

VISUAL ARTS

EXHIBIT GUIDE



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EXHIBITION REVIEWS

"Burpee Garden Revisited," paintings by Alden Mason, 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, through March 29, Greg Kucera Gallery, 212 Third Ave. S., Seattle (206-624-0770 or www.gregkucera.com).

"Alden Mason," 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, through March 29, Foster/White Gallery, 220 Third Ave. S., Seattle (206-622-2833 or www.fosterwhite.com).

"Step Back," paintings, drawings and prints by Fay Jones, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, through March 29, Grover/Thurston Gallery, 309 Occidental Ave. S., Seattle (206-223-0816 or www.groverthurston.com).

Pleasing visits with two Northwest greats

Special to *The Seattle Times*

There is just about a week left to see two greatly differing bodies of work by Seattle's inimitable Alden Mason — right next door to each other. This is a great chance to gallery-hop, jumping from the big, boldly gestural abstractions of the 1970s at Greg Kucera Gallery to the smaller, more figurative and surreal paintings of the past few years, on view at Foster/White Gallery. Afterward, move on to Grover/Thurston for a showing of recent works by Fay Jones — another local treasure.

Although Mason's career has not been as celebrated as some believe it ought to have been, he has been described as a "Northwest Master," an apt title arising out of his deep and varied talents and his strong connections to the region. Born in 1919, Mason grew up on a farm in Skagit Valley, earned his MFA from the University of Washington in 1947 and taught at UW from 1949 to 1981. He lives and works in Ballard. He has been recognized outside the region, too, with his work finding homes in many national museums.

His big, fluid, beautiful paintings of the 1970s show an exuberant, earthy use of color and striking, all-over compositions of organic forms. Go sit in the back gallery at Kucera and immerse yourself in the swirls and swoops of paint and the

open up across the canvas. These paintings can take you back to the joys of childhood — conjuring vague physical associations with digging in the dirt, splashing in the water or smearing paint around with abandon. In fact, the title of this series is "Burpee Garden," stemming from Mason's childhood fascination with the Burpee Seed Company catalog.

While the associations come fast and fluidly (seeds in the earth? tidepools? cross-sections of agates?), the paintings also make you marvel at the skillful balance of composition and expression. Each shape or gesture is like a fully committed experiment in movement and paint quality at that particular moment, but every shape and swoosh of paint fits together like an organic puzzle — removing one piece would diminish the impact.

After an intimate experience with the six abstract paintings of the 1970s, you can travel next door to Foster/White, and get hit with 29 recent works (from the 1990s right up to 2007) that are clearly quite different. There is an abundance of figures — people, birds, dogs, abstract totemic characters — all painted with jittery lines that are somehow fragile and strong at the same time. The colors are usually cooler and less varied than in his early work: There's much more white, black and gray. This reduced palette seems necessary

ground for the characters and symbols that dance all over the canvases.

The human figures are simple, quirky outlines with giant heads and spindly arms; their faces and bodies contain or sprout other symbols and characters as if we're catching glimpses of their surreal, lively dreams.

Although his early paintings were completely abstract, Mason has always drawn figures beginning with a childhood love of drawing cartoons. The linear and playful cartoonish quality of these paintings is made edgier with distorted shapes, restrained colors and complex handling of paint.

Getting up very close, you can discover some continuity with his 1970s work. The neutral backgrounds are enlivened by swirls and pools of paint. And while the quaking figures obviously suggest symbolism and potential meanings, the associations here, just as in Mason's "Burpee" paintings, are at once immediately inferred and difficult to clearly articulate.

FAY JONES

Quasi-narrative and personal, but not quite autobiographical, symbolism is also present in the work of Fay Jones. Another heavy-hitter of the Northwest, Jones is showing recent paintings, mixed-media works and prints at Grover/Thurston. Her large-scale paintings really shine



Alden Mason's "Burpee Surprise Package, 1972.



Detail of Fay Jones' triptych "Poetic License Renewal."

The strong color, forms and scale are grippingly juxtaposed with the delicate paper on which they're painted. These are works that need to be seen in person; the format is strongly vertical and large — taller than the viewer — and the ample characters are close up in the picture plane, creating very engaging paintings.

We can't help wonder what these characters are up to and how they relate to each other. In the triptych "Poetic License Renewal," three men face two

women, all of them lined up in profile. Immediately, we might try to parse out the relationships among this grouping but, wait, some of the figures contain faint outlines of other figures, or appear in multiples, suggesting a stop-action sense of motion. Other figures and symbols pop up in the three panels: babies, child, a volcano, an elephant. The possible stories are vague and enticing, exotic and everyday — rich discrepancies that are supported through Jones' play with transparency and opacity, fullness and flatness.

Even when people are absent, Jones creates scenes that suggest slightly dangerous, but amusing, stories, just waiting for human presence, very possibly ours. Jones creates meandering paths, garden and beach scenes that invite us to enter the real-but-fantastic settings, becoming the vaguely old-fashioned characters that populate her paintings. There's something very appealing about stepping into the chunky 1940s heels of her women or the buttoned-up, casual attire of her gentlemen. This pleasing sense of engagement is oddly unaffected by the presence of inapplicable and even slightly menacing elements: rats, fish traps, rabbits and cowboys — why not? We're all living together in Jones's quirky and enthralling pictures.