Mason paints images that seem to be alive

"Courtship Series," recent paintings and drawings by Alden Mason at Greg Kucera Gallery, 608 Second Ave. through Sept. 30, 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday, 624-0770.

by Karen Mathieson
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Alden Mason has been wedded to a creative life for some 50 years, but he's still engaged in an artistic courtship. As the paintings in his "Courtship Series" reveal, Mason continues to revel in the delight of not quite knowing an outcome, of hoping for a response, and of discovering new terrain.

Included in the glossy exhibit booklet accompanying Mason's current show at Greg Kucera Gallery is a recent photograph of the Northwest master standing amused and at ease with two Huli tribesmen of Papua New Guinea. Mason's explorations into primitive traditions such as the Huli Sing-Sing celebration provide him with a wealth of themes and titles — "Bride Price Taboo," "Twenty Pigs Dowry" and so on.

More to the point, as exotic places and ceremonies spark the artist's joyful interaction with acrylic paints, they are transformed. Rising from a seething black and white background with hints of color, the forms in Mason's work are both skeletal and a little scary, and yet somehow solid in its stance and presence.

"Lunar Guardian," a recent acrylic painting on canvas by Alden Mason at Greg Kucera Gallery.

The central figure is skeletal and a little scary, and yet somehow solid in its stance and presence.

"Lunar Guardian," in which a dying bird, a black moon and other portents emerge from a crowded scene of seemingly abstract elements.

Several of Mason's earlier pieces, especially one of the first in the "Burpee Garden Series," add depth to the Kucera show. Look for a painting from 1972, when Mason was still working in oils, in which the fruits of his labor almost seem to steam with translucent heat. Then return to "Garden Kit," a new painting, in which refuse, seeds packets, root vegetables and other images have pigment laid on with a slapdash but sure artistic trowel.

Despite surface differences, both paintings reflect Mason's ongoing fascination with art as a way to "square" the circles and cycles of the natural world with his own experience. One frequent image in Mason's paintings is a grinning coyote. This intelligent, curious trickster of legend might well be a symbol of the artist's own engaging spirit.
The Mudmen of New Guinea: The current series take on a life of their own. The skin of a Mason painting peels further back, revealing the fragile surfaces beneath. In 'Lunar Circle' one looks at least five layers of vision are in operation at once: four without anything so solid as foreground and background. The central figure is skel-