

Seattle

Alden Mason at Greg Kucera  
(*Art in America*, March, 1996)

Alden Mason, 76, now retired from the University of Washington School of Art, where he once taught Chuck Close, synthesizes all his earlier phases in his latest body of work. Despite a successful flirtation with Color Field painting, Mason has worked with the figure since 1976, producing animated compositions of birds, animals, trees, flowers, fish and people. He has now refined the antic, cartoonlike look of his drawings and adapted them to acrylic paintings that are created like drawings. He uses thinned paint applied with plastic squeeze-bottles instead of brushes.

Such an approach keeps everything on the surface. There is little sense of pictorial space but plenty of scale differentiation from element to element. In Mason's new paintings (all works in the show date from 1995), everything seems to be X-rayed, with each image containing or revealing another. This crowded and fecund world looks unbalanced and tottering at first glance, but Mason's impeccable sense of placement anchors things, even when it seems (as in *Black Bird/Black Tulip*) that too much is going on.

Mason uses black lines as delineators over white, gray or mixed black-and-white grounds. Although the prominence of line recedes in the more complicated compositions (*Head with Animal*), this practice can seem a tired illustrational convention. In *Spirit Vase*, the depiction of cut flowers below a bird in flight seems too safe and hieratic an arrangement: it shows less of the imaginative recklessness that distinguishes the best of these paintings.

Several of the works use the head-within-a-head device to suggest memory, split personality or the male and female aspects of each person. In these works, childlike exuberance is undercut by more threatening touches. For instance, an open-mouthed man suckles an enormous green nipple in *Head and Green Seductress*. Mason's facility of drawing can trick the viewer into expecting joyous, colorful doodles when a reading of predatory animals or troubled psyches is also possible. In this group of works, the balance between gaiety and danger is just right.

*Totem* (1995) may point to the future. All the disparate colors and images usually spread out across the canvas are pushed together into a central vertical core topped by a head. Blended color areas sit tight against one another with minimal linear interference. Over the whitened background that contains pink, purple, yellow and green flourishes, this totem shoves way past Mason's cartoon-figure legacy, much closer to an abstract figuration with richer, if vaguer, implications.