

Review 'Karl Benjamin: The Late Paintings' at Louis Stern is colorful fun

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Karl Benjamin's "#6" is an oil on canvas painting created in 1995. (Louis Stern Fine Arts)

“Karl Benjamin: The Late Paintings” is all about discovery. Fun figures into the sharply focused show, as does delight, surprise and wonder.

At Louis Stern Fine Arts, the first exhibition of Benjamin's works since he died two years ago at 86, shows a lover of color at the height of his powers: slamming together slender, neon-tinted triangles with weird wedges of cinnamon brown, bruised maroon and delicate gray to make paintings with madcap palettes that sound gross but look great.

Vision, not logic, mattered to Benjamin, and his 12 late paintings bring his purposeful wackiness to viewers so generously and deliciously and joyously that you can't help but feel as if this show is a gift.

It's set up perfectly. The five paintings in the first gallery, painted from 1986 to 1989, show Benjamin balancing color and structure, sometimes packing super-saturated slabs and slices into jigsaw compositions and at others laying out asymmetrical wedges of color as if each were a panel of a folding screen or the flexible folds of an accordion.

Composition takes a back seat to color in the three paintings in the middle gallery, all from 1994. Each is a grid: a five-by-five arrangement of equally sized rectangles of some of the strangest colors Benjamin has ever cooked up: freakish pastels, quirky tertiaries and all manner of uncanny grays,

beiges and mauves.

Benjamin stopped painting in 1995 because his health was failing and because he had satisfied his desire to come up with compositions that would make color sing.

That's what happens in the four paintings in the last gallery, where a lifetime of looking carefully, thinking clearly and then letting color rip pays off in spades. You can look at these electrifying paintings forever and always see something different.

Louis Stern Fine Arts, 9002 Melrose Ave., (310) 276-0147, through Oct. 25. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.louissternfinearts.com

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