

Joan Moment and Monroe Hodder get the Havu gallery off to a running start in 2011

By [Michael Paglia](#) Tuesday, Jan 11 2011

The continuing appeal of abstraction some hundred years after it was developed in France by the gods of art history — [Picasso](#), Matisse, Braque and on and on — is both astounding and predictable. Astounding because, like hip-hop, it seems to be an inexhaustible source for newness; predictable because arrangements of color on a flat surface is a hard formula to beat when it comes to potential for visual appeal and infinite variations. Want proof? Consider how few ugly flags there are.

However, it had looked like abstraction was going the way of the dodo bird thirty years ago, what with post-modernism's taste for new media pushing aside old-fashioned forms like painting. So what saved it? It was the rise of neo-modernism, which took abstraction under its cloak. Since the dawn of the 21st century,

neo-modernism, together with the surviving remains of classic modernism, has been a major rival to post-modernism, and this was a lucky break for abstraction.



Joan Moment, "Tiddlywinks I", acrylic on canvas

a pair of abstractionists working in neo-modernism.

This triumph has been partly accomplished by post-modernism itself, which has degenerated into the theater of the absurd at one extreme (think of MCA Denver sponsoring a buffalo butchering on the premises as though it were a performance piece) and a kind of hackneyed traditionalism at the other (imagine a typical McMansion).

Before accepting this victory, however, we've got to acknowledge that neo-modernism owes a considerable debt to the way post-modernism broke apart doctrinaire modernism, making the newer sensibility technically post-post-modernism. That is, neo-modernism has incorporated many attributes of post-modernism — like the formerly degraded idea of decoration — and converted them to new uses.

Some prime, real-world examples of this shift are now on view at [William Havu Gallery](#). Among the offerings are two connected solos on the first floor devoted to

Joan Moment: A Question of Magnitude features an artist who orchestrates her compositions using circles. These dazzling paintings are from two distinct series, one involving all-over spatters of small circles, the other using big, bold ones. Though Moment has spent the past four decades in California, she began her career as a graduate student at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Once I learned this fact, I could readily link her style to the work of fellow artists who were there in the '60s. These include highly

influential teacher [George Woodman](#), then doing pattern paintings, and other students of his, including [Clark Richert](#). Like them, Moment does programmatic work that relates to patterning, meaning her work is abstract but also has conceptual content, making it neo-modern.

In the '80s, Moment began to eschew brush painting and instead started to do what she calls "imprints." In this method, she covers objects with paint and then transfers the pigments to the canvas. Those precise circles come from the bottoms of bottles. Sometimes the imprint is left as an outline; at other times, Moment fleshes out the circle by over-painting it. This is similar to the way Denver's [Vance Kirkland](#) created his famous dot paintings — another link to the art of Colorado. Moment has written that these circles are meant to evoke various natural things from stars to seeds, but for me the paintings read as being examples of pure abstraction — and really good ones, at that.

The Moments that particularly stuck with me are those in which the artist has applied a taxicab-yellow ground and then scattered the circles, done in various shades, over the surface. The arrangements of the circles are clearly instinctual and present the principal variation in the series. In "Realm of Jewels," the circles seem to cascade down from the top; in "Jiggling Polarities," they resolve into two clusters on opposite ends of the bottom. All have a lyrical quality, owing not just to the lightness of the circular shapes, but to the blues, pinks, reds and oranges against that distinctive yellow, as in "Tiddlywinks I."

The second solo at Havu is [Monroe Hodder: The Incidental and the Infinite](#), featuring recent paintings based on the power of horizontal lines. I've sometimes criticized gallery owner Bill Havu for his awkward pairings of artists, but not this time: Hodder's work is completely simpatico with Moment's. The two bodies of work come together brilliantly, producing a powerful atmosphere — as does the overwhelming odor of linseed-oil off-gassing coming from the Hodders. I was knocked back on my heels as I entered the place: It looks that good and smells that strong.

Hodder, who divides her time between [Steamboat Springs](#) and [London](#) and who lived in the Bay Area for many years, has had a long international career as a painter stretching back decades. She did her undergraduate work at [Vassar College](#) and earned her MFA at the [San Francisco Art Institute](#). She has been represented in Denver by Havu since 2008, and soon after her debut at the gallery, one of her paintings was acquired by the Denver Art Museum.



Monroe Hodder, "The Winter Series: Moscow in Mind", oil on canvas

The principal aesthetic device in this latest group of pieces — and in those shown previously at Havu — is the stripe. But Hodder executes her stripes not as pioneers of the type — like [Gene Davis](#) or [Kenneth Noland](#), who crafted chaste sets of lines with thin and at times vaporous applications of pigment — but more like an abstract-expressionist would, with heavily built-up paint complete with smears, paint-outs, runs and drips.

This Hodder characteristic leads to another distinction between her work and her sources. The original stripe painters created crisp, straight margins between the colors, whereas Hodder uses soft margins to cut the shades apart. A third distinction is that unlike those of her predecessors, Hodder's colors aren't consistently of the same hue throughout the length of the stripe, but morph and change into different tones.

It's this reconciling of opposites — minimalism and expressionism — that marks her oeuvre as being neo-modern.

To some extent, the paintings are all alike: Each is made up of a stack of horizontal bars divided by slightly wavering lines. But Hodder assembles different palettes for each. Some have a bright and sunny character, such as the monumental "The Winter Series: [Moscow](#) in Mind." In it, the bars, which are broken up, are made up of a range of colors including vibrant reds, yellows and purples, with other shades — in particular, more somber blues and greens — grounding the piece. "Incidental [Caravaggio](#)" is much earthier in tone, with deep blues and greens separated by extensive passages of white.

I started this discussion by indicating that neo-modern was alive and well in the contemporary art world as proved by these two impressive shows of abstract paintings. But given this fact, it's interesting to note that both Moment and Hodder are veteran modernists whose styles have transformed as the times have changed. Apparently, it was the right move for both, as they wound up making art that is still clearly relevant.

The William Havu Gallery doesn't have any particular stylistic program, and these neo-modern abstractions are not the only things on view there now. Under the mezzanine are recent paintings by [Carrie Lederer](#), a California artist who does densely composed and meticulously executed post-modern pictures that incorporate both abstract and representational elements. Upstairs is a handsome group of expertly crafted neo-traditional landscapes by [Jeff Aeling](#), who lives in Missouri but often paints Colorado scenes. His paintings are fairly monumental, with one that's as big as a billboard.

But I need to come back to the Moment and Hodder shows, because together they've gotten this landmark gallery off to a running start just as 2011 dawns.