ALDEN MASON:
MAGIC LANDSCAPES AND UNKNOWN DREAMS

by Regina Hackett

There is a breathing, delicate balance in painting, formed naturally like the delicate balance of our ecosystem.

Alden Mason is a painter concerned with balance: the balance between spontaneity and technical skill, between gesture and grace, between complicated, obsessive forms and loose, open ones. He is a native Northwesterner who shares many of the assumptions about art and nature that underlie traditional Northwest art. Along with Mark Tobey and Morris Graves, Mason has a pantheistic view of nature and an interest in creating art with movement, magic, and life flow. Yet Mason’s art is different from the Tobey-Graves school that Peter Plagens claims possesses Northwest art to the point of suffocation. While the work of Graves, Tobey, and their followers is often small, muted, and solemn, Mason’s work is expansive, wildly colorful, and exuberant.

Public recognition has been slow in coming to Mason; perhaps this is because his work looks at first glance like a complete departure from the Northwest tradition. The acclaim he now enjoys did not reach full flower until 1973 when Lamar Harrington of the Henry Gallery chose Mason to represent the State of Washington in the 74th Western Annual at the Denver Art Museum. After that stamp of approval, Mason has had an increasing number of well-received shows, not only in the Northwest, but also in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York.

Success seems to agree with Mason. In the past year he has painted several dozen major paintings and has had five one-person shows. Fortunately, his technique is well suited to this kind of productivity. He paints with a sustained burst of creative effort, from nine in the morning until midnight, and usually completes a painting each working session.

Mason’s canvases have a characteristically luminous, translucent look. This is because he prepares each canvas with eight or nine coats of gesso, sanded after each coat, the last two coats half acrylic medium. In addition, he dilutes his oil with stand oil, varnish and turpentine. “Essentially what I’ve got is oil paints behaving like watercolors,” he says. “That’s why the painting has to be completely intuitive and direct, because the paint sets up in 10-20 hours and I can’t change it. All the decisions have to be made in one day. Towards ten or eleven at night I’m dead tired and it’s hard to make the crucial decisions about what works, but the decisions have to be made.”

Since his paintings are about movement, Mason feels they work better large. “When the paintings are smaller than, say, seventy by eighty inches, there’s not enough space to sense the potential movement and the bumping sort of relationship between shapes. I want the paintings to look like natural events, like the arrangement of pebbles washed up on a beach. The tide comes in and moves them around. Maybe two or three brown ones, a black one, a big one, a small one.
When people take them home and put them in a fireplace hearth, it's all so over-designed. But on the beach it's marvelous. I'd like my paintings to have that kind of naturalness, like landscapes that just grew in form. I'm not talking about the Abstract Expressionist sort of vigorous gesture painting. It's just the opposite, really. I have to surmount the gesture and the activity to let this thing happen. But I still have no idea what a painting is going to look like in the end.

"With Spring Shimmy, I wanted it to have big shapes. So I started big, as you can see on the bottom, with that large, brown amorphic shape. As it went along, those small things happened towards the top. I liked them and put in a few more, and pretty soon they took over. The painting became complicated but in a sense still quiet and resolved. When I did this painting, it was Good Friday and I was thinking that a great big blanket of cold grey had hung over Seattle all winter and now it was spring again. So I meant it as a celebration of spring painting. A ritual altar to rebirth like a dance or like petals moving. I want it to be that important. If my paintings don't give me the feeling of emotional involvement you get with primitive painting, for example, I destroy them."

Mason was born in Everett, Washington, in 1919. He got his M.F.A. from the University of Washington in 1947 and has taught there for the last twenty-five years—"you might as well say the last hundred years, that's what it feels like," he says ruefully.

Growing up on a farm he was exposed to very little art. He didn't turn his attention to art until after he had already enrolled at the University of Washington studying entomology. His reasons for transferring to art seem casual enough: "I was tired of entomology, not tired of the subject itself—insects—but of the university approach. Instead of concentrating on the things themselves and what they did, we memorized Latin names and labelled dissections. It seemed to me like it would be more fun in art."

In the art department, Mason met Ray Hill, a watercolorist who painted landscapes in Eastern Washington. "I started doing watercolors then, kind of dreamy, romantic things and El Greco dark things. Ray Hill taught me about form, how to look at it.

Rainbow Teaser, 1973, oil/canvas, 70" x 85"
"As time went on, I began to realize there were other ways to do landscape. I began to see people like Gorky and Miro, and began to see the possibility of a more intimate, organic view.

"In a way, painting in the Northwest is small and complicated with very little color. One of the first big shows I saw, maybe in San Francisco, was a Matisse retrospective. The scale of his paintings overwhelmed me—big paintings and big areas. I felt like I'd been suffocated so long, and the world had opened up.

"In Europe I saw a lot of Bonnard paintings. I guess for me Matisse was scale, Gorky was images, and Bonnard was color—all that open, sensuous, drifting color. My own work didn't change right away, but I stored up the energy to release it at the right time."

Although Mason drew energy from Matisse, Gorky, and Bonnard, his work comes from his own private sources. "My first serious things were watercolor landscapes of the Deception Pass area around 1950. My present work grew out of those early watercolors. It is as though the wheel has turned and I am back where I started, but with new insight.

"Everyone should collect their own private symbols. There should be more people who are obsessed by what they want to do, like the guy who tried to sail to Alaska in a bathtub. He started off in Seattle and got to Port Townsend before someone pulled the plug. Art is an obsession just like that.

"I struggle with my paintings until they reach that indefinable state, until they say something to me that is real and has magic. The washes can be so beautiful and seductive, but it's a tightrope, to let the magic happen but not let it slip into beauty alone, to keep the forms from being too complicated or too open.

Rainbow with Lumps, 1974, oil/canvas

Triangle Butterfly, 1976, mixed media drawing, 36"" x 42""
"When the forms are too large and open, like a Frankenthaler, I'm disturbed by it, at least for my own painting, because I feel there's not enough there. Of course, I don't want the shapes to be anything specifically recognizable. Some people tell me they see breasts or buttocks in them, and I really don't intend that. But still I know the paintings refer. I like them to do that. I like them to feel real, like living landscapes.

"My paintings are my obsession. I travel a lot, like to the tropics and down to Mexico, looking for magic places. When I get where I'm going, the places are never what I imagine. But with painting I can re-create the magic and make the imagined world of paint more real than the actual place. Painting is like making my own unknown dream appear on the canvas. If I make a painting once a week, it's like going to heaven once a week. Along with boogie dancing and fly fishing, it keeps me going."  R.H.