

ART REVIEW

A Knockout Tribute to Alden Mason at Wright Exhibition Space

New exhibit Alden Mason: In Memoriam 1919-2013 hits the high points of the artist's work from 1970 on.



Alden Mason, *Head with Green Hair*, 1970, oil pastel on paper, 49.5 x 39.5 in.
Image: Courtesy Foster/White Gallery

By Sheila Farr
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When artists die their work always gets a fresh round of scrutiny, for better or worse. In the case of Alden Mason, who passed away in February, the quickly assembled exhibition honoring him that opened last Thursday at the Wright Exhibition Space only reaffirms his prominence as an artist and teacher. The show is a knockout.

Alden Mason: In Memoriam 1919-2013 is not a full retrospective by any measure. Mason began painting seriously in the 1940s and the earliest piece in this show dates to 1970. But that's fine. Leave it to the museums to do the research, track down older work and present a full survey down the road.

This show, organized by Mason's dealer Phen Huang of Foster/White Gallery and former dealer Greg Kucera, spotlights the mature Mason in all his glory, linking the imagery of some Dubuffet-influenced, mixed-media drawings from the early 1970s to the squeeze-bottle acrylics of his later years, and bringing back just enough of the glowing oil washes of his breakthrough Burpee series abstractions to remind us of their ethereal beauty. Those paintings swept color-starved local art lovers—weaned on the gloom-and-mist palette of the Northwest mystics—off their feet with glowing amethyst, sapphire, ruby, turquoise, and citrine.



Ethereal is hardly the word to describe the bulk of Mason's work. **Jittery, fetishistic, grotesque, zany, patterned, exuberant, obsessive, playful, dark:** this selection of paintings represents the gamut of Mason's mood swings and the breadth of his considerable technical skills. When Mason got sick from breathing the solvent fumes from oil paint, he had to drop his highly successful Burpee abstractions and switch to a new medium. He did it with flair. Patience isn't a word usually associated with Mason, but imagine what it took to squiggle line after line of gloopy acrylic from squeeze bottles to create the 82-by-70-inch *Up the Amazon*, intricate as a tribal carpet. Balancing wildness with control is what these paintings are about, both technically and metaphorically.

Alden Mason, *Up the Amazon*, 1981, acrylic on canvas, 82 x 70 in.
Image: Courtesy Foster/White Gallery



The trouble with Mason in later years was that, prolific as he was, his imagination sometimes got stuck in a loop. There could be a sameness to the imagery and palette—too many jittery figures and big heads on white grounds. At the Wright Exhibition Space, each piece feels urgent. It's all high energy, brilliant—a real tribute to an artist whose work will certainly endure.

Alden Mason, *Golden Burpee*, 1973, oil on canvas, 70 x 85 in.
Image: Courtesy Greg Kucera Gallery

Alden Mason: In Memoriam 1919-2013

Thru June 20, Wright Exhibition Space, 407 Dexter Ave N, Thu & Sat 10-2