Be-bopper Alden Mason paints his canvas with rhythm and hues

By Regina Hackett
P-I Art Critic

Who'll take the dog with the skinny legs?

Alden Mason will, of course. He painted it repeatedly in his new “Courtship Series” at the Greg Kucera Gallery. This eminent Seattle painter is a be-bopper to the bone, and that’s what comes through when he paints: rhythm, ladies and gentlemen, rhythm.

Acrylic on canvas, his current paintings share a rich, scribbly ground. Out of the slather of gray, black and white ground, figures emerge and recede, moving easily through their thick grounds with bursts of bright primaries. They seem to be only pausing, caught in the act of being themselves.

Mason’s sources include Western surrealism, pop, color field expressionism, Krazy Kat comics, seed catalog illustrations, Aboriginal “X-ray” dream time landscapes, Navajo sand paintings, the molas of the Cuna Indians on the San Blas Islands, and molecular biology. What emerges in the end, however, is pure Mason, stronger and more jubilant than ever.

In “Bride Price, Tabor” (66 inches high by 80 inches wide), white lines are arteries connecting one gleefully missmashed body to another. Rectangles of protoplasm toast each other with maraschino cherries, as spaceships and lumpy birds nod to each other in passing.

“Coyote Kachina” (60 inches high by 82 inches wide), is full of squashed stovepipe hats, with rockers for rims. A bird on the far left, feathers streaming behind him, shows off for the bony coyote, far right. The figure between them is caught in their force field, possibly a Mason self-portrait, the observer becoming what he sees.

In the back of the catalog accompanying the show is a jaunty 1989 photo of Mason flanked by two New Guinea Huli tribesmen. It’s a nice bow to a source – the body painters of New Guinea – and it would have been nicer if the names of the flamboyantly painted men had been listed. Who painted their faces yellow and red, and who did those terrific feather hats?

Alden Mason’s “Coyote Two Moons,” an acrylic on canvas measuring 80 by 66 inches, is on view at the Greg Kucera Gallery.

Review

Alden Mason at Greg Kucera Gallery through Sept. 30.

Doris Chase at Woodside/Braseth Gallery through Sept. 26.

Julie Speidel at Linda Farris Gallery through Sept. 30.

residences in both places. She’s showing the non-video end of her production at the Woodside/Braseth Gallery: abstracted wood sculpture.

From desktop to more than 7 feet high, her new sculptures are sleek and old-fashioned. One can imagine them on top of or beside a 1950s Danish modern coffee rings, bracelets and necklaces. They were tiny Henry Moore sculptures made for the body, and she quickly achieved fame in that field.

Since the mid-1980s, she has devoted her energies to sculpture. Her current show (with casting by Josh Levine) at Linda Farris Gallery is her best yet. “Guardian Figure” is sandcast bronze, nearly 7 feet tall and vaguely figurative. It is monumental yet intimate, with lush, creamy surface effects, shadow-light purples and gold over fish-gill fluting.

Like Chase’s sculptures, Speidel’s don’t speak to our time. They are more properly considered in the context of early 20th-century organic abstraction from England, made by Moore and Barbara
**Doris Chase:** Doris Chase is widely known for her videos, especially her dance videos. A Northwest native, she moved to New York in 1972 in her late 40s and became prominent in the burgeoning video art movement. The University of Washington Press is soon to release a book on Chase with text by art historian Patricia Failing, accompanied by a home video.

Last year she moved back to Seattle and plans to maintain table. They are ovals, circles and cubes, polished and stained, mostly fir, and they fit together like Russian nesting dolls. I have a great deal of respect for Chase, admire her videos, and yet her sculpture leaves me cold. It is one tune sung for decades and not very catchy the first time: fussy and slight even when large, with no possibility of extending itself.

**Julie Speidel:** Julie Speidel started out making jewelry: gorgeous, weathered blue bronze ear-

Hepworth, and seem like lesser variants on their themes, with an unconvincing overlay of Eastern mysticism. Standing in the office and looking first at a little Lynda Benglis on the office wall and then out at a room full of Speidel’s work, one sees what is missing: evidence that one has been alive in the last 50 years.

But unlike the Chase show, Speidel’s new work shows solid growth. These aren’t earrings enlarged. She is working toward something and hasn’t arrived yet.