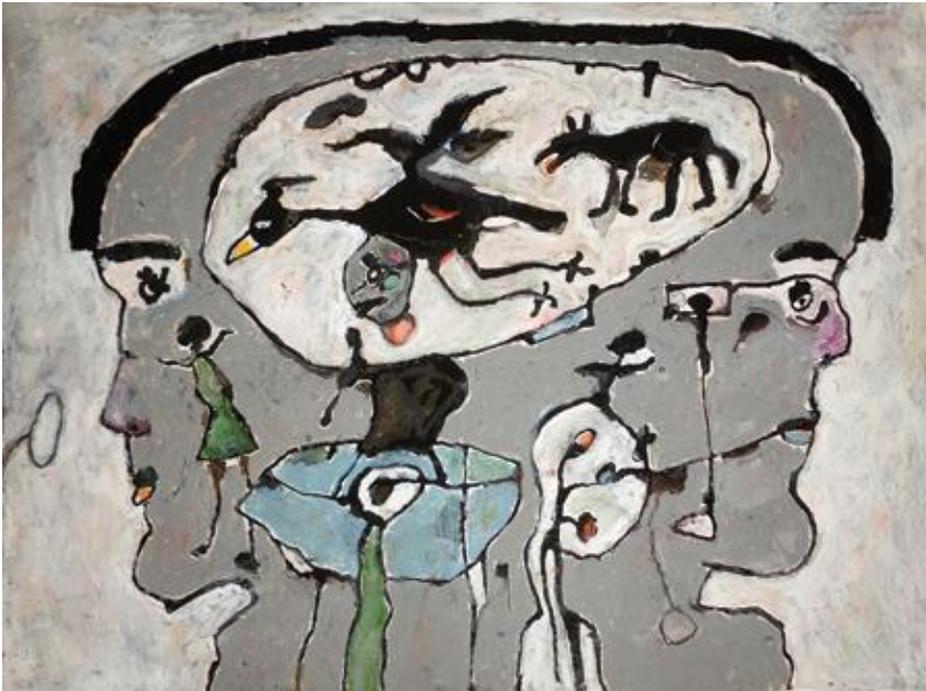


# art ltd.

## APPRECIATION: Alden Mason (1919-2013)

by Matthew Kangas  
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Alden Mason, veteran Pacific Northwest modernist painter, died in Seattle on February 6 at age 93. Last of the University of Washington School of Art graduates who were hired to contain the influx of



postwar GI Bill students, Mason left UW in 1981 at age 62, before retirement, to pursue his career more aggressively. This single act may not have extended his life per se, but it definitely allowed for a final three decades of prolific studio production and regional and national museum and gallery exhibitions. He continued to paint or draw daily until a year before his death. Doctors were divided over a Parkinson's disease diagnosis.

*Bird Dilemma*, 2007, Mixed media on paper, 26" x 35" Photo: Courtesy Foster/White Gallery

Mason's other crucial decision, made when very young, was to not follow classmates and eventual faculty colleagues Spencer Moseley and Wendell Brazeau to atelier Fernand Leger for a post-MFA year in Paris. This protected him from Leger's strict geometry and structures. Arshile Gorky and Joan Miro whose works he saw first-hand in Europe were more significant. As to the Northwest School, he met Mark Tobey (who gave him first prize in a competition) and later admitted the influence of Morris Graves' bird paintings. Mason's colorful, gestural early work, indebted to abstract expressionism and color field, was well received in four shows in New York from 1954 on. With its pouring and pooling of oil paint, the *Burpee Garden* series (1972-74), was duly praised in *The New York Times*, *Arts* magazine and *ARTnews* as an extension of color field.

"For me, the birth of a painting, the improvisational use of energy to expressively pattern a surface with paint, is suggestive of the delicate balance of the interrelationship of all living things in the ecosystem," Mason noted in an interview. It was this connection between nature and ecology and patterned abstraction that made Mason, along with artist Joseph Goldberg, the key transitional figure between the Northwest School and midcentury American modernist art.

Mason's presence in California was extensive, beginning at the San Francisco annex of his Seattle dealer, Gordon Woodside, in 1965, continuing in the Bay Area at William Sawyer, and in Los Angeles at Esther Robles, Gerard Hayes, Tortue and Ruth Schaffner galleries. Curator Gerald Nordland took an interest in Mason and included him in "Fourteen Abstract Painters" in 1975 at UCLA Wight Art Gallery. He also authored a 1990 catalogue essay at Greg Kucera Gallery.

A Seattle memorial tribute organized by Kucera and Phen Huang is currently on view at Wright Exhibition Space (to June 30). Two others recently closed at his last representative, Foster/White and Woodside/Braseth galleries. Mason's final museum show was at the Seattle Art Museum in 2011. While the two gallery shows and the Wright survey of 30 paintings and drawings do not strictly constitute a collective retrospective, they function as one by default, absent any substantial monograph. Its riches are substantial. A more authoritative, larger museum survey is now needed with the full-length monograph he never received during his lifetime.

Largely positive critical opinion over 50 years ranged from Californians Alfred Frankenstein, Thomas Albright and Bill Berkson to New Yorkers Grace Glueck and Allen Ellenzweig and Seattleites R M Campbell, Ron Glowen and Regina Hackett. But they rarely dealt with Mason's figurative work (men, women, birds and animals) in any psychoanalytical depth. Focusing on color, pattern, gesture and exuberant humor, most critics, with the exception of Hackett, overlooked Mason's dark side, which is where all posthumous scholarship should begin. His terrifying mother (*The Farmer's Wife*, 1997; she lived to 104); ex-wives (*Cousin Claudia*, 1992); lovers (*Dumb Dora*, 1982); angry gay couples (*Bird Dilemma*, 2007); and numerous tropical birds and giant heads that acted as stand-ins for the artist (*Portrait of the Artist and the Spirit Bird*, 1995) all convey a strategy of ceaseless energy and brilliant color concealing panic, anguish, sexual anxiety and a fear of the void. For all Mason's manic cheerfulness, his art operates on multiple emotional levels and deserves closer scrutiny beyond his historic role in regional modernism. As his friend Theodora Jonsson put it at the Foster/White memorial, "You, crazy unstoppable bird man walking, didn't miss a beat in the end."

"Alden Mason: In Memoriam" was on view at Foster/White Gallery, Seattle. March 7 – April 30, 2013.

[www.fosterwhite.com](http://www.fosterwhite.com)

"A Tribute to Alden Mason," was on view at Woodside/Braseth Gallery, Seattle. March 11 – April 27, 2013.

[www.woodsidebrasethgallery.com](http://www.woodsidebrasethgallery.com)

"A Special Alden Mason Exhibition," is currently on view at Bagley Wright Exhibition Space, Seattle. Organized by Greg Kucera Gallery and Foster/White Gallery. April 25 – June 30, 2013.