

FOSTER/WHITE GALLERY

ALDEN MASON

'Exhibits show discipline underlying abstract art'

Matthew Kangas for The Seattle Times: Entertainment & the Arts

September 10, 2004

Two painters exhibiting this month offer fresh and innovative versions of abstract art that entertain as well as challenge our preconceptions of what art should look like.

Alden Mason, 85, is opening his 44th solo show since 1946, a grand and glorious affirmation of his talent that is split right down the middle between total nonobjective abstraction and exuberantly figurative works. Larry Bemm, 35, unveils his 14th solo show since 1996; it's his first show in Seattle since his well-received 2003 debut in New York City. With colors and shapes like pastel mints, Bemm's work still retains an informality and spontaneity that belie solid compositions and endlessly varied combinations of lines, circles and squares.

Mason had two pivotal shows in New York, in 1977 and 1981. Part of what troubled me over the years has been Mason's repeatedly stressed desire to make a painting retain the vitality of a drawing. But what may work in a drawing — like the smaller, linear watercolors on view — does not necessarily transfer to a 5-foot-tall painting. Mason has reconciled all this beautifully in the current work, restricting the teeming groups of figures to the watercolors and reverting to his style of the late 1970s — big gestural, goopy puddles of paint — for the large abstractions. The viewer gets two shows in one.

The darker intimacy of the watercolors allows Mason to express his love affair with line. The deceptive doodling style reveals complex compositions of shifting figures, landscapes and images lifted from the tribal art Mason so reveres. However, they pale by comparison to the larger paintings, masterful assemblies of color, gesture and shape that allude to New York School paintings of the 1950s, like Jackson Pollock. They are bright, centerless compositions wherein no one part of the picture is any more important than any other.

The seven new paintings (all are 2003) triumph over this challenge. With 'Gold Blusher' and 'Waltzing Elephant Blues,' the palette is very wide, the true test of a colorist. In others, like 'Nuptial Flight' and 'Vanilla Pudding,' the artist sticks to a pink-and-green axis of contrasting tones or falls back on lots of white to pull it all together.

Bemm moved to Minneapolis from Seattle last year and now uses it as a base for shows in Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York. His work is the subject of an article in this month's Art & Antiques and received a rave review in The New York Times.

Simple — almost too simple — geometric shapes wander across divided or solid-color backgrounds in off-tone shades of yellow, green, gray, orange and blue. There's a retro feel to the colors, like manufactured consumer products of the 1960s, along with other references to baby toys, candy and nature.

Overall, the work is strong but, with seven small 12-inch-square paintings and only five larger ones averaging 4 feet high, the show is a bit of a let-down after his debut show at Bryan Ohno in 2002 when every painting was a winner.

'Udder and Roe' (2002) and 'Sucker's Arm' (2003) have an immediate, intangible humor even without their titles. Descending rows of dots and extended tubular shapes meander across pale blue and green backgrounds. The smaller paintings point up how thin at times Bemm's method can become. Taken along with the new larger works, though, they provide a strong confirmation for an artist about whom we are bound to hear more in the coming years.