Mason’s pop-tinged works span the worlds of surrealism and native art

By Regina Hackett
P-I Art Critic

Australian aborigines living in remote, western desert communities are artists. They use paintings to transcribe motifs taken from what they call “the dreaming.” These days, because nearly 60 percent support themselves by selling art, art is literally keeping the culture alive.

A sympathetic, parallel tradition to “the dreaming” runs through art in the West, particularly in dadaist and surrealist circles. Seattle’s Alden Mason is a link between these worlds. He sets his surrealist-derived, cartoonishly pop-tinged forms — born in the West — spinning in the outback of aboriginal crosshatching, dots and squiggles.

But while traditional aboriginal painting is feverishly tight, Mason’s paintings, though dense, have a fast and loose quality. No burdensome psychic freight weighs them down.

Even when given credit for the lavish facility of his hand and his masterfully lush color sense, he is dogged by questions of deportment. If art were a grade school, Mason would be the class clown — smart but not applying himself. Can substance lack weight? Some say no and cast a cold eye at his bop-till-you-drop canvases.

Others say yes. For them, Mason’s current exhibit of acrylics on canvas at Greg Kucera Gallery — nearly all roughly 5-by-5½ feet — is a treat.

In “Lunch at the Jaguar Cafe,” the figures seem to be trying to exert a calming influence on the field. Half-space ship, half rhinoceros, they peer around at frenzied, bruised blue and green color strokes, trying to get their bearings. The slight uncertainty of these figures gives this canvas its offbeat edge.

“Spirit Bird After the Sing Sing” is a straight shot of ecstasy. Cotton candy trees strung with lights rock under a banana moon. A two-faced mountain in the foreground sings out of both sides of his mouth. Random long strokes of high-toned color punctuate the ground and serve as some kind of resolution. Without them, this painting could be accused of hysteric.

In “Animal and Woman,” a female whose stubby legs serve to emphasize her ridiculously elongated torso — either a homage or a dig at Modigliani — lies restless on the ground, face averted from the skyborne wolf overhead. Birds are the wolf’s lecherous chorus and time stands still, with the pink sun bracketed by two wolf-gray, half-moon parentheses. Few do this kind of thing better.

Scott Fife, Northwest artist now living in Brooklyn, comes out of surrealism’s tougher side. He is clunky and awkward just where Mason is facile and smooth. His painted constructions tend to be strange, cold and disconcertingly beautiful.

Nearly a hundred years ago, as Claude Monet watched a beloved mistress die, he caught himself in his grief calmly studying the deoxygenated pastel hues stealing across her face.

The scene is one Fife might relate to, as he tends to favor the tonalities of impending death.

His small, paint-stiffened bed jutting out into space from a wall in the Fuller/Elwood Gallery comes out of the Edward Kienholz school of art blight. Stained and rumpled, it looks as if it might smell bad. Its legs are charred, its center is sagging.

The painting on the spread is meticulously dreary, dirty red with ropey, dirty yellow decorative seams. Its unavoidable and unrelenting ugliness demands respect, as does a plaster arm cast painted in gangrenous hues and hung on a thickly painted, cheap old curtain. In other hands, this could be corny.