An Interview with Artist Karl Benjamin

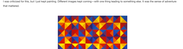
(1925-2012)

May, 2008

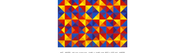
Interviewer:

Karl Benjamin was born in Chicago, IL in 1925. He received a BA from the University of Redlands, CA (1) and an MFA from the Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, CA. He was awarded Honorable Mentions for the Santa Barbara Guild Show (1) and the Pasadena Art Institute Annual (1) in 1949 to 1977. In 1970 he was appointed Professor of Art and Artist-in-Residence at Pomona College. He also served as Professor of Art at the University of California, Irvine (1) and was a visiting artist at many other universities throughout the United States and Canada. His work is found in many private, corporate and public collections, including: the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; the Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; the Rathbone Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; the Pasadena Museum of Art, Pasadena, CA; the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, CA; the Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; the Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, WA; the Chaney Cowles Data Museum, Spokane, WA; the Blackwell Museum, Hartford, CT; and in California: the La Jolla Museum of Art; the Long Beach Museum of Art; the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Pasadena Museum of Art; the Santa Barbara Museum of Art; the Oakland Museum; the Fresno Art Museum; the Stanford University Museum of Art; the Palm Springs Desert Museum; the Pasadena Museum of California; the San Jose Museum of Art; the Stanford University Museum of Art; the Rathbone Museum of Art; the Pomona Museum of Western Art; the Santa Barbara Museum of Art; the Santa Cruz County Museum of Art; as well as the Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, Japan. Benjamin lives and works in Los Angeles, CA. His work has been shown at Geoform Gallery in Santa Monica, CA. Karl Benjamin passed away in July 2012, an interview was his last artwork. (1) Dates unknown.

Jule Kardaszewicz: Your paintings, which span the early 1950s through the mid 1980s, show great visual diversity.



#1, 1950, oil on canvas, 50" x 60 in (127 x 152.4 cm)
Entries otherwise noted all images courtesy of the artist and Louis Stern Fine Arts



1-2-3 Series, Jordan Grove, oil on canvas, 50" x 60 in (127 x 152.4 cm), 1960

Karl Benjamin: My development is not characteristic to one thing but taking shape slowly upon another. I have a number of souvenirs from traffic that seem to appeal tremendous because of me.

#7, 1970, oil on canvas, 144 x 144 cm (57 x 57 in), 1970

I was criticized for this, but I just kept painting. Different images kept coming—with one thing leading to something else. It was the sense of adventure that mattered.

#17, 1970, oil on canvas, 144 x 144 cm (57 x 57 in), 1970

Critics often liken to appreciate the threads that run through my work. Threads that were repeated periodically and that limited their way throughout my painting course.

#27, 1970, oil on canvas, 144 x 144 cm (57 x 57 in), 1970

Quite early on, I began to develop a strong sense of shape and the ways in between them. When I look back to Kandy Kid, a line when I experienced shape as the thing that I was looking for. I was interested in the shape that was between them. Kandy Kid was a line, but it was a difference line. They to look large accumulations of rectangles reflecting a common underlying sensibility. In Bach's Bible Shop shape also appear, anticipating later work.

Bach's Bible Shop, oil on linen
50 x 40 in (127 x 101.6 cm), 1960

Wanders, oil on canvas, 70 x 120 cm (28 x 48 in), 1960

Since my first museum exhibition at the Pasadena Museum of Art 1964, my work has dealt with both large, linear or less geometric forms and an intuitive expression of color.

Chief, 1964, oil on canvas
127 x 170 cm (50 x 70 in), 1964

Chief II, 1964, oil on canvas
127 x 170 cm (50 x 70 in), 1964

KB: Paint-on-paint technique marks with a great deal of variation. For example, at times a mind might form the basis for a very complex composition, and at other times it might appear almost as either a very simple arrangement or the top.

#19, 1964, oil on canvas
130 x 167 cm (51 x 65 in), 1964

#20, 1964, oil on canvas
130 x 167 cm (51 x 65 in), 1964

KB: Almost from the beginning, I'd was doing a lot of very busy or complex paintings, that I'd move on to more simplified compositions and vice versa. Similarly, I'd was working with very largely saturated colors, then might switch to muddier or monochromes for a while, or might alternate them.

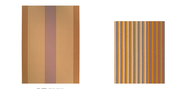
Green & White Rectangles, oil on canvas,
40 x 40 cm (16 x 16 in), 1960

#42, 1964, oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm (20 x 20 in), 1964

It could't matter at philosophical levels. I think the reflects the organic desire for variety—too much of something early and you want something visual.

KB: Painting at one relief, always have appeared periodically and was profitably in your painting.

KB: My first serious groups were from 1964 that featured shapes of different widths. These paintings were fairly lyrical and non-systemic in color. I'd seen paintings by Barnett Newman (all a group about the center of the canvas to the left and through). You, you can paint a painting with just vertical? — I thought we could paint some quite different.



Vertical Stripes #3, oil on canvas,
127 x 203 cm (50 x 80 in), 1964

Vertical Stripes #4, oil on canvas, 96 x 151 cm (38 x 59 in), 1965

KB: That method of painting sounds like your friend, Frederick Hammersley's, idea of "found" painting.

KB: Yes. I'd begin with a simple idea for a painting in mind. Then, I'd look at what I'd done and I'd superimpose that new notion. I'd look at old notes books and add others until relationships began to take shape. Then, I'd go back and make the shapes exactly right. The method of painting involves a remarkable sequence—a process and a remarkable sequence—a way for the proper application of a notion. I'd make a notation and then I'd make a notation on that notation.

I'd also keep a lot of notes in these early shape paintings. I'd start in a very light transparent color and then I'd add more and more and more and