**Joan Moment** (American, 1938 - )

*TRIO-Atom, center panel*

Date: 1983

Medium: Acrylic on paper

Dimensions: 14 x 17” (each of three panels)

Donor: Artist

Collection Number: TMP2013.0101

*Atom* is the central image of the *TRIO* triptych created in 1983. It was a gift of the artist to the CSUS Art Department during Lita Whitesel’s tenure as chair from 1991-1995*.* Joan Moment was a professor of Studio Art at California State University Sacramento from 1970-2005. In 2003, she retired as Professor Emeritus.

*TRIO* is a selection of abstract icons and archetypal imagery that would recur in numerous series following its creation. In the 1983 *Art Week* review “Structures and Patterns,” Jeff Kelley observed, “In her newest paintings, Moment has begun treating her imagery—which now include Roman columns and cosmic spirals—as elements, rather than generators of, the composition.”[[1]](#endnote-1) *TRIO* is composed of three powerful images, where the title refers to the elements in the composition: *Cross with Universe*, *Atom* and *Column & Cross*. Of the triptych, only *Atom* remains in the CSUS Art Collection. Both *Universe* and *Column & Cross* are lost.

“When I start a new body of work, I start with paper. Start small. Until I know what will happen on canvas.”[[2]](#endnote-2) *Atom* is a genesis for future large-scale work, where imagery is recomposed as in *Pertaining to the Planets & Raw Nerve Endings,* 1983, 72 x 84 inches.*[[3]](#endnote-3)* *Atom*, though small by comparison, is no less alive with ‘an unknown language’ that provokes an illusion of “our own corporeal existence.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

*Atom* is composed of broad gestural lines—circular, hatched, wide and narrow. They radiate rhythmically and are layered on an agitated grey background. The image is made of four orbs. Moment used red and black lines, like finger paint, leaving a residual bodily trace. Thinner black marks layered with red lines rise up from the paper in a fast circular pass. The tactile lines quickly build up, but never into a mass. The concentric movements are spacious. The sweeping lines reiterate the “iconic or petroglyphic forms insist[ing] on its simultaneous function as sign, signal and symbol.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Moment’s painting process, “the brushy line” used to separate the layered grounds, imparts an alternating scale of the near and far, the micro and macrocosmic. [[6]](#endnote-6) The sudden shift in perspective seen in *TRIO*, from the sprawling universe in *Cross* to the microcosmic *Atom* finally, to the architectural & figurative *Column & Cross*, are characteristic of Joan Moment’s oeuvre.[[7]](#endnote-7)

*TRIO* initiated a succinct and simplified method of exploring imagery. *Atom* is painterly but it is not elegant. It is reductive but it is not without its subjective references. For her solo exhibition at the CSUS Robert Else gallery in 1985, Christopher French wrote, “What began as an oval form inspired by the utilitarian hooked rug that she favors in her house becomes, in paintings like *Skeletal Universe* and *Only One*, a developing symbol for a highly personal cosmology.”[[8]](#endnote-8) What was once domestic and decorative, exploded into a full-on cosmos. *Atom* lent itself to the development of more complex imagery.

Looking at Joan Moment’s body of paintings throughout her fifty-plus-year career, Elaine O’Brien found that “From the perspective of 2006 and the paintings of *Aerial Luminations*, all of the much-noted fixtures of Moment’s oeuvre can be seen to originate [in the buried self]: the primordial iconography, conceptually and formally linked series, repetition, phenomenological experience, and the artist’s automatist methods in which painting is at once a search for the real, the traces of being, and the process of self-creation.”[[9]](#endnote-9) The buried self was a topic assigned to Moment as a graduate student at the University of Colorado Boulder in 1966.[[10]](#endnote-10) O’Brien explained that it initiated a life-long introspection where *Atom* is but one manifestation. There she arrived at a spontaneous and layered equivalence between surface and imagery.[[11]](#endnote-11) The symbolic strips away the physical, the figurative.

The artist has no qualms for another interpretation. She writes, “The red is like blood, raw flesh—alive, not dead, but with all the nerve endings exposed.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Like much of her art, *Atom* is direct in its desire to be a symbol, to be an archetype, to “transcend human experience.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

Joan Moment, in a personal interview, commented that she considers the works gifted to CSUS the strongest works on paper from the *Planetary series*.[[14]](#endnote-14) *Pertaining to the Planets and Raw Nerve Endings* wasmade in residency at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) shortly after the completion of *TRIO*. Responding to the later work of the *Planetary series,* Judith Dunham writes, “Poised against these symbols of civilization, these fragments asserting the presence of the productive rational mind, are the circles and ellipses that for Moment have served as ‘images of desire’ heated by boldly linear depiction and pure colors. Freed of gravity, the ellipses within ellipses assume the identity of planets, galactic configurations and vortices expanding and contracting in the nebulous space of the paper….”[[15]](#endnote-15) Dunham was responding to an imagery arrived at through *Atom*. *Pertaining to the Planets and Raw Nerve Endings* recomposes the disparate spaces depicted in *TRIO.* Though its field isdarker, its simplified and agitated surroundings recall *Atom*, where forms project indefinite and changing proportions. “They are at once cellular internal structures and universal ecto-skeletons.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

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1. Jeff Kelley, “Structures and Patterns,” *Art Week* (May 7, 1983): 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Joan Moment, interview by author, Sacramento, Calif., 5 November 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Christopher French, “Various States of Being,” in *Joan Moment* (Sacramento: Robert Else Gallery, California State University, Sacramento, 1985): 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Moment interview, 5 November 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. French, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Elaine O’Brien, “To Image the Soul: The Paintings of Joan Moment,” in *Seeking Primordial Forms: Joan Moment and Claire Beaulieu* (San Francisco: Meridian Gallery, 2006):1. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Kelley, 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Moment, personal notebook, 1984. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Moment interview, 5 November 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Judith Dunham, *“*Rawness, Crudity Balanced by Sensuality,” in *Joan Moment* (Wake Forest, North Carolina: Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Wake Forest University, North Carolina School of the Arts: 1984):2*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. French, 2.

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    Dunham, Judith. “Rawness, Crudity Balanced by Sensuality.” *Joan Moment*, exh. cat. Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Wake Forest University, North Carolina School of the Arts, (1984): 1-9.

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