

# the Stranger

Obsessive, Crawling, Joyful  
The Five Decades of Alden Mason

by Jen Graves • March 28, 2012



Alden Mason is 92 years old and says he's made every painting he's going to make. Because he's a local legend, many people already know the story: Nerve damage from inhaling toxic paint fumes finished his career, which careened from pop to abstraction to squeeze-bottle pointillism to mottled landscapes populated by totemic plants and animals. Lead poisoning from paint killed Mason's father, who was a house painter, when Mason was a boy. Also famously, Mason was almost famous. Hotshots in New York and LA in the 1970s picked up on a series of bright, restless, alchemical abstractions he made called the Burpee Garden series—they are remarkable—and to this day, any

time one of those paintings appears on the secondary market, it sells immediately. The Greg Kucera Gallery featured a whole slew of them four years ago.

Three Burpee Garden paintings are part of a small but striking overview of Mason's career at Foster/White Gallery. There are 14 paintings in the exhibition, dating back to 1965's *Muscle Beach*, a perfect piece of pop candy. Two of the Burpee paintings—*Yellow Teaser* and *Watermelon Teaser*, high in contrast, full of incident, and as giving as paintings get—are borrowed from a private collection. Mason's 1980s are represented by two large-scale tribalist abstractions influenced by travels to South America; their labyrinthine patterns of shiny dots and lines of acrylic paint are essentially wet sand mandalas. They're obsessive, crawling, joyful—and still, although entirely differently from the Burpees, abstract.

In the 1990s, recognizable figures and forms burst out of the patterns, the symbols hailing from Skagit County (where Mason lived before he came to the University of Washington as a young man): cows and tulips and towering trees. By the mid-2000s, a series of "pseudo-Burpees" left Mason dizzy from poisoning again, this time not from working in oil but from pouring acrylics. He continued working, but smaller, in India ink, watercolor, and oil stick. Rather than canvas, he used water-resistant Yupo paper, so that the elements—symbolist portraits in a limited palette, people and birds and plants intermeshed—sit on the surface, holding themselves out for consideration and conversation. Every decade was an offering.