Growing old or up isn't for Alden Mason

By Regina Hackett
P-I Art Critic

There are plenty of ways to avoid taking one’s assigned place at the table with the rest of the adults, and Alden Mason’s is one of the most socially acceptable. Now in his late 60s, he’s the Peter Pan of Northwest art.

His drawings, currently at the PONCHO Gallery in the Seattle Art Museum’s Art Pavilion in Seattle Center, celebrate the dreamy distortions of an idealized childhood.

Children, when they draw, are freed by their ineptitude from the burden of Western-style representational reality. What they can’t do, Mason won’t do. But where children wander, only occasionally scoring a vividly realized form and orchestrating it into a composition, Mason is consistently on the mark.

Bodies as cities

Because he is a facile artist gifted with a fluid, cursive line and a glowing, buoyant sense of color, his drawings are condensations of celebratory sensation. His figures are rainbow-colored goofballs, stumblebums and fall guys, all of whom exude an innocent, prepubescent sexuality. They won’t grow up. They’re having too much fun.

In their natural egotism, children sometimes imagine that their bodies are cities. They move carelessly on those days so a sudden motion won’t disturb roadways coursing inside their arms and legs, houses nestling behind their rib cages, movie houses and carnival dotting their spines and ducks floating on ponds somewhere in the vicinity of their big toes.

Mason’s figures are cities in this sense. They are gleefully punch-drunk with the activity they contain. Mason, heartily in favor of eyes, breasts and sex organs, gives nearly every figure a multitude. The trio in “Larry, Mary and Child,” from 1976, have eyes in the fronts and the sides of their heads. Each of them is a crowd, yet they have a low-density lightness of being.

Visible brush strokes of browned white enclose the swollen head and dwarfed shoulders of “Medicine Man,” from 1972. This single figure would be uncharacteristically static except for the thin streams of white paint that circulate through its face, functioning as air currents, never letting the features settle into one place. The nose, smashed off to the left, is hooked like a propeller or a white flag, possibly waving to the tiny bird-plane floating toward it from the left.

Being surrounded by a room full of these drawings could take the starch out of even the most serious art viewer. Some people, however, seem immune to the infectious gaiety of Mason’s work.

He takes heat from some members of the local art community, particularly younger artists who see his heavily patterned paintings as decorative in the worst sense and his drawings as sugared, precious, pseudo-primitive affectations.

Art credentials

Mason is painting not to confront but to comfort and entertain — goals not ordinarily viewed as despicable. Admittedly, his work is lightweight. Lightweight is not the same as inconsequential.

In his catalog essay for this show, curator Bruce Guenther does an admirable job of describing Mason’s art credentials, linking him to the surrealist abstraction of the late Arshile Gorky and the funk-pop of the late West Coast painter John Altoon.

Those who want to read about that should certainly pick up a copy of this catalog. Those who don’t can go ahead and enjoy these portraits of high-stepping, empty-headed revelers, these malice-free monsters and charming ghouls. There are no pop quizzes at the exit gates.