

VISUAL ARTS

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Alden Mason's energy glows in museum-worthy retrospective at Wright Space

By MICHAEL UPCHURCH
Seattle Times arts writer

Every kind of cloud shape, plant hue and flower color seems to be a swirl in Alden Mason's 1975 oil-on-canvas, "Sky Spreader."

The painting — simultaneously tactile and vaporous, stylized and naturalistic, sharply outlined and teeming amorphous — marks a peak in his career. But not the only one.

EXHIBITION REVIEW

'Alden Mason: In Memoriam 1919-2013'

10 a.m.-2 p.m.
Thursdays and
Saturdays through
June 30. Wright
Exhibition Space,
407 Dexter Ave. N.,
Seattle; free (206-
264-8200).

Garden Series" (inspired by the garden catalog) put him on the radar of New York art dealers, bringing him considerable commercial success. His work with oil paints, however, harmed his health, and he soon switched to acrylic paint, often squeezing it directly out of the tube onto the canvas.

The change in medium led to a change in style. But no matter whether Mason was working in figurative, abstract or primitivist mode, the exuberance of his work is consistent and irrepressible. There's an antic energy to just about everything he does.

Mason traveled extensively and soaked up the cultures of every place he went, as this exhibit demonstrates. Australian aboriginal art, for instance, had a big impact, evident in "Up the Amazon" and "Tambopata Tango" (references to a Peruvian trip in 1981 — but the aesthetic is pure Outback).

In "Tango," tidy beads of red, pink, violet, brown and other colors form horizontal lines that provide an obsessive-compulsive

That much is evident at "Alden Mason: In Memoriam 1919-2013," a museum-worthy retrospective featuring close to three dozen paintings at Wright Exhibition Space.

The show, curated by Phen Huang and Greg Kucera, covers almost 40 years in Mason's career, with an emphasis on the 1970s. That was when his "Burpee



COURTESY OF FOSTER/WHITE GALLERY

Alden Mason, "Cousin Claudia" (1992), acrylic on canvas



COURTESY OF
FOSTER/WHITE GALLERY

Alden Mason, "Tambopata
Tango" (1981), oil on canvas



COURTESY OF
GREG KUCERA GALLERY

Alden Mason, "Golden
Burpee" (1973), oil on
canvas

backdrop to hieroglyphlike squiggles and diagonals that do indeed have a dance-step dynamism to them. Tropical jungle as ballroom? Perhaps.

The more whimsical side of Picasso seems to have had an influence on Mason, too, both in his pre-Burpee work ("Fetish Mask" is the best example) and in paintings from the early 1990s such as "Cousin Claudia" and "George Doesn't Eat Red Meat." (Mason's way with language is as playful as his way with paint, as other alluring titles — "Nuptial Flyer," "Lavender Blusher," "Bird Dilemma" — indicate.)

Along with the paintings themselves, the exhibit serves up 15 mini-essays by art-world figures — critics, dealers, former students, fellow artists — that bring Mason-the-man as alive as Mason-the-artist.

Artist Fay Jones writes, "He was a flirt, a wild dancer (we called him Spider-Legs), bigger than life, a Northwest one of a kind."

Chuck Close, calling Mason "my teacher, my mentor and my friend," praises him as "the greatest painter to come out of the Pacific Northwest — for me, even greater than Mark Tobey or Morris Graves."

Some viewers may dispute that. But with this show there's a powerful case for it being made.

Michael Upchurch: mupchurch@seattletimes.com