Playgrounds for memory, intuition

ALDEN MASON | At 89, the Northwest artist continues to paint, driven by the forces of spontaneity and the personal symbolism of his Skagit Valley childhood.

BY GAYLE CLEMAN
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Talking with Alden Mason is a lot like looking at his paintings. In a charming and somewhat scattered manner, he tells stories of his childhood — trapping muskrats to earn money for his first paint kit — and of his travels — trips to Papua New Guinea, Africa and Australia where he developed a kinship with native art. His stories, like his paintings, are full of vivid imagery and nuances of wonder, hardship and transformation.

At 89, Mason casts a long shadow over Northwest painting. Seattle Art Museum contemporary-art curator Michael Darling calls him “one of our most important living artists here in Seattle.”

But the painter isn’t overly concerned about shaping his legacy. When I spoke to him recently at Foster/White Gallery, where an exhibition of his recent work is on view through March 21, he didn’t care to discuss critical attempts to compare him with Northwest mystics like Mark Tobey. Or to talk about the 32 years he spent teaching at the University of Washington (he retired in 1981).

Instead, Mason told mini-narratives about his childhood, his travels and career, and the black birds that frequently appear in his paintings.

Mason was born in Everett and grew up in and around the Skagit Valley — a landscape whose presence can be felt in many of his images. He is probably best known for his Burpee paintings of the 1970s: big, fluid.

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ART EXHIBITION
"Alden Mason: Bugaboo"
New and recent mixed-media works, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, through March 21, Foster/White Gallery, 220 Third Ave. S., Seattle; free (206-622-2833 or fosterwhite.com).

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gorgeous paintings with an exuberant, earthy use of color and swirling compositions of organic forms. Like many things in Mason’s work, the title of the series stems from Mason’s childhood: a fascination with the Burpee Seed Co. catalog. Mason says that, with the Burpees, “success was coming fast in New York and Los Angeles, but I was getting dizzy from the oil paint and having lots of balancing problems. I had to quit doing those things just as I had two shows in New York. They said, ‘Goodbye. We don’t know who you are anymore because you’re doing something different.’”

Characteristically, Mason kept working, trying different media and new approaches. He picked up acrylic painting and returned to figurative work in the late 1970s. Trying to achieve a watercolor-like effect with the acrylics, he used quarts of gloss medium. While acrylics are nontoxic, the gloss medium was not, and his health problems increased. He now uses an oil stick and watercolor combination.

While his work may seem radically different in terms of medium, scale, color palette and degree of abstraction, Mason gets frustrated when galleries insist on separating his bodies of work or showing only his newest pieces. He says that the works “are not different at all” and that they are all about “improvisation.” In fact, Mason says that there are a few paintings in the current exhibition that he did with his eyes closed, although he does say that “I peeked once or twice.”

Mason explains that this approach “was wonderful because your hand is a smartass. You think ‘I can draw figures and people with my eyes closed,’ but when your eyes are closed, your hand puts the arm coming out of the leg or hip. Crazy things happen, which is what I like.”

While Mason doesn’t set out with preconceived notions, he sometimes draws from a unique set of iconography — symbols, shapes, and figures that occur repeatedly — with many additions and alterations. He says, “There are symbolic relationships in everything.”

The figure with the hat who shows up over and over in his work? Mason says, “That’s usually me.” He’s been fond of hats ever since his childhood in the Skagit Valley, where hats kept the hay chaff from falling down his shirt.

In his quirky and touching “Big Head” paintings, big-haired figures (occasionally wearing hats) contain birds, doglike figures, other people. Mason says, “In the head you can put anything you think. The head is simply a vessel for the symbols that I use.” A simple vessel, perhaps, but one that holds his intuitive, even Surrealist, approach.

The Surrealists, and some of the New York School abstract painters like Arshile Gorky, whom Mason describes as a “kindred spirit,” were interested in a spontaneous approach that bypassed the conscious mind, revealing a more authentic self. Mason says, “It’s all improvisation, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t come out of some secret, wonderful place.”

Mason’s discussion of “Dream of Africa,” a 2005 acrylic painting, reveals these various forces of spontaneity and personal symbolism. After noting that there’s a “double Alden” in the painting, Mason laughingly says that the elephant seems to be trampling one of the figures with hats while “the bird is rejoicing.”

This duality of playfulness and calmness communicates ideas about life and death, passages and transformations, ideas that are shored up by his frequent use of “Totem” and “Shaman” in his titles. And also by his repeated inclusion of the black bird, a messenger between the living and the dead that he learned of during a trip to Papua New Guinea.

Mason balances these profound references with his lively marks and cartoonlike figures, keeping his paintings fanciful. He also includes sweet, personal symbols like the tulip, a reference to going to the tulip fields in Skagit Valley with his mother.

With these frequent references to trips and childhood experiences, and in his desire to see some of his paintings live side by side with others, Mason seems to relish looking back. This man is primed for a retrospective.

SAM’s Darling, though a fan of Mason’s work, says the museum has no plans to mount such a show. But surely this artist — so emphatically committed to an intuitive engagement with materials and process — deserves one.


“Alden Mason points out figures in one of his paintings being hung at Foster/White Gallery. He said it’s one of the pieces he painted with his eyes closed but that he “peeked once or twice.”

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ALDEN MASON
Artist