Imagineer
Exploring Alden Mason's headscapes art/12-13
The artist’s dilemma

Alden Mason’s influential work takes a space at WVC gallery

BY JEFFERSON ROBINSON
World staff writer

Alden Mason spent much of his youth in a soft world — prismatic, glossy, lacking hard lines. Only as a University of Washington student in the 1920s did the painter try on a friend’s glasses, and realize the world had sharp edges. He got his own pair and wore them into a portraitraiture class, where he’d been making soft-spoken, impressionistic works that didn’t resemble the models, but still won praise from instructor Ambrose Patterson.

With the glasses on, his next portrait was so hard-edged it looked like it was cut out with a knife.

“Professor Patterson told that class — he could never and said, ’What happened to you?’” says Mason. “I said, ’I got glasses, I can see now!’ He said, ’Throw the goddamn glasses away’.”

The softness of Mason’s nearsighted youth persisted in his canvases, which have made him an influential touchstone for Northwest artists for the last 60 years. Now 89, with most of his career spent just on the cusp of national fame, the Seattle creator shows a selection of his latest work next week at the Robert Graves Gallery at Wenatchee Valley College, alongside friend and fellow painter Karen Simonson.

“He’s always been one of those names, like Michael Snafford and the late Mark Tobey,” says John Crew, president of the Graves Gallery board, noting two key artists of the abstract Northwest School. “It’s a rare thing for someone of that caliber to be showing here.”

The show comes during a fruitful but painful year for Mason. Two major Seattle galleries, Greg Kucera and Foster/White, are now showing his paintings — including pieces from his 1970s “Burpee Garden” series, which brought major attention from the New York art world. Some of them are newly sold for $35,000. A long-planned documentary on his life and work gets its first airing on Seattle television next month.

But in August he suffered an apparent ligation tear in his left knee, already damaged from a series of falls, which confined him to a Seattle rehabilitation center. Now he’s preparing to move to an assisted-living facility, and his attendance at a Wenatchee reception Sept. 25 is in doubt.

His hands tremble and his sense of balance is impaired, possibly by the toxicity of the pains and variances he’s used all his life. It’s a syndrome he first experienced in the 1970s, doing the massive “Burpee” oil canvases.

Mason lost his own father, a Skagit Valley house painter, to lead poisoning at the age of 5. “Little did I know I was going to do a similar thing to myself,” he says. “I thought I knew the answer to all these dangerous things, but...” He shrugs. “I goofed.”

Simonson, 63, met Mason almost four years ago, and impressed him with her paintings. A late-bloomer artist, she became an assistant in his Ballard studio, and a key manager of his day-to-day business as his mobility began to decline.

“The angel here saved my life, so to speak,” Mason says. “It was just a godsend when she

Alden Mason’s 1973 oil painting “Rainbow Rocker” — part of the “Burpee Garden” series that made him famous, influenced by the soft forms and bright colors of his Skagit Valley youth. It now hangs at the Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle, with a $41,000 price tag.

Mason found a kindred spirit when he encountered Karen Simonson’s art, like this untitled work in oilstick and acrylic on Yupo paper. “I found her paintings utterly delightful,” he says. “She had made a series of soft, col of gray paintings, with little dots and little marks and so on, and they moved so shyly and shifting that you’re not sure what was going on or what is meant, and it becomes a very poetic reference.”

Seattle artists Karen Simonson and Alden Mason. Simonson became a friend and aide as Mason suffered health setbacks, and helped organize the Robert Graves Gallery exhibit.
“Alden Mason: Artist”

This documentary on Mason’s career was begun by filmmaker Maury Douchamp, but left incomplete at Duchamp’s death last year. Seattle producer-director John Forsen took over the project, and showed the completed one-hour work in a premiere 7 p.m. Oct. 7 at the Foster/White Gallery’s Pioneer Square location in Seattle, 220 Third Ave. S. The film shows again the following night on a world tour. For information, call (206) 622-2833 or visit fosterwhite.com.

appeared on the scene.”

“I feel totally, totally blessed,” Simonson says. “It’s been a good collaboration. It’s been good for both of us.”

Mason’s early exposure to art came from a cartooning-by-mail course at age 12, and from his experiences in the natural world of the Skagit Valley — birdwatching, farming, exploring. A small child, picked on by other kids, he took art lessons from a local woman who also taught piano and held Sunday revival meetings in her home. To earn money for painting supplies, he trapped muskrats and sold their hides.

“I got a little painting kit — I think it was meant to be used for tinting photographs, mostly,” he says. “I then found a cardboard piece in a cracker box of my mother’s, so I scrubbed a little white on there and sat in the stairway and did my first painting — birch trees in the snow or some corney thing that I thought art should be like. Later on I did a big mural in the basement of the house, of birch trees in snow with a wolf or something like that.”

His formal introduction to art had to wait until college, where he experimented with watercolors and won heaps of awards in the medium. The recognition led the UW School of Art to invite him to join the faculty after he earned his master’s degree in 1947. He taught students there for 32 years — among them Chuck Close, later to become world-famous for his huge, detailed photorealist paintings.

Meanwhile, “Burpee” was percolating. The dappled, soft-edged oils imitated watercolors, and incorporated the shimmering color and light-play of Mason’s Near East country youth. The seven-foot paintings, named for the seed catalog that arrived without fail at his parents’ farm, showed first in Seattle, then in New York in 1973. Chuck Close first displayed “Burpee” in his SoHo studio, where it was seen by Manhattan art patrons like Allan Stone, sponsor of many American abstract artists. The works moved to Stone’s gallery that year, and caused a sensation among critics and buyers.

The “Burpee” period was short, running from 1970 to 1975, when Mason started working with thinned acrylic paints — his health demanded it — to create other forms. He started applying paints with squeegee bottles rather than brushes and used that method to create two huge murals that decorated the state Senate Chamber in Olympia from 1980 to 1987. Although his acrylic works still featured mudslides of rich color, most differed radically from “Burpee”: humanoid forms emerged to smile, leap and play, often as huge heads containing visual concepts, like the dreams of a cartoon.

But no work since has created such a national stir, and a recent attempt to revisit the “Burpee” style, with acrylic glosses instead of oil, led to Mason’s latest bouts of vertigo and nausea.

“You shouldn’t emulate what you did before,” he says philosophically. “That’s a bad thing to do anyway.”

Mason has also written poetry, some of it published in a chapbook in 2004, featuring many of his paintings. “Love is a wish,” he writes, “and fame is folly.” Another poem depicts the artist’s wrestling match with the Muse: “Sing of paint loving the canvas/Struggling to caress their destiny.”

“Eisenhower and other presidents all painted as a hobby. To relax, they said. It’s not relaxing for me. It’s a big fight,” Mason says. “Yet at the same time, it’s kind of spiritual in a way, or something happens. If you’re relaxed and expect it, it just takes over, and you just paint it. It flows from nowhere — but from somewhere.”

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“Sleeping Beauty II” (2001), an acrylic on canvas, hangs in Alden Mason’s Ballard studio, next to his walker. Although slowed by injuries and vertigo, the 89-year-old Northwest art legend shows a selection of his abstract work in Wenatchee’s Robert Graves Gallery, beginning Monday.

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