Alden Mason is 89-years-young. The Seattle painter’s hands tremble, his voice is weak, and he moves a little more slowly these days – but he’s full of life. Just released from rehabilitation after some health complications, he’s already back in the studio.
A characteristic fedora adorns his head, until it’s replaced with his “paint hat,” which is almost identical but designated for wear during work. The studio is a small, mostly typical artist’s workspace. Tubes of paint, brushes, paper, canvas, and paint-splattered everything are strewn about. There’s a small office and a storage area with decades’ worth of work. More unusual are the artifacts that decorate the space: masks, arrows and figurines collected by Mason on his travels to Africa, South America and Australia. Each souvenir-ar-series has a story behind it. The same is true of each of Mason’s paintings, as is discovered when pulling some out of storage. “I forgot about that one,” he says. He proceeds to tell the story behind the particularly bright, abstract painting. Clearly he has not forgotten.

As he sits in a wheelchair, Mason recounts stories of his youth as if they happened yesterday. His memory is as sharp as a 20-year-old’s. The gifted storyteller apologizes repeatedly for being a “motor mouth,” but no one’s complaining. His words evoke a wisdom that comes with age and experience, while conveying a sense of amazement and joy often lost at a young age. Anyone who knows Mason will tell you, he hasn’t lost it. “Kids are more curious,” says Mason, who has been able to maintain that childlike wonder of the world and translate it so effectively onto canvas.

Mason has spent his career on the cusp of national notoriety but has remained an influential fixture in the Northwest art scene for more than half a century. It’s only appropriate his art would be appreciated in the region that has influenced his work so greatly. Mason was born in Everett, Washington, in 1919. Growing up in the picturesque Skagit Valley, Mason spent a lot of time outdoors as a boy — exploring, farming, and bird-watching.

And that’s where it began. Mason says his artistic interest “started out, in a sense, with building bird houses.” He enjoyed constructing homes for swallows, but perhaps more so, enjoyed studying them when they visited. He recalls a great moment when a bird sat on his finger and

IMAGE: At left, The Candidate, 2005, mixed media on paper, 35 x 26 inches. Courtesy of Foster/White Gallery, Seattle, WA. This page at top, untitled painting in studio, and Alden Mason.
stared right at him with its beady black eyes. He's been an avid bird-watcher ever since. It's a hobby that's taken him around the world and a common motif in his art.

His art education began with a cartooning-by-mail course he paid for by shooting muskrats and selling their pelts. It continued with private art lessons from a neighborhood woman who also taught piano lessons and led a Sunday revival meeting in her home. "You could save your soul and save your art," Mason jokes.

Mason's high school didn't offer art classes, nor did his community college. His uncle agreed to pay for his schooling if he majored in anthropology; but when he transferred to the University of Washington to major in art, the funds stopped flowing. Mason once again had to pay his own way— he insists it was worth it.

Experimenting with watercolors gained Mason praise from professors and multiple awards. His art took on energy and movement, with a soft focus that had always been characteristic of his work. Turns out this artis-
tic inclination was also visionary, so to speak—it wasn’t until college Mason discovered he was “half-blind.” After trying on a friend’s glasses at a college football game, the field snapped into focus. Up until this point he had thought the world looked like an impressionist painting and he had no reason to think otherwise. As one would expect, the blurry world he lived in had been reflected in his art. After his own pair of glasses, his work in a portraiture class suddenly started to resemble the models he was painting. A professor asked what had happened; and when Mason told him he could finally see, the professor said, “throw the damn glasses away.”

Fresh out of school, Mason says he was “headed to New York to be a starving artist.” But his early success prompted the University of Washington School of Art to offer him a fulltime teaching position following his graduation from its master’s program. “I couldn’t turn that down, of course. No one gets that chance right out of school.”

He taught hundreds of students in his 32 years at UW. Among them was Chuck Close, who later became a well-known photorealist painter. Mason says he and Close have remained friends ever since Close knocked on his office door. “He’d say, ‘What do I do with this painting — I don’t know what to do with this painting — please help me.’ Little did I know where he’d end up.”

Chuck Close recently sold a painting for a million dollars, Mason says in disbelief. “You never know where life will take you,” he says. “Things happened to me that would never happen in a million years.” He still can’t believe one of his own paintings recently sold for more than $40,000.

Mason’s perpetually upbeat attitude disguises a career full of setbacks. Shortly after graduating from college, New York’s Museum of Modern Art contacted him. “They said, ‘We’re going to make you famous,’” he recalls. They wanted him to be one of 30 painters for a new show and coffee table book. A week later another phone call dashed his hopes; MOMA said they needed to cut a few artists and he was one to go. That experience seemed to set the tone for the rest of Mason’s artistic career. “Fame and fortune were always so close,” he says somewhat regretfully.

But fame came knocking again in the 1970’s when Mason’s Burpee Garden series gained national recognition. The largescale, abstract paintings are named after the seed catalogs that came to the farm when he was a boy. His “Burpee” style broke from what other Northwest artists were doing at the time. By pouring diluted oils onto canvas, he created huge, exuberant, audacious displays of color. Meanwhile, the Northwest school was producing small, drab, Asian-influenced works.

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Chuck Close helped Mason’s Burpee paintings gain exposure when he showed them in his SoHo studio. “That was quite the role reversal,” says Mason. Then well-known, radical art dealer Allan Stone bought the collection and proceeded to represent Mason in New York. Burpee Garden paintings are now in collections at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Denver Art Museum, Portland Art Museum, Seattle Art Museum and Tacoma Art Museum, as well as corporate and private collections.

Still, other occurrences worked against him. The oil paints used in his Burpee series turned out to be detrimental to his health, forcing him to switch to acrylics. Gallery owners lost interest when his style changed; others proved unreliable. Still others died before exhibitions came to fruition. “I shouldn’t say this — it’s negative; but almost every gallery I showed in, the owner would die after the first show,” Mason says. “I’d get a call that the owner had a heart attack, and I’d say, ‘Oh my god, not again!’” Mason spent two years writing his autobiography, only to...
have his work lost during one of his moves. And just last year, filmmaker Maury Duchamp died of a heart attack before completing a documentary on Mason that was three years in the works.

But Mason chooses not to dwell on daunting experiences. All setbacks are merely temporary in his mind – he can even use them to his advantage. Known for an eclectic and ever-evolving artistic style, Mason has used unfortunate events as a reason to do something new. He actually prefers frequent changes of direction. "When you get bored, you want to do something else," he explains. Though no artist wants to be forced to switch mediums, Mason adapted to using acrylics; and eventually he found his niche by adopting what he calls a more "linear" style.

Unfortunately, trying new things sometimes got him into trouble. Recently attempting to emulate his Burpee paintings using acrylics, Mason mixed the paint with quarts of glass medium. This combination proved to be toxic, and Mason's health was put at risk once again. "I thought I was invincible," he says, "No one is, of course." But that's how Mason has lived his life, seeking out new experiences at every turn, as curious as a child exploring the vastness of nature. Life has been his greatest education, and art his expression of what he's learned.

"He teaches you to look at the world differently," says Pat Howie of Mason. Howie and Karen Simonsen are both artists who assist Mason in managing his day-to-day tasks. Despite all they do for Mason, they say they gain so much more. "He actually teaches you to look at the world – to really look at it – to see the colors, to use your imagination, to just be a part of the environment."

Looking at pieces that span Mason's career, it's apparent each captures a different time in his life. His abstract work, like the Burpee Garden paintings, displays the vibrancy of the nature that surrounded him as he grew up on the farm. Subject matter returns with a youthful joy in later pieces - faces or figures float in midair, like the characters in cartoons and children's books he's always loved. And much of his recent work represents the tribal and ritual art he observed on his many global adventures, like the aboriginal cave paintings that fascinated him in Australia.

Mason's art is by no means predictable. Even this late in his career, he still tries new things. And he has no intention of slowing down. He's back in the studio after getting the green light from his physical therapist. He has a new show scheduled for March. And he finally got his silver screen debut in October, when Seattle producer-director John Forsen finished what Maury Duchamp had started.

His art captures a moment, but his goal is not to stop time. It's not about living forever – it's about creating something that does. This theme emerges in Mason's words, as he also wears the hat of poet. "Art is seemingly endless and life a brief moment," he writes. "Life is a fleeting moment/art an endless caress." Alden Mason's art will forever touch. It will continue to provide lessons long after he is able to teach them. Stay young, look at the world in wonder, and expect the unexpected. You never know where you'll end up.

IMAGE: Bird Dilemma, 2007, mixed media on paper, 26 x 35 inches. Courtesy of Foster/White Gallery. For more photos of Mason's work and Seattle studio go to www.artworksmagazine.com