

All paths lead to bountiful nature at Greg Kucera Galley

By REGINA HACKETT
PI ART CRITIC

Alden Mason's males have always been light on their feet. Clicking their misshapen heels, they dance, wiggle and writhe to the music in their heads.

Gaylen Hansen paints one male only. Known as the Kernal, he's a feet-on-the-ground kind of guy. Smoking his corn cob pipe, he holds his own with impassive fortitude.

The Greg Kucera Gallery is currently hosting a two-part exhibit with recent paintings by Mason and work from the early to mid-'70s by Hansen. Kucera represents Mason, hence has access to his new work. The Linda Hodges Gallery represents Hansen; the work here comes from a private collection.

Since both Northwest artists are doing some of their strongest painting late in life — each is in his mid-'70s — a fair comparison would feature new work from each. Neither has let age slow or mellow him. As painters, they are both fierce and powerful old men.

For that reason, Hansen's sweet little studies from the '70s can't compete with Mason's gleeful gargoyles and thump-heavy still lifes made this year.

Over the course of his career, Mason has made numerous stylistic leaps and changes. They include the loose, glowing pods in oil in the '70s (the Burpee Garden series), the more problematic beaded, squeeze bottle acrylic pattern paintings of the '80s and the scribbly figurative studies and still lifes of the late '80s and '90s, now at a flourishing height.

In spite of these changes, the spirit or meaning of Mason's work has remained constant. He's a celebrator. The universe hums in his ear. Whatever their form, the figures he makes wave feet, fins, wings and antennae in the air and keep time to a basic beat. Mason loves nature, and in his best work tends to see it through a scrim of comics and rock 'n' roll.

Hansen, on the other hand, has been stylistically steadfast. Since the mid-'70s, he has been roughing out tall tales in oil on canvas stapled flat on the wall, frying the colors until they had a grizzled glow, and leaving off the frames.

His is a tongue-in-cheek surrealism with a funk/cowboy overlay. What he has chosen to express within the style, however, has changed considerably.

In recent years, his vision has darkened, and the Kernal no longer plays a major role. When he appears in the paintings, he tends to be incidental, as if the earth had moved him and his grandiose species offstage. The paintings look peeled alive, raw and wild.

Hansen from the '70s was not inconsequential, particularly in his smaller works in pencil, ink or watercolor, on which this show concentrates.

"Two Spotted Chickens" (12 inches high by 18 inches wide) are lumpy, light-struck beings peering out of a gray, watercolor wash. They lean slightly to the right like a pair of vaudevillians past their prime and edging toward the exit amid a scattering of bored applause.

With "Chicken and Fish" (18 inches high by 12 inches wide), Hansen is his own Darwin, tracking new species. This watercolor is really two watercolors, painted one on top of the other. Above is a halo-headed chicken, a puff of dark feathers with a turquoise green

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Alden Mason is a celebrator, as seen in his 1995 acrylic on canvas "Spirit Vase."

ART REVIEW

■ Alden Mason and Gaylen Hansen at the Greg Kucera Gallery, 608 Second Ave., through Oct. 9.

trout sliding out of its backside. Below, the trout hangs lightly in the air, its midsection feathered like a chicken.

The other drawings here feature Hansen's staples: dogs, ducks, birds, fish, ample-breasted women and the Kernal, a puny guy at peace with the natural world.

Mason's current production in acrylic on canvas is dominated by his dreaming heads. In "Black Bird/Black Tulip" (50 inches by 60 inches), one enormous dome head has birds for eyes and tulips for tonsils. His open mouth is a sunflower with the seeds blown away, and his brain is full of birds, scraggly black creatures dragging limp feet behind them.

Mason's still lifes and his heads are currently full of flowers. He paints them with a nod to Horace Pippin. Like Pippin's, Mason's blooms are bloated, his tables wobbly and vases insufficient for the load they carry.

In "Honeymoon" (50 inches high by 60 inches wide), the roadrunner of cartoon fame streaks across the sky, the pink glory of his feathers trailing behind him. The male in the painting's a square, or maybe a video screen. His blocky-shaped face is outlined by a thin, live-wire line. It's a permeable membrane that fails to separate him from the painted air around him.

Beside him is his wife. She's a soap bubble, woozy with color, ready to pop. The skin of this couple is colored in a densely scribbled white. Mason tends to plow colors into his colors. His grays are seeded with red and blue, and his whites have pink and dark blue bruises.

"Triple Bouquet" (36 inches by 43 inches) has cranked up back beat. The vases sway and the flowers tower over them. Mason likes cheap blooms. Betty Boop might wear them as a corsage. They are vulgar, all-American flowers. If they had an odor it might be popcorn or Juicy Fruit gum.

Mason has been gathering speed in recent years and has found a powerful new stride. His paintings are blessings, and they glow like a neon ring around a sign advertising sodas. In his hands, paintings are good times, and he can make his good times roll.