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Is Painting Small the Next Big Thing?

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Small may be beautiful, but where abstract painting is concerned, it is rarely fashionable. Big has held center stage at least since [Jackson Pollock](#); the small abstractions of painters like Myron Stout, Forrest Bess and Steve Wheeler are mostly relegated to the wings, there to be considered eccentric or overly precious. [Paul Klee](#) was arguably the last genius of small abstraction to be granted full-fledged membership in the Modernist canon.

But what is marginalized can also become a form of dissent, a way to counter the prevailing arguments and sidestep their pitfalls. It is hard, for example, to work small and indulge in the mind-boggling degree of spectacle that afflicts so much art today. In a time of glut and waste on every front, compression and economy have undeniable appeal. And if a great work of art is one that is essential in all its parts, that has nothing superfluous or that can be subtracted, working small may improve the odds.

Small paintings of the abstract kind are having a moment right now in New York, with a luminous exhibition at the [New Museum of Contemporary Art](#) spotlighting the wry, fastidiously wrought work of the German painter Tomma Abts; and PaceWildenstein presenting in Chelsea the latest efforts of James Siena and Thomas Nozkowski, two older American whizzes at undersize abstraction. Even post-war Modernism could be downsized a bit, with a show titled “Suitcase Paintings: Small Scale Abstract Expressionism” opening next month at [Baruch College](#).

Four young painters who embrace smallness are now having solo shows — three of them New York debuts — that challenge the importance of the big canvas.

Small abstractions avoid the long realist tradition of painting as a window, and also the shorter, late-Modernist one of painting as a flat wall. Instead these smaller works align themselves with less vaunted (and sometimes less masculine) conventions: the printed page, illuminated manuscripts, icons and plaques.

And yet, as each of these four exhibitions demonstrates, abstraction allows a serious exploration of process despite the limited real estate. This expands the already considerable pleasure of looking at paintings that are not much larger than your head.

Katy Moran

The little paintings in Katy Moran's first New York show, at Andrea Rosen in Chelsea, plug into another tradition — the plein-air oil sketch. But she turns her canvas, which always measures 15 by 18 inches, into a very tiny arena in which to act. Her spirited brush work creates a sense of gesture and movement that is almost comical, as if a Lilliputian artist of overweening ambition were rushing about, dispensing profusions of feathery curls and slashing lines of paint.

These marks frequently add up to little Rococo set-tos that imply rushing figures themselves — scuffles and skirmishes between beings moving too fast to be identified. They may be humans (see the horizontal roll of “Meeting in Love”), birds (the confrontation of “Pecking Order”) or some other animal entirely (“Orton”). Or they may be nothing of the sort.

The twin brown-on-mauve peaks of “Hoopers Retreat” suggest a cobbled-together shanty, with Hooper as the pink dot at its center. Sometimes hints of seascapes or still lifes emerge from the confusion.

Ms. Moran's colors, on the other hand, are reserved and shot through with light: a wide range of delicate grays, mauvish browns, yellowish tans and a variety of whites that keep the painting action distinct. Their goal seems to be to lend an air of dignity to the proceedings, but it is the tumult, hanging in the air, that prevails.