

Moment and Stegall Share Shimmering Intensity at JayJay Gallery

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Joan Moment and Peter Stegall would be at or near the top of anyone's list of Sacramento artists. Moment, who had a one-woman show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the 1970s, is the doyenne of Sacramento abstractionists. Stegall, who has received grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and the Adolf and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, has had a quieter but no less remarkable career. That the two should be showing together at Jay Jay is an occasion for celebration. While their approaches to abstraction are quite different, both take us to deep levels of visual contemplation. Moment continues her series of paintings of star fields, constellations and planetary chains, reaching new levels of visual and philosophical intensity. A former nurse, her scientific background comes into play strongly in these works, some of which are based on telescopic photographs of the universe.

In "Alchemical Interactions," strings of nebulae spatter the sky like snow and distant worlds seem to collide, emitting gaseous clouds in which new stars are born. Moment's masterful technique of creating veils of form and color that build up into deep layers is on view here, with crusty surfaces in places that suggest burgeoning universes coming into being. At the same time, you are reminded that Moment's material is paint, albeit paint handled with a deeply felt mimicry that makes the abstract real.

"Infinite Night" is a mesmerizing portrait of deep space with stars twinkling in momentary flashes that will be long gone by the time their glow reaches your eyes. The abstract, all-over composition, again, is a model of mimesis, encompassing us in a view that is as endlessly satisfying as the night sky seen away from the glare of cities. It's a painting that is given to sustained viewing.

"Alchemical Interactions" and "Infinite Night" are large paintings. Even on a smaller scale, Moment convinces us of the deep space and cavernous distances between stars and planets. "Atoms and Galaxies" gives us a micro-macro view of the universe with blue and red blobs, circles and ellipses breaking against a yellow sky. In "Lake Region," she maps a sky-high view of a planet with irregular bodies of water made of thick, viscous passages of paint. "Omega Centauri" is a small canvas as gray as a sleety day, the stars streaming down in white and yellow on the slate background in layers of veils that give the painting an almost three-dimensional feeling, as if you could reach into it.

On a different tack, though related, are large paintings with insouciant balls of color bouncing optically on a brilliant yellow ground. In "Of Polarities, Waves, and Half Moons," black and white circles carom like billiard balls across the canvas while orbs of blue, pink, lime green and violet offer relief from the polarity of dark and light. The looping wreaths of circles set up a lively dance of optical verve. Similarly, "Tiddlywinks II" with its colored balls dances across your optical nerves, exploding like Pop Rocks.

Moment also gives us a wall of smaller works that range from the deep-space images to the livelier bouncing balls, sometimes joined by bright blue masking tape that suggests an armature for a planetary model. In these, blue bubbles cluster and break apart, white galaxies burn holes in black paper, and nebulae string across the sky. It's a wonderfully generous grouping that gives you a feeling for what Moment's studio looks like with works interacting and suggesting new directions.

On the surface, Stegall's work would seem much calmer, almost monkish. First of all, the works are very small, many no larger than 12 by 12 inches. Within this format, Stegall hand-paints hard-edged shapes in subtle color relationships that because they are close in value, jump with complementary color halations as you stare at them. At first the work seems quiet, understated and a bit cold. But as you look, drawn more and more into the small compositions so carefully poised, they become increasingly prepossessing and pleasing.

Some are deceptively simple. "White's Deception" pits a gray like a photographer's gray card against a subtle blue on a white field. But as you take it in, it begins to vibrate with color. Even more engrossing is "Blue Gray Haze" with its sharp edges and envelope-like folds. As you stare at the intense blue and your eye moves to the warm brown next to it, an orange ghost posits itself.

In contrast to the subtlety of those two works, "Tinted Lime With Friends" bounces off the wall like a neon sign. The close-valued hues of gray, violet and lime are not at all shy. Their boldness is a delight. "Soft and ShriII" hovers between a whisper and a scream with olive, teal and orange tints seducing your eyes. Looking at Stegall's work is such an intense experience of color that you even begin to see color in the shadows the works cast on the wall, layers of colors you would never have seen before. And like Stegall, you begin to see the colors as characters with their own personalities and talents. These small gems are gifts that keep on giving.