Outsider
Alden Mason at Boise Art Museum
BY JEANETTE ROSS

A lert, funky and always mischievous, Seat-tle artist Alden Mason has painted his way in and out of whole revolutions of style. Each group of work has explored, borrowed, shifted and then moved on with barely a nod to the next, and in this context, the artist’s travels and immersions into various cultures could be suspect: another Great White Hunter in pursuit of the exotic Other, as when he assumes the identity of the randy Coyote in yet another display of narcissistic excess.

What’s new? Love has tamed the artist, apparently, and permitted a welcome reflectiveness. This exhibition of twenty-nine paintings brings together many of Mason’s obsessions in a characteristically declarative way, yet with enough of a personal theme to allow us to enjoy them without guilt. His considerable skill, which expresses what he has learned from Gorky and other surrealists, is now the baton. Elements borrowed from isolated cultures are guests who drop in and establish trace lines that dance across the canvases with a satisfying rhythm and bounce. Calm at last and hummimg his own tune, this lover of paint, foolery and a still-mysterious world unpacks his bag of discoveries and sets them out. Like a modernist Moses, he is standing on a hill and pointing to a land which he himself may not enter.

Despite a longtime interest in the natural world, Mason’s primary subject often is himself. In his seventies, this has been supplemented with reflections on the meaning as well as the pleasures of family and career. Regional influences are present, but not in a derivative way—his white line, like that of Mark Tobey, is inventive and spontaneous, not a thing in itself but at the service of narrative—more emphatic than calligraphic. He isn’t, however, expressing spiritual realities in the manner of Morris Graves, who used white as a gesture that traces the path of the soul. Rather, Mason uses white lines to describe, to teach, to show us what he has seen, to bridge and contain paradoxical experience. The bumpy, often criss cartoon line of the late eighties loses some of its nervous jitter and folds around form in ways that reveal both inner and outer realities. Lines also break up forms so that any single human outline can support multiple references, as in Love Comes Late, in which the body contains pathways leading into rooms containing separate narratives, evidence of a life that has been good, bad and bittersweet by turns, yet always productive. A knack for formal design allows the conversion of personal history into an accessible mythology in several of these acrylics, particularly Sockeye and Grandpa Nels, in which the oversized head of Grandpa Nels becomes a spirit map of obsessions and their concomitant distortions of ear, eye, throat. It’s a portrait stuffed with good-natured irony.

Here and elsewhere, Mason retains a certain quality of the outsider, overeager and yet not entirely at ease with his esoterica—a condition conveyed, for instance, by the gawky bird who hangs overhead in the self-portrait Bird Watcher’s Dilemma. This bird may be wise, but it seems to speak in a squawk. Bright colors and a jangly style, wiry as well as self-conscious, turns awkwardness into charming self-disclosure.

In technique, what began as a disaster has become another servant to the long undressing of the soul. Just as the artist’s thin oil washes gained him some national attention during the seventies, he discovered an allergic response to the paint. His present strategy of squeezing out and quickly blending bright colors with various implements allows color to take on its own code even while functioning within a larger design. Dancing, floating human figures contain images of what we usually veil and protect; instincts embarrassing and potentially shameful—needs for comfort, safety, transformation. And yet, the swirl of color, of crimson and blue-black into cream, suggests inherent possibilities, perhaps, a beauty in the transitory nature of each intense moment. The total effect is irresistibly optimistic—one person, immersed in paint, and in the same private agonies and pleasures as the rest of us, hears a piercing cry—spirit of a new land—and translates, one more time.

Alden Mason—Dream Realities: New Work through October 21 at Boise Art Museum, 670 S. Julia Davis Dr., Boise.

Jeanette Ross teaches at the Idaho Theater for Youth and sits on boards of the American College Theater Festival and the Idaho Arts Alliance in Education.