALLERIES

LOS ANGELES TIMES

# Math made lively

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT  
Times Staff Writer

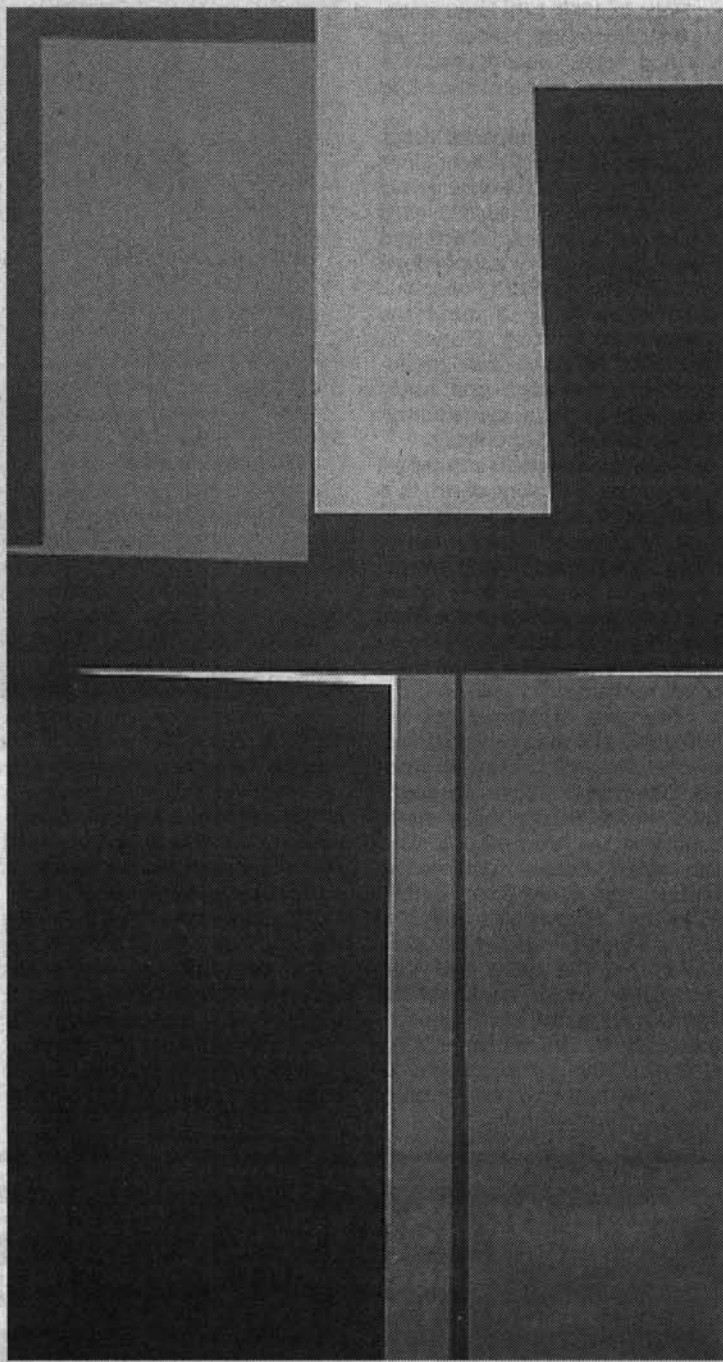
With exceptional geometric abstractions now regularly being made by younger painters as diverse as Darcy Huebler, Bart Exposito and Yek, it was inevitable that artists of an earlier generation would begin to be reassessed. One provocative and engaging example is "June Harwood: California Hard Edge Painting Revisited, 1959-1969," a newly opened exhibition at NoHo Modern.

NoHo Modern, a mid-century furnishings emporium with aspirations to establish a serious gallery program, has assembled 17 mostly untitled paintings (and one small painted sculpture) for a debut exhibition. The paintings span the decade in which Harwood developed a mature and independent style.

As oil paint and Masonite give way to plastic-based acrylics and canvas in her work, rectilinear planes of dark and light evolve into colored fields of curved space. Following the trajectory of these paintings is rather like watching tectonic plates begin to shift, break apart and slowly bend beneath unseen forces of unstoppable pressure — rather like the unfolding decade of the 1960s itself.

Harwood, who taught for many years at Los Angeles Valley College before her recent retirement, is a second-generation Hard Edge painter. The term — coined in 1959 by her late husband, the eminent art critic Jules Langsner, for an older group of painters that famously included John McLaughlin and Lorser Feitelson — marked the first episode of international success for postwar Los Angeles art. The aesthetic helped to spawn directions as disparate as the perceptual environments of Robert Irwin's Light and Space art and the epistemological sculptures of Bruce Nauman.

The show's earliest painting, from 1959, is a handsome vertical abstraction in flat, velvety shades of black, gray and teal blue. Perceptually, a subtle grid is established. Black and gray rectangles bisect the panel's bottom edge, while the top edges of those rectangles cut the picture in two across the center. (Think of mullions dividing a window.)



NoHo Modern Gallery

**GEOMETRY RULES:** Linear shapes form a grid of sorts in a 1959 abstract painting by Hard Edge artist June Harwood.

Interlocking L-shapes are dominant in the top half.

The intimation of a grid plays quietly against the actual, hand-rendered shapes, few of which are strictly horizontal or vertical. Slightly canted instead, the rectangles leave slivers of white or black between them, like piercing shards of light or shadow. The surface shapes seem to jostle for position. Without benefit of traditional devices of illusionism, space opens up.

Harwood's contrapuntal geometry feels intuitive rather than mathematically precise. It yields a more organic, less mechanical visual rhythm. Like jazz, the painting gives a platform to improvisation within an aggregate of formal rules.

The latest painting in the show seems light years away —

although a mere decade has passed. A 4-foot-square field of flat, cherry-red acrylic paint is overlaid with a precise hexagonal grid of bright blue. The grid, patterned like chicken wire, seems to curve up and away to the right. Beneath it, a second hexagonal grid in a deeper shade of red bends down and away to the right. Accentuated by the saturated colors of acrylic paint, which is also light-reflective, the juxtaposition of two vivid reds with an intense blue shoots a visual buzz though the warped space. The squared painting magically intimates a curved universe.

The difference between the first and last painting is like the difference between the extemporization of a jazz ensemble and the amplified reverberation of an

electric guitar. In the interim, Harwood honed her skills.

Other "sliver" paintings from the early 1960s introduce greater and more nuanced chromatic range while expanding the sense of optical space from flat shapes. Next, a group of so-called "color-form" paintings balance positive and negative shapes according to demands of color, composition and volume. "Coupled," which alternates flat waves of crimson and royal blue in sensuous, kissing curves, is reminiscent of the work of Feitelson — a hugely influential presence in L.A. since the 1940s — who often managed to get an almost erotic charge from purely nonfigurative means.

Next comes a series of "loop" paintings — the strongest one a horizontal red field across which a controlled yet spontaneous sequence of black rings careens. Highly animated, almost like an abstract cartoon, the painting introduces a surprising element of optical motion that the final curved grid paintings masterfully exploit.

Harwood's work belongs to a mode of abstract painting in which gesture — as an outward physical trace of the artist's internalized state — is banished. Instead, impersonal surface is everything, while elements of line, shape, form and color are continuous with one another. The goal is an objectified field of dynamic tension. In Harwood's often compelling work, it's taut yet energetic.

**NoHo Modern**, 11225 Magnolia Blvd., North Hollywood, (818) 505-1297, through Dec. 1. Closed Tuesdays.

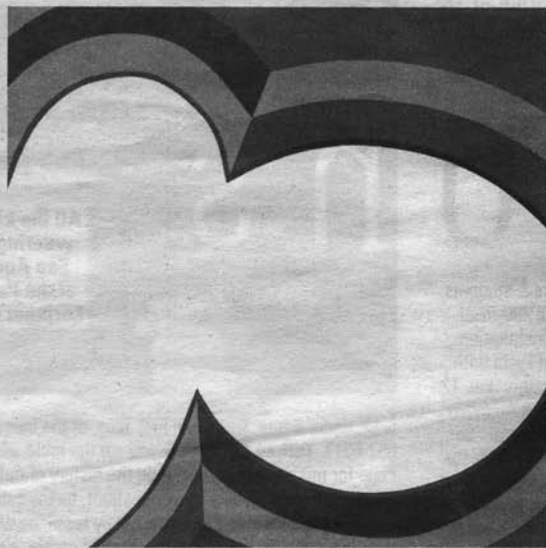
## THE VALLEYS

**Betsy Davis** Wall sculptures inspired by plants, science, buildings, humans and pastries. Haus, 517 S. Sierra Madre Blvd., Pasadena; ends Nov. 15. (626) 356-2408.

**June Harwood: California Hard-Edge Painting Revisited, 1959-1969** Abstract paintings. NoHo Modern, 11255 Magnolia Blvd., North Hollywood; ends Dec. 1. (818) 505-1297.

**Rising Above Jim Crow: The Paintings of Johnnie Lee Gray** Paintings showing life in the South during the last years of legal segregation. Cal State Northridge Art Galleries, 18111 Nordhoff St., Northridge; ends Nov. 15. (818) 677-2226.

## JUNE HARWOOD

*Bulls Eye, 1965*

The renewal of interest in hard-edge abstraction, the late-1950s geometric response to abstract expressionism that began right here in Southern California, has not only returned the spotlight to painters such as Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg, but has renewed interest in the work of still-living artists such as Karl Benjamin and Frederick Hammersley — and is beginning to bring to light their less prominent compeers. June Harwood is one such fellow “abstract classicist,” also alive and kicking, and also responsible for a notable, even stunning, body of work from the 1960s. To judge from what has been unearthed of this buried treasure, Harwood was no also-ran; she took the relatively simple abstract-classicist formula — flat, intensely colored shapes with crisp contours and a sense of coincident movement and stillness, contemplation and flow — and made it her own, painting paintings in a way no one else quite painted them. Oh, the resemblances are there, but they are so numerous, and yet so oblique, that they affirm rather than compromise Harwood’s distinctiveness. This reintroduitory exhibition shows Harwood’s stylistic progress through abstract-classicist methods and tropes, moving from the off-kilter architectonic structures of her early-’60s canvases into the curvilinear, even orbital paintings of mid-decade, then into more purely linear circles and orbits, which in turn morph into webbed and crystalline compositions. These last images, coming at the end of the decade, are clearly derived from scientific sources, whether astronomical or subatomic; they also speak to such ’60s aesthetic concerns as Op Art and geodesic domes — and they anticipate the pattern painting of the following decade. Harwood is certainly fascinating as an artist symptomatic of her times, but she is worthy of our continuing attention because she has evidently fashioned an oeuvre engaging in its own right. Let’s now see what she’s done since — and let’s also keep looking in the shadows for other worthy artists of the recent past. At Noho Modern, 11225 Magnolia Blvd., N. Hlywd.; thru Dec. 1. (818) 505-1297.

—Peter Frank  
2003

We also recommend: *José Bedia* at Iturralde; *Carlos Estévez* at Couturier; *Lee Miller* at Apex; *Rob & Christian Clayton* at La Luz de Jesus; *Maria Elena González* in Ted Watkins Park; *Edith Vonnegut* at Hamilton; *Dale Chihuly* at Frank Lloyd; *Lee Pratt* at Gail Harvey; *Craig Keith Antrim* at Studio 343.