Inside

Alden Mason’s head

ONE OF THE NORTHWEST’S MOST PROLIFIC ARTISTS SHARES HIS VIEW OF THE WORLD

By Roger Urquhart
Seattle Times art critic

One of Alden Mason’s favorite photographs of himself is tacked to the wall of his Western Avenue art studio.

Taken in 1988, it shows Mason in one of his trademark fedora-shaped hats, a kerchief around his neck, and binoculars slung over one shoulder bandolier style. At the top-right corner, the shot was taken in a jungle. Finishing the trio are two New Guinea birds that inhabit the ceremonial head-dresses that he wears and the bilum bags that he carries.

The warden’s neck and shoulders are adorned with strings of shells, a JKU, and various ornaments that resemble a traditional African mask.

Mason chuckles as he points to the yellow faces of his two companions. “You should see them,” he says. “They look just like the people who live here.”

At 76, Mason is one of the Northwest’s most enduring, prolific, and inventive painters. He has been producing works since he was a young man, and his style continues to evolve. His current show at Greg Kucera Gallery is a collection of his most recent works, which he says are his best yet.

And when the show at Greg Kucera comes down at the end of this month, another exhibition of Mason’s recent work will open at the Seattle Art Museum.

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Artist Alden Mason offers a peek into his vivid world

Mason

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work will go up at the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham. The Whatcom show will include his original paintings on canvas as well as works on paper. Mason will give a slide show and talk at the Whatcom Museum on Oct. 22.

One of the things he misses about teaching, says Mason, “is that I don’t have an audience to tell stories to anymore. So, if you come to the slide show, you’ll hear all of them.”

Actually, Mason tells these stories in his paintings, which are often biographical. A group of paintings he calls the “Courtship Series” and a couple others he says are related to his dead wife, Claudia, who happens to be about 30 years younger than Mason. To the marriage she brought him their 3-year-old son, Mason has an adult son from a former marriage who is now an anthropologist, a career choice that Mason thinks may have been influenced by Mason’s habit of taking his son along with him on trips to exotic lands.

Many of the paintings in his current show have to do with his 1964 trip to New Guinea, where he and a sculptor friend lived with the Huli tribe for six weeks. The Huli are considered one of the most technologically primitive peoples left on earth and Mason tells stories of birds and arrow battles between warring tribes and nights spent listening to village elders tell stories.

The image of a black bird that pops up in many of the current paintings refers to an incident from that trip.

“We were in some smoky hut and these guys were telling us their stories and it was going on for hours,” said Mason. “Finally, it gets to about midnight and a bird sang outside and everyone got quiet and said it was the spirit bird here to warn them not to tell tribal secrets.”

He never actually saw the bird, and doesn’t know if it was black. But the spirit bird made an impression on him, partly as a symbolic creature and partly because he has a fondness for birds anyway. Mason’s an avid birder, and has taken trips to places such as Costa Rica, Northern Australia, and the Amazon rain forest to find unusual birds and unusual people.

“A bird, art, bird-watching and painting all go together,” he says. Though he many years ago traveled to Europe to look at the great works of Western art history, he has no particular interest in going back. He’s drawn to tribal cultures, where the immediacies of life and death are closer to the surface.

He’s ‘deady serious’

His paintings reflect his passions. They’ve been described as looking like primitive or “nasty” art. They’re also frequently called whimsical and cartoonish, though he waxes when he hears this. Though they’re figurative, the figures are highly abstracted.

“To me, the paintings are deadly serious,” Mason said. “They’re not meant to be funny at all. I’m trying to make them look as real as they can be.”

One reason his work strikes some as cartoonish is that for the past decade Mason has been painting by using acrylic paint squirted out of squeeze bottles. After years of using oils, he developed allergic reactions to the chemicals in oil paints. So he switched to acrylics, which are bright, sometimes rubbery sheets that stick, especially when applied thickly. This choice of bold, contrasting colors also remind some of a cartoon palette. To others the bold colors suggest the ochres, blacks and white of cave paintings or shamans-tic tribal art.

His are paintings about people and spirits traveling through both the natural and magical world. It’s no wonder they have a surrealistic edge.

Why the big beaks?

Mason says that with canvases that include magical animals and human figures, Mason is known for his “big beaks.” These are always big paintings with, often, a face on either side of a giant, stocky bird that takes up nearly the entire canvas. Inside the heads are figures of animals, people, scenes from the natural world. He finds the interior of a human head, metaphysically speaking, a fascinating subject.

“People ask, ‘Why the beaks?’” said Mason. “Because everything you ever think, or dream or fantasize about, it’s all in your head.”

Kucera, who took painting classes from Mason 20 years ago at the UW, says he’s serious about the “primitive” look of his paintings, people often overlook Mason’s talent for composition.

“He paints very strong, very element compositions,” said Kucera. “And that’s always been important to him. When he talked about the quality of positive and negative space.”

John Odhams, deputy director of the Whatcom Museum, says that Mason’s work is “clever, very inventive. He has a real strong sense of composition, he’s a strong colorist and also a marvelous storyteller.”

Hooked on art at UW

A native of Everett, Mason spent his youth fishing, and bird- and bug-watching in the Skagit Valley. When he went off to the UW in the ’60s, he intended to study entomology. But after a couple of art courses, he was hooked. He graduated in art and went back later to earn a master of fine art degree.

He was asked to join the UW art faculty, where he says his first job was teaching watercolor painting to architecture students. In those days he was using watercolors, and was having shows of watercolor landscapes at the Seattle Art Museum by the late ’70s.

By the early ’80s he had switched to oil painting, and was making big, boldly colored abstract works that had little to do with the so-called Northwest School of native grays and browns favored by contemporaries like Mark Tobey and Morris Graves. His painting caught on nationally, and in the ’70s and early ’80s he was being included in lots of prestigious shows around the nation. He also had some shows in New York.

These days he’s in the midst of moving from a condominium to a house in Bremerton, and, as always, painting new works. And he says he constantly thinks about traveling. Though he acknowledges being influenced earlier in his career by the work of painter Arshile Gorky, who lived in Kooming, Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso, now his biggest influences come directly from other cultures.

“The most fantastic body decoration in New Guinea,” he said. “I see these kids in (Seattle) with rings in their noses and blue hair and that’s really beautiful. They should go to New Guinea and see the real thing.”