

Alden Mason And The Devil In The Bushes

By Regina Hackett on August 21, 2007 at 6:42 PM



"Alden Mason Age 6-River Forks Farm"
(2000, acrylic/canvas, 61" x 51") via Laura Russo Gallery

"There's a great spirit who helps me and a devil who hides the bushes," said Alden Mason in the reedy voice of the recently ill. "There's a joke in there, but I've forgotten where."

Maybe it's that at age 87, he still seeks a reputation beyond the region. Unlike many artists who flourish in their old age, he hasn't given up hope that the art god will smile on his enterprise, causing his prices to rise and critical acclaim to pour in.

In contrast, by the time he was in his 80s, Guy Anderson had given up his fame quest and found a powerful freedom in painting for himself. But even though Mason still hopes for the major call out, he continues to paint with relish and invention.



"Parrot Talk" (2005, mixed media on paper, 39.5" x 31")
via Laura Russo Gallery

Recently, other troubles have piled on. The Lock Vista Apartments in Ballard, where he has lived for two years and recently relocated to a ground floor apartment because of a balance problem, are slated for condo conversion. The Seattle Displacement Coalition claims that in Ballard, 240 units in 22 buildings have already been converted, and Lock Vista will nearly double those losses. Lock Vista is home to low-income working people and seniors.

Wednesday night at 7:30 at the BallardWorks building, 2856 N.W. Market St., the Coalition is holding a meeting to discuss strategies for halting Lock Vista's plans.



"Big Squeezer" (1974, from Burpee Garden Series), via arts.wa.gov

Mason has little hope that anything can be done and calls the impending loss of his home the least of his problems. Last week, filmmaker Maury Duchamp, who was working on a documentary on Mason's life and art, died of a heart attack. He was 45. "He'd worked on it for three years," said Mason. "I care much more about him than the film, but I was looking forward to seeing it."

And that's not all. Several months ago, Mason realized that his attempt to return to the Burpee Garden series of the 1970s, his most acclaimed, was a mistake, as he used a gloss medium that has damaged his central nervous system. He thought he'd be fine, as the acrylics he favors don't have the health risks of oils, but the gloss remains toxic, he said.

He didn't want to mention the doomed book project and declined to give specifics, lest he seem bitter. The gist of it is that Mason was picked for inclusion in a big-deal book on painters but didn't make it through the final edit. "My hopes were sky high, and then, the sky fell," he said.

Although his hands shake, Mason works when he can. He's represented in Seattle by Foster/White, in Portland by Laura Russo.