

# San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

April 28, 2007  
Kenneth Baker



Courtesy of Haines Gallery

Simpson goes to the well again: David Simpson, another Bay Area artist with a long career, has paintings from the past decade at Haines. The sign of maturity here is refusal to compromise or to entertain, along with a very focused search for the next challenge along a fine line of effort.

For some time, Simpson has made abstract paintings that look like monochromes to a hurried eye, but yield ambiguities that intensify upon closer inspection.

He works by setting a stretched canvas on its back and dragging paint across it with a bladelike tool that he originally had made for a different purpose. As layers of pigment accumulate, each burnished by sanding after it dries, a painting's surface coloration develops nuances unique to it and uncertainly under Simpson's control.

In the pieces now on view, he has used interference pigments with reflective and refractive properties that make the paintings' finished states very hard to peg with language. A step closer or farther away from a canvas, or to one side, can change its apparent tonality startlingly. So can a shift in the daylight that floods the gallery. The paintings thus appear to position themselves in a manner more like sculpture than like most two-dimensional abstraction, tying specific effects to precise viewpoints.

Some viewers will reckon such changes trivial, a fixation serving as an excuse not to address more urgent worldly matters that engagement through painting might yet affect. Others will recognize that Simpson exposes some of the perceptual roots of unreflective experience, inviting us to consider the instability beneath some of our most settled judgments about the world.

In his recent work, Simpson continues to explore chromatic recipes and some previously untried canvas proportions, with mixed success. But his most conspicuous experiment, the "Light Wells" that lend the show their title, date from 1991. In them he took on a format that has tripped up some of the greatest painters: the tondo, or circular canvas.

I cannot recall seeing anyone else present circular paintings face up on the floor, as Simpson does here. Their position tempers the awkwardness of the format and lets us experience the circular canvases as equally open in all directions (except from below), something that never seems to happen when a tondo hangs on a wall.

But the "Light Wells" -- at least these particular four -- despite occupying the common ground of minimal sculpture, do not assert their position as objects with the same vividness as Simpson's

wall pieces. In a different setting, with light sources more oblique than overhead, who knows?

I do not see the "Light Wells" as Simpson's best work, but like his best work, they resist judgment through countless visual inflections that remind a viewer how a change in setting or time of day might transform them.

David Simpson: Light Wells: Paintings. Through May 19. Haines Gallery, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. (415) 397-8114, [www.hainesgallery.com](http://www.hainesgallery.com).

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This article appeared on page **E - 10** of the San Francisco Chronicle