

At 88, painter still surprises himself

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Alden Mason sits with two of his pieces at the Foster/White Gallery on Monday. Mason's work will be shown this month at Foster/White and at Greg Kucera Gallery. Photo: Mike Kane/P-I

Growing up as a shy kid with an overprotective mother in the Skagit Valley, Alden Mason studied bugs, watched birds become blurs in the sky and fish leap in the river.

He was no good at sports because he couldn't see the ball, and bad at math because he couldn't see the blackboard. But on winter mornings he liked to stand close to cows whose breath made fat, white bursts in the air.

To escape the strictures of home, he wandered into fields to smudge furrowed lines with his toe. Mason, 88, has led an urban life without acquiring an urban viewpoint. His work is full of all the things that moved him as a child, including the sparrows that flew around his head as he offered them carrots. While realizing that his art owes a lot to his early environment, he also credits a mail-order cartoon class. He earned the tuition by trapping muskrats. "I feel guilty about those muskrats," he said, "but I loved cartoons, with figures jumping, hopping and smooching. They were having more fun than I was. They lived in a brighter world."

Mason opens Thursday night in two Pioneer Square galleries. A large, late-career overview is at Foster/White and a small selection of 1970s "Burpee Garden" paintings are at Greg Kucera. Named for the seed catalog, "Burpee Garden" paintings remain Mason's greatest success – although fumes from the oil paint, varnish and turpentine that gave the series its high-toned wet look nearly killed him. A recent series he calls "pseudo-Burpees" have had the same health consequences. Once again, he's dizzy, short of breath and subject to headaches. "The acrylic gloss medium didn't come with a warning label, but I shouldn't be surprised," he said. "The whole world's becoming a toxic waste dump."

Why didn't he wear a respirator? "I can't work in one of those things," he said. "The sound of my own breathing drove me nuts." Mason's father, a house painter, died of lead poisoning when Mason was 5. To be nearly felled by a similar affliction is remarkable to him. "It's weird, but what are you going to do? He was a painter and I'm a painter."

Painting has always come first. He uses it to return to the world as he first saw it, through a soft-focus, myopic fog. He was in college at the University of Washington before he realized he needed glasses. At a football game, when he couldn't see the plays, a friend lent him a pair, and the field snapped into focus. "The world scared me," he said. "I didn't know it had all those sharp edges." Naturally enough, he wanted to translate his new experience into his paintings. In class, Ambrose Patterson looked at Mason's efforts and shook his head. He asked what in the world happened, and Mason explained about getting glasses. "Throw the damn things away," said Patterson.

On the edge of fame



During his long life in the studio, Mason has painted on the edge of a national reputation without achieving one. Something always held him back. Art dealers closed, lost interest or proved unreliable. He has been known to leave a good gallery for a bad one. Book projects have fallen apart. Only last year, a filmmaker who'd spent three years shooting a documentary on Mason had a fatal heart attack before finishing the project.

The figures in Alden Mason's recent paintings are grounded in the abstractions of his earlier works.
Photo: Mike Kane/P-I

With the single exception of the Museum of Northwest Art, which is too small to make a difference, Northwest museums aren't interested in mounting retrospectives for regional artists. Mason says he has no complaints, aside from his knees, which he smashed when dizziness led to falls. "I've always had a place to show my work, and a lot of people to appreciate it. Plenty of good artists can't say that."

Fun-loving and upbeat, Mason also is restless. When he abandoned "Burpee" as the series was catching on around the country, his health was the reason, but he says he wouldn't have stuck with it anyway. Others were enthralled, but he was getting bored. He bores quickly, changing galleries and wives, losing houses in divorces.

On the faculty at the University of Washington's School of Art, he retired early, believing that he didn't need the salary or the full pension. His art was going to keep him afloat. It has, but not in the

style to which he had become accustomed in his flush years. "There's a great spirit who helps me and a devil who hides in the bushes," he said. "There's a joke in there, but I've forgotten where."

Having lived all around the city, Mason is committed to Ballard, where he has an apartment and a studio. Last year the sprawling Lock Vista Apartments in Ballard were scheduled for a condo conversion, and Mason, who has lived there for several years, drawn by modest rent and the company of other artists, is happy the deal fell through. "I didn't want to have to move again," he said.

After his recent health decline, one of his ex-wives invited him to move in with her. Touched, he said no because he would have had to leave his impressive support system, largely composed of younger artists. Renato Oliva buys his groceries every week, among other chores. He visits for the pleasure of Mason's company. Karen Simonson washes his laundry, writes checks for him to sign, takes him to the studio and drives him around. A rotating band of others pitch in as needed. "It takes a village," Simonson said. Nobody in the village is getting paid. "I'm getting more out of it than Alden ever could," Simonson said. "He taught me a lot about art, that you have to be willing to make a lot of bad paintings to get a few good ones."

Large paintings are beyond him, but he continues to paint in watercolor and oil stick on paper. Although his hands shake when he isn't painting, he can stop the tremor to work, a process he does not understand. "It just happens," he said. The art also happens. Using Pop art as a base and drawing with a stick, Mason creates mutants who are dressed to dazzle and ready to cavort like there's no tomorrow. The paintings in the "Burpee Garden" series are abstract. What Mason has achieved in his paintings since then is to use a similar style of abstraction as a ground for the figures who always populated his drawings.

Figures just want to dance

Recent figures were born old, warped in time and oppressed by place, but they kick up their misshaped legs to dance. Those without legs wave useless arms. Those missing both arms and legs rock in place, fat heads tottering on long necks. Mason's work remains improvisational and celebratory. Even when his figures signal a tragedy, the universe hums around them.

If he has a regret, he said, it's that he can no longer travel. He saw Europe once and never went back. Travel to him means South America, Australia and Africa, where he sought out native and tribal art and increasingly rare animal species. Now he travels through TV and is fond of Animal Planet.

Insecure about his work for much of his life, he has become serenely confident and at peace. "I had a dream a couple of nights ago," he said. "Somebody said to me, 'Your paintings are wonderful but you've changed them so much.' I admit it and glory in it. Of course I've changed them. I'm old. I've lived a long time. I improvise and follow delight. I'm as surprised as anyone to see where it takes me."