

A remembrance of Alden Mason, a brilliant and bumptious life

I first knew Alden Mason's work when, as a high school student, I would come into Seattle from Federal Way to see the galleries and what was being shown in 1973-74. Mason was showing his "Burpee Garden" series then at Polly Friedlander's roughly realized, but ever so chic, gallery space on Yesler Street. I remember the paintings as containing the most vivid, jewel-like colors and the most expressive, delightful paint surfaces I had yet seen in paintings in Seattle.

Burpee Garden Series

In 1973, following the spectacular success of his first exhibition of the "Burpee Garden" series of paintings at Seattle's Polly Friedlander Gallery, Alden Mason visited New York at the invitation of Chuck Close. Close, a former student of Mason, encouraged him to install a number of his "Burpee Garden" paintings in Close's SoHo studio in the hopes of finding a dealer in New York. Notably, Close arranged for the maverick art dealer Allan Stone to view Mason's work.

Seeing the paintings Mason installed in Close's studio, Stone agreed to buy all of them and to represent Mason's work in New York. Allan Stone showed Mason's paintings in New York through the late 1970s, finding an international market for the work. Some of the "Burpee Garden" paintings were also shown to great acclaim at Ruth Schaffner Gallery in Los Angeles, and at Esther Robles and Gerard John Hayes, also in Los Angeles, and at William Sawyer in San Francisco. Through exhibitions with these galleries on both coasts, many of these dynamic paintings were acquired by museums and important collectors. (Earlier, Mason had showed with Zoe Dusanne's and Gordon Woodside's galleries in Seattle, and Bau-Xi Gallery in Vancouver, BC.)

"Burpee Garden" paintings are represented in the collections of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Denver Art Museum, Portland Art Museum, Seattle Art Museum, Tacoma Art Museum, Museum of Northwest Art in La Conner, and corporate and private collections all across the country.

The "Burpee Garden" series, named after the Burpee Seed Company catalog which Mason remembered from his early years growing up on a farm in the Skagit Valley, were the first of many triumphant innovations as Mason's career progressed. With their audacious color, surprising scale, and exuberant abstraction, they represent a break with the somberly colored or poetic narratives that had typified painting here following the advent of the Northwest School. Mason's significance is obvious in the way the "Burpee Garden" paintings mark a distinct turn in that linear history. Along with other abstract artists working in Seattle such as Francis Celentano, Michael Dailey, Robert Jones, William Ivey, and Frank Okada, Mason influenced the development of many younger artists here. Despite



ALDEN MASON
RAINBOW ROCKER (BURPEE GARDEN SERIES), 1973
Oil on canvas 80 x 90 inches
Private collection

his need to abandon oil painting because of its detrimental effect on his health, this short-lived series of paintings remain the pinnacle of Mason's early success.

By Mason's own estimation, there were only about 60 – 70 of these large oil paintings painted between 1971 and 1977. There are some small works as well but most of them are edited from larger works that Mason rejected as a whole while saving the "good parts" from them as separate works.

The scale of these "Burpee" works was the natural outgrowth of making some very large, 40 x 50 inch, watercolors on thick paper and illustration board. His drawings during this period were similarly large works using oil pastels rubbed with thinners and, while figural in nature, contained some of the same aqueous nature of the "Burpee" paintings. In some of the later oil paintings one can detect loosely realized figures among the pools of color but the paintings largely remained at odds with the drawings during this period.

History with Alden Mason

My own history with Mason continued at the University of Washington School of Art, where Mason taught for over thirty years. When I started college there in 1975, Alden taught me in drawing and design courses. Though I also had courses from influential professors such as Jacob Lawrence, I always felt a kinship with Mason for his irreverence, and for his infectious view of life. He was an impressive teacher, and an even more important artist.



ALDEN MASON
BROWN BLUSHER, 1975
Oil on canvas 82 x 70 inches
Private collection

In 1979, I started to work part-time at Diane Gilson Gallery where Mason was represented. His first show of acrylic paintings there attempted to continue the "Burpee" paintings in washes of acrylic on a black background. Mason was working with very broad gestures and brushstrokes that mimicked, but weren't convincing as a furtherance of, the "Burpee" series. His second show with Gilson introduced the next major breakthrough in his work by using a raised line of acrylic paint as a middle ground between his painting and drawing. Paintings from this series included his ill-fated murals for the State Capitol Senate Chambers, and several other civic commissions.

During my tenure at Gilson, I also began to work as a studio assistant to Mason, mixing paint, stretching, priming and framing his canvases. Mason proved to be an inventive, thoughtful artist in his studio, generous with his time, his advice, and the stories of his travels.

Working there, I saw his paintings from the time they were just blank rectangles of canvas (painted black), through his rough drawings on them in charcoal, and then through the eventual scratchy lines of paint that would become filled in with acrylic color, applied through squeeze bottles. These paintings moved back and forth between comically figural

and completely patterned, eventually becoming, by the mid-1980s, large heads or monumental figures that filled the canvas from edge to edge. His drawings also featured similar figures but lacked the thickly textured patterns.

After Gilson closed in 1983, I opened my own eponymous gallery on Second Avenue. Alden took a great chance in being represented by my gallery, and through his trust and encouragement, other artists such as Gene Gentry McMahon, Francis Celentano, Roger Shimomura and Frank Okada, soon joined the gallery as represented artists. I could not have achieved any early success at the gallery without Alden's support, faith and loyalty.

In the mid-1980s, his work made another significant development forward as his raised lines of paint receded into patches of scratchy colors, as he mixed the paint freely on the canvas with the nozzles of the squeeze bottles. His drawings in oil pastel on board greatly resembled the paintings in color range and in having only a slightly raised texture. Alden felt he had finally unified his drawing with his painting and this work continued to the end of his life. As the work progressed, Mason could levitate several figures at once in his paintings at once dissolving, emerging, and mutating from one into another, as they cavort across the canvas.

In 1990, the gallery published a catalog on his "Courtship Series" with essays by Gerald Nordland and Bruce Guenther. In the forward I wrote, *"Each new body of work seeks to explore uncharted territory. Each new painting promises to better translate his observations into a painterly language. Being summoned to Alden's studio to view 'the most marvelous painting yet' has become a familiar and personal joke between us. Yet each time I hear excitement register in his voice over a new painting I am reminded that his lack of complacency keeps him vital."*



ALDEN MASON
SKY SPREADER, 1975
Oil on canvas 82 x 70 inches
Private collection

My gallery represented Mason from 1983 to 1996. We did nine shows of paintings and drawings with him in that time and I am grateful for every one. Since 2003, Mason has been represented by Foster/White Gallery.

In 2008, we collaborated with Foster/White Gallery to produce two simultaneous exhibitions of Alden Mason's work in our two side-by-side galleries. Foster/White, because they represented the artist, showed his recent works in acrylic on canvas, or watercolor on paper. We showed his earlier work in an exhibition titled *"Burpee Garden" Revisited: Paintings 1973-1976.* Two of the paintings in our show were among those works Allan Stone acquired, then exhibited, and held onto for the intervening thirty-five years. We were pleased to present them for the first time in Seattle. In addition, we showed several "Burpee Garden" paintings and watercolors on resale from local private collections.