

Alden Mason, a cheery neo-expressionist
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Before Alden Mason gained notoriety as the painter of controversial murals on state house walls, the Northwest native was more widely recognized as an art professor at the University of Washington who became a nationally known painter. Now seems an appropriate time for the UW's Henry Gallery to mount a Mason retrospective, allowing the public (and legislators) a timely look at the many distinct phases of the artist's work since 1951. Not everything will be to everyone's liking, and just as curator Chris Bruce has been selective in choosing works from Mason's enormous oeuvre, so the wise viewer will be selective in wandering through the galleries. Mason has had his highs and lows over the years and, no matter what series, style, or period one sees, there's an obsessive consistency that can weary even the most sympathetic viewer.

Mason's development as an artist differs from that of his contemporaries, and regrettably there is no real attempt in the catalogue that accompanies the exhibit to place Mason in the historical context of Northwest modernism. In the essay by *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* critic Regina Hackett, there is a glancing allusion to the late Raymond Hill, a fellow faculty member of Mason's at the School of Art, but no mention of his teachers Walter F. Isaacs and Ambrose Patterson and the impact they might have had on his development and maturity. Patterson was an impressionist from Australia who exhibited with Monet. Isaacs was a modernist who studied in Paris with Othon Friesz and Charles Guérin and who exhibited in the 1922 autumn salon with Picasso. Mason was the first of his generation of UW students not to follow his teachers' footsteps to France. Other students of Isaacs and Patterson, notably Spencer Moseley and Wendell Brazeau, faithfully trekked to the studio of cubist master Fernand Léger in Paris to soak up European art firsthand.

But then, that is the difference between Mason and his fellow students. His is a second-hand, at-one-remove modernism, tried on from afar rather than experienced directly. Exposure to Arshile Gorky, the abstract expressionist, and John Altoon, the Bay Area expressionist, may explain the evolution of some forms and the influences on Mason's oblique sexual imagery. But it does not constitute a hands-on exposure to any of the great moderns.

What does that leave? Mason turned out to be an artist caught between conflicting urges, in my opinion. Starting out with a love of landscape that he pursued for nearly 20 years, he has flipped toward figuration in the past 15 years. Perhaps instead of revering his abstract art achievements, we can admire how he turned out to anticipate the return to expressionist figuration in the final quarter of our century. At any rate, the exhibit seems split down the middle, and one is left to sort out individual works that shine forth in lieu of being able to follow any comprehensive development or growth.

Maybe a true retrospective would expose Mason's schizophrenia too clearly. Curator Chris Bruce has chosen not to show any of Mason's work prior to 1951, and *Deception Pass* (1951) is the only representational landscape on view. Here, one can see the roots of Mason's Mount Vernon childhood. The limpid, liquid forms of the trees are harbingers of the beautiful transparent blobs of color in his abstract landscapes of the 1970s.

The north gallery is filled with the "Burpee Garden" series, abstract landscapes, large squarish canvases of oil paint mixed with varnish that relate directly to the final phase of American modernism, the Color Field, or "post-painterly abstractionists," as Clement Greenberg, their critic-mentor, called Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, and Kenneth Noland. Taken together, Mason's dozen or more paintings in that room are an undeniably impressive achievement. The "lavish beauty" Hackett praises in the catalogue is substantial in its very transparency and

seeming formlessness. Lush greens, blues, yellows, oranges, and reds flow up against one another and present a convincing natural world redolent of sensuousness and color.

Rainbow Flinger and *Rainbow Tie* (both 1973) balance a wider palette successfully and combine an active pouring of the paint with an intuitive mix of colored areas that looks just right. The absence of a central, anchoring form does not matter; Mason is summoning up Isaac's composition, or "placement," lessons. This unerring compositional sense, coupled with the landscape associations, ties Mason in the positive sense of the developments of Northwest art.

What happened after 1975 is something else again. One remarkable and beautiful work, *The Proboscis Enigma* (1970), foretells Mason's battle with figuration. Combining drawing and painting in an image of a simplified "children's art" central figure, the work is unusual for its restraint and open awkwardness of line. Never again would the artist exercise such control over a figure in a painting. Instead, a long period ensued after the abstract landscapes (*Cloud Catcher*, *Pink Blusher*, 1974) that persists to this day, wherein Mason has sought to balance two others concerns, a return to representation through the figure, and a retention of the flat picture surface.

At first, the switch from poured or pooled paint to a ketchup squeeze-bottle applicator looked like a technical breakthrough. Unfortunately, the results were confectionary in the extreme. Adapting his indulgent color schemes to the squiggly line, Mason coincided with P&D, or "pattern and decoration" art, a short-lived outpost of late modernism in which repetitive pattern and decorative color were elevated to fine art status by feminist artists like Joyce Kozloff and Miriam Schapiro, and egged on by P&D guru, critic Jeff Perrone. Though Hackett asserts that the "buoyant grace of the pattern paintings...offer eloquent evidence that Mason can...keep forms in motion," to my eye they remain static and immobile.

All of this brings to mind Mason's work-on-paper survey at Seattle Art Museum in the winter of 1986. Perhaps Mason is one of those artists better seen in small, highly edited doses. In the SAM show, curator Bruce Guenther concentrated on figurative work that exposed the wonderful freedom of line. The witty invention of images looked fresh and effective compared to the labored process and forced hedonism of the paintings. Considering how intense each of Mason's paintings is, we could have used more empty space at the Henry Gallery. There's a slightly claustrophobic feeling or sense of being lost in the fun house as one strolls from room to room.

The exhibition comes up to the present with the artist's new squishy rather than squeegee painting application, and you have to hand it to the professor emeritus for finding an alternative to his tiresome squiggle. Mason's dilemma might be one of overindustriousness. No matter what effect he comes up with, it is turned into another convention almost instantly by overuse or overkill. The more one becomes wrapped up in his tactile technique, the harder it is to perceive the content or activity of the figures. A cheery neo-expressionist in an age of somber art, Alden Mason's sojourn from Skagit Valley landscapes to manic hieroglyphics remains puzzling. One has to at least comment the energy and enthusiasm he has put into solving the enigma of his talent. For me, it still remains insoluble.