Decorations can be art, too

By Regina Hackett
P-I Art Critic

In his new paintings at the Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle painter Alden Mason combines the quirky, cartoonish figuration from his old drawings with the gaudy squiggles of acrylic color daubed onto the almost totally obscured black backgrounds from his recent paintings. The marriage is in most cases successful.

Mason is a pattern painter for whom figures used to be no more than inflections, wisps of form that cut the teeming ground. Now the figures dominate.

In the most successful paintings, in the current show, there is a close reading between the colors of the figures and colors of the space around them.

In “Adam and Eve,” “Roy on a Holiday” and “Charlie, Come to Dinner,” form and space flow together in a rhythmic tide of staccato paint pulses. The figures aren’t distorted simply for the sake of distortion, but because the tide of the space around them ebbs and flows and forces them to flow with the ground.

In unsuccessful paintings, such as “John Likes Himself,” the colors that comprise the figure aren’t closely related to those of the ground. The figure seems imposed on the space, and its cartoon form looks coy and simple-minded.

At its best, however, Mason’s method relates him to the great post-impressionist pointillist: painter Georges Seurat. Like Seurat, Mason’s colors aren’t mixed on the palette but in the viewer’s eye. There’s a vibrancy and soft luster to the pearlescent, rosy sheen of “Adam and Eve,” a dappled light that animates the canvas and makes it glow.

What Meyer Schapiro wrote about Seurat could describe Mason’s best work as well: He creates an “image-world where the continuous form is built from the discrete, and the solid masses emerge from an endless scattering of fine points— a mystery of coming-into-being for the eye.”

Mason’s color daubs, which he squeezes onto the canvas with a squeeze bottle, are a means of ordering space and enlivening it at the same time.

Like the New York pattern painters such as Cynthia Carlson and Joyce Kozloff, Mason’s work is romantic and sensuous, related to traditionally female art-crafts such as quilt-making and to non-Western art— Islamic, Far Eastern, Celtic and Native American.

He takes embellishment seriously, just as artists from non-Western traditions do. For him, decoration is not superficial addition, it is the agent that animates form.

Virginia Paquette, currently showing new work at Seattle Pacific University’s Art Center Gallery, hasn’t resolved the relationships between figure and ground as successfully as Mason has.

At first, her canvases look like collages in which colored scraps of paper wheel and turn in thick, congested-looking pools of paint.

The canvases get more interesting when the viewer realizes that the forms aren’t collaged into place, but are passages of paint bobbing to the surface. They are parts of the painting underneath the heavy, surface ground cover around them.

I don’t think the ground cover is equal to the forms that float in it. The forms are bright and buoyant, showing her relation to Mason’s early work, but the paint that coats the surface is at odds with them, choking off their possibilities. It’s almost as if the forms in her paintings have a heavy cold and she has surrounded them with disfiguring mufflers.

Paquette can paint, and I hope that the present work is a transition to something more satisfying.
Alden Mason's "Roy on a Holiday" is on view at the Greg Kucera Gallery, along with other works by the pattern painter.