

**Dream Realities:
New Work
by Alden Mason**



**Boise Art Museum
September 1
through
October 23
1994**

Checklist of Paintings

- 1**
Nasty Talk in the Rainbow Tavern, 1988
acrylic on canvas
40" X 36"
- 2**
Coyote Kachina, 1990
acrylic on canvas
60" X 82"
- 3**
Claudia's Moon, 1990
acrylic on canvas
42" X 73"
- 4**
Home Free Jamboree, 1991
acrylic on canvas
60" X 70"
- 5**
Lunar Waltz, 1991
acrylic on canvas
50" X 60"
- 6**
Aunt Violet Makes Dolls, 1991
acrylic on canvas
66" X 80"
- 7**
Sidesplitter, 1991
acrylic on canvas
70" X 60"
- 8**
Hootenanny, 1992
acrylic on canvas
70" X 82"
- 9**
Andrew's Birthday, 1992
acrylic on canvas
50" X 60"
- 10**
Summer Sleep, 1992
acrylic on canvas
72" X 90"
- 11**
Ancestors, 1992
acrylic on canvas
36" X 44"
- 12**
Sockeye and Grandpa Nels, 1992
acrylic on canvas
82" X 70"
- 13**
Chicken Farmer Bob, 1992
acrylic on canvas
42" X 36"
- 14**
Bird Watcher's Dilemma, 1993
acrylic on canvas
43" X 36"
- 15**
Shaman, 1993
acrylic on canvas
50" X 35"
- 16**
Big Yellow Tulip, 1994
acrylic on canvas
36" X 43"
- 17**
Tulip Promenade, 1994
acrylic on canvas
70" X 82"
- 18**
Birthday Bouquet, 1994
acrylic on canvas
36" X 43"
- 19**
The Pink Table, 1994
acrylic on canvas
36" X 43"
- 20**
Pink Vase, 1994
acrylic on canvas
36" X 43"
- 21**
Summer Skagit, 1994
acrylic on canvas
78" X 66"
- 22**
Skagit Valley, 1994
acrylic on canvas
36" X 43"
- 23**
Love Comes Late, 1994
acrylic on canvas
50" X 60"
- 24**
Spirit Bird's Lament, 1994
acrylic on canvas
43" X 36"
- 25**
Bangkok Promenade, 1994
acrylic on canvas
60" X 72"
- 26**
Fred on Holiday, 1994
acrylic on canvas
48" X 36"
- 27**
Two by Two, 1994
acrylic on canvas
50" X 60"
- 28**
The Fleeing Shaman, 1994
acrylic on canvas
36" X 43"
- 29**
Visitor from San Diego, 1994
acrylic on canvas
43" X 36"
- 30**
Adam and Eve and the Fool, 1994
acrylic on canvas
70" X 60"
- 31**
Spirit Bird Returns, 1994
acrylic on canvas
36" X 43"

Alden Mason is a recipient of a 1991 WESTAF/NEA Regional Fellowship for Visual Artists. Funding for this exhibition is provided in part by a grant from Western States Arts Federation, with support from the Idaho Commission on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, Bill and Robin Weiss of Jackson, Wyoming, and with the generous cooperation of Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle.

During 1991, the pace of Mason's quick-moving line diminishes, and shapes become more legible. Mischievous characters emerge against coal-dark and shimmering-light backgrounds. Figures float and dance as they swim on the surface, quizzically gaping at the viewer. The comic nature of works such as **Home Free Jamboree** is accentuated by the raucous birds and cats that scamper through the scene.

By 1992, Mason's cast of characters becomes blatantly frontal and scrambles for attention. In works like **Summer Sleep** and **Hootenanny**, bodies are articulated, feet are gyrating, and arms are waving in spontaneous abandon. Newly apparent in the figures is a skeletal framework implied by the open-knit design of the limbs. Mason's body structures are related to the linear quality of the aboriginal rock art that he has seen both in Moab, Utah, and on trips to New Zealand. Set against solid grayish grounds, petroglyphic shapes are suggested through Mason's use of abstract and frontal humanoid forms.

Over the years, Mason has embarked on a progression of adventures to exotic locations, simply for the experience and the opportunity to observe remote cultures and wildlife. The allure of bird-watching in wondrous places took him to central Africa, the jungles of South America, Australia, and more recently to New Guinea and Costa Rica. Mason eagerly absorbs these encounters, integrating his escapades into inventive canvas concoctions. **Spirit Bird's Lament** alludes to an incident which occurred on a visit to New Guinea in 1989. Mason sought out a local tribal people, the Huli, whose company he enjoyed for several weeks. During this period, one fireside evening was particularly memorable. Stories of a "spirit bird" were being recounted when a blood-curdling screech was heard from outside the dimly lit hut in which they were seated. This omen was received as a warning to the orator to take heed against sharing secrets with individuals outside the tribal group. Entranced by the experience, Mason incorporated versions of the spirit bird in numerous works as a voice from beyond, the conduit which passes messages from one state of being to another.

The storytelling that goes on within these works is traced through the repeated use of people, animals, birds, and fish that are all part of a personal journal. Oversized heads, symbols of the unconscious, act as metaphors for the spirit of being, while angry-looking heads and frightening, squawking birds are omens and portents of the darker sides of man. In works like **Bird Watcher's Dilemma**, Mason recounts the psychological difficulty of being a bird-watcher in a family of hunters. The dilemma to eat the bird or watch the bird is at the heart of the problem.

Some of Mason's other recent paintings refer to family members, domestic activities, and personal events. In **Sockeye and Grandpa Nels**, Mason reminisces about his grandfather, a longtime Skagit Valley resident, a man set in his ways who didn't feel he should adjust to changing societal rules, especially new regulations requiring a license to fish. Mason himself, along with his wife, Claudia, and son, Andrew, pops in and out of paintings such as **Andrew's Birthday** and **Hootenanny**. Punctuated with stories of the artist's companions and kin, Mason's canvases read like a family album.

In paintings from a very prolific year, Mason's 1994 canvases have grown increasingly colorful. The gray tones and black and white backgrounds so prevalent from 1988 to 1992 have become spiced with glowing pinks, brilliant reds, and vibrant greens and yellows. Still lifes of vases and floral arrangements are new to the outpouring of images and convey the happiness of the artist's present outlook. As in the tabletop studies **Pink Vase** and **Birthday Bouquet**, compositions are rendered in a bright palette, intimations of a cheerful and contented homelife.

With his most current paintings, Mason is coming full circle in a fresh return to colorful masses of abstraction. As seen in **Love Comes Late**, the artist is drifting away from the dark, violently expressive lines of several years ago and inundating the canvas with ribbons of electric color in more solidly worked surfaces. Like a composer of music, Mason examines variations on a theme — the abstracted triple figures of **Summer Skagit** offer a less literal interpretation than the more realistic threesome seen in **Adam and Eve and the Fool**.

A remarkable aspect of Alden Mason's artwork is the sense of cohesion within a wide range of experimentation that is discernible over a lifetime. Surrendering to the persistent influence of automatism and the flow of the subconscious, Mason investigates the colorful extremes of the palette and skillfully oscillates from abstraction to representation. Mason's comprehensive body of work, seen through the various stages of his explorations, demonstrates his unique capacity to move from one painting style to another with adeptness, while maintaining an unmistakable stylistic signature that is absolutely Mason.

Sandy Harthorn
Curator of Exhibitions



About the Artist

Biography

Born in 1919 in Everett, Washington; lives in Seattle

Education

University of Washington, Seattle, B.A., 1942; M.F.A., 1947

Teaching Experience

University of Washington, Seattle, 1949-1981
Retired from teaching in 1981 to paint full-time

Awards

- 1992 WESTAF/NEA Regional Fellowship for Visual Artists, for distinguished achievement in painting
- 1988 King County Honors Commission Award

Commissions

- 1988 **Lunar Promenade**, Washington State Convention Center, Seattle
- 1987 **Seattle City Light Promenade**, four murals, Seattle City Light Building
- 1982 **Yellow Bird**, Renton District Court, Washington
- Portland Rose**, Portland Justice Center
- Big Chief Seattle**, Sheraton Hotel, Seattle
- 1981 Two murals in Washington State Senate Chambers, Olympia (removed in 1989)

Exhibition Itinerary

Boise Art Museum

Boise, Idaho
September 1 - October 23, 1994

Holter Museum

Helena, Montana
November 25 - January 15, 1995

Prichard Gallery

University of Idaho
Moscow, Idaho
March 8 - April 5, 1995

Selected One-Person Exhibitions

- 1993 Bentley-Tomlinson Gallery, Scottsdale
Fay Gold Gallery, Atlanta
Bau-xi Gallery, Vancouver, BC
(also 1965, 1969, 1971, 1976, 1980)
Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle
(also 1984, 1985, 1987, 1989-1992)
- 1992 Laura Russo Gallery, Portland
- 1990 Griffith Gallery, Steven Austin State University,
Nacogdoches, Texas
Elaine Horwitch Gallery, Santa Fe
Jamison/Thomas Gallery, Portland (also 1988)
- 1989 **Alden Mason—First Prints**, Wentz Gallery, Pacific
Northwest College of Art, Oregon Art Institute, Portland
- 1988 Koehler Gallery, Whitworth College, Spokane
The Art Gym, Marylhurst College, Marylhurst, Oregon
- 1987 **Alden Mason—A Selective Survey**, Henry Art Gallery,
University of Washington, Seattle (also 1964, 1955, 1962)
- 1986 **Alden Mason Drawings**, Seattle Art Museum
(also 1949, 1957, 1958)
Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco
- 1982 Diane Gilson Gallery, Seattle (also 1979, 1980)
- 1976 Tacoma Art Museum
- 1975 Polly Friedlander Gallery, Seattle (also 1970, 1972-1974)
- 1973 Denver Art Museum
- 1967 Gordon Woodside Gallery, Seattle (also 1965)
- 1957 Zoe Dusanne Gallery, Seattle

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1994 **Pacific Northwest Annual**, Bellevue Art Museum
- 1993 **The Art of Microsoft**, Henry Art Gallery, University of
Washington, Seattle
Northwest Artists from the Permanent Collection,
Museum of Art, Washington State University, Pullman
About Face: Portraits and Self Portraits,
Tacoma Art Museum
- 1992 **44th Annual Academy-Institute Purchase Exhibition**,
American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York (also 1989)
Spirit of the West, traveling exhibition sponsored by
West One Bank
- 1990 **Views and Visions**, Seattle Art Museum
Northwest X Southwest: Painted Fictions,
Palm Springs Desert Museum
- 1988 **Contemporary Survey: A Visible Presence in the
Northwest**, Cheney Cowles Museum, Spokane
- 1987 **Focus: Seattle**, San Jose Museum of Art, California
- 1986 **Northwest Impressions: Works on Paper**, Henry Art
Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle
- 1984 **What's Happening: Contemporary Art from California,
Oregon, and Washington**, Alternative Museum, New York
- 1983 **38th Corcoran Biennial of American Painting, Second
Western States Exhibition**, Corcoran Gallery of Art,
Washington, DC (traveling exhibition)
- 1976 **Masters of the Northwest**, Seattle Art Museum
- 1975 **Fourteen Abstract Painters**, Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery,
University of California, Los Angeles
- 1974 **Art of the Pacific Northwest**, National Collection of Fine Arts,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC (traveling exhibition)
Northwest Annual, Seattle Art Museum
(also 1943-51, 1954-61, 1964-67, 1971-73)
- 1965 **Art Across America**, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
- 1962 **Northwest Art Today**, World's Fair, Seattle
- 1960 **Abstract Expressionism in the West**,
San Francisco Art Institute (traveling exhibition)

Brochure Images

Cover Top
Bird Watcher's Dilemma, 1993
acrylic on canvas, 43" X 36"

Cover Bottom
Adam and Eve and the Fool, 1994
acrylic on canvas, 70" X 60"

Inside Cover Top
Pink Vase, 1994
acrylic on canvas, 36" X 43"

Inside Cover Bottom
Love Comes Late, 1994
acrylic on canvas, 50" X 60"

BOISE ART MUSEUM

670 SOUTH JULIA DAVIS DRIVE BOISE IDAHO 83702

Dream Realities: New Work by Alden Mason

Alden Mason creates zesty, energetic paintings that radiate his passion for life and frequently relate to the spirit of an event or a locality. He is a man attuned to his surroundings, the marvels of nature, and the quirky incidents of daily life. Of Norwegian heritage, Mason grew up on a farm in the fertile Skagit Valley north of Seattle where his grandfather had settled in the 1800s. Living in a river delta, the artist became acquainted with an abundance of wildlife that sparked an interest in bird-watching and fly-fishing. Mason's pastimes have become obsessions that color his life and are always a source for subject matter. With genuine curiosity, he absorbs and synthesizes life's experiences and translates them into colorful abstract figures and nonrepresentational compositions.

Initially hoping to pursue a career in entomology, Mason entered the University of Washington in 1940. To further his studies, he enrolled in art and sculpture classes, and these hands-on experiences became the deciding factor in shifting his focus from entomology to art. Upon graduation, Mason joined the University art faculty, which provided the opportunity for a lasting vocation in art. Mason's earliest public recognition came during the late forties and early fifties when he exhibited his landscape watercolors at the Seattle Art Museum and the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington. By 1960, he was well-recognized in West Coast artistic circles, and his work was included in the San Francisco Art Institute's national touring exhibition, **Abstract Expressionism in the West**.

Alden Mason approaches his craft with thoughtful consideration for the formal aspects of painting, relentlessly exploring the use of color, line, form, and composition. While always true to his own personal style, Mason has gleaned insights from the work of such acclaimed artists as Arshile Gorky, Jean Dubuffet, and Joan Miro. Mason also incorporated ideas from the Surrealists who celebrated automatism — a view that endorses the value of dreams and the free flow of the subconscious as a source for imagery.

Abstract expressionist painting, especially the work of Arshile Gorky, appealed to Mason for its gestural and emotive drawing style. In action painting, Mason found the energetic process that inaugurated a long period of semi-abstract figurative works during the 1960s. Loosely aligned with West Coast abstraction, Pop, and Funk movements, works from this period contained fantastical small-bodied caricatures with enlarged, flattened heads that are simultaneously fanciful and menacing.

During the seventies, Mason's ebullient fantasy forms, so prominent earlier, evolved into nonrepresentational abstraction. Swollen organic shapes and earthy tones dominated these large canvases, executed with thin washes of oil, layered in saturated color. Sensuous and emotional, the fluid gesture of the brushstrokes became a Mason trademark. Already known in the Northwest, Mason gained national attention with a sequence of colorful stain-washed paintings improbably titled the **Burpee Garden** series, a name derived from a popular brand of commercial garden seeds.

At this juncture in his career, Mason unexpectedly became allergic to the chemicals in oil-based paints and during the 1980s turned to acrylic paint as an alternative. Mason utilized his new medium to startle the viewer with bright compositions filled with bold squiggles of design — patchwork surfaces oddly reminiscent of South and Central American folk-art textiles. Consistently vigorous, the paintings are brilliantly colored and entirely offbeat in approach. In place of thin opaque washes, toothpaste-tube lines of acrylic paint were squeezed from bottles directly onto the canvas. Sometimes referred to as the "wedding cake" period because of the raised icing effect of the paint, these works feature thick impasto surfaces hardened into shiny textural patterns. The unleashed motion of earlier paintings was transformed to dense, tightly constructed designs.

In the paintings of the nineties, from which this exhibition is selected, Mason's compositions have grown less controlled and the moods are increasingly brisk and gleeful. A variety of floating, and often magical, shamanistic-looking figures define the expressive atmosphere of these pieces. Unlike the thin washes used in the seventies or the thick applied layers of the eighties, the nineties' figures are swiftly rendered and have a spontaneous look. Mason achieves this effect by squeezing paint from plastic bottles that he quickly swirls over the canvas. Through this method, the character of line retains the vibrating energy of earlier periods. We see these results in **Coyote Kachina** and **Claudia's Moon**, both from 1990, which are energized to a state of frenzy. Barely definable figures swirl in a confusion of hypermovement. **Claudia's Moon** is a party on canvas — confetti streamers of color contribute staccato to the images, suggesting a whirl of happiness — it's a private dream inhabited by a wonderland of eccentric figures.

Alden Mason



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Mason's pop-tinged works span the worlds of surrealism and native art

By Regina Hackett
P-I Art Critic

Review

If art were a grade school, Alden Mason would be the class clown.

Alden Mason's new paintings at the Greg Kucera Gallery, 608 Second Ave., through March 26.

Australian aborigines living in remote, western desert communities are artists. They use paintings to transcribe motifs taken from what they call "the dreaming." These days, because nearly 60 percent support themselves by selling art, art is literally keeping the culture alive.

A sympathetic, parallel tradition to "the dreaming" runs through art in the West, particularly in dadaist and surrealist circles. Seattle's Alden Mason is a link between these worlds. He sets his surrealist-derived, cartoonishly pop-tinged forms — born in the West — spinning in the outback of aboriginal crosshatching, dots and squiggles.

But while traditional aboriginal painting is feverishly tight, Mason's paintings, though dense, have a fast and loose quality. No burdensome psychic freight weighs them down.

Even when given credit for the lavish facility of his hand and his masterfully lush color sense, he is dogged by questions of deportment. If art were a grade school, Mason would be the class clown — smart but not applying himself. Can substance lack weight? Some say no and cast a cold eye at his bop-till-you-drop canvases.

Others say yes. For them, Mason's current exhibit of acrylics on canvas at Greg Kucera Gallery — nearly all roughly 5-by-5½ feet — is a treat.

In "Lunch at the Jaguar Cafe," the figures seem to be trying to exert a calming influence on the field. Half-space ship, half rhinoceros, they peer around at frenzied, bruised blue and green color strokes, trying to get their bearings. The slight uncertainty of these figures gives this canvas its offbeat edge.

"Spirit Bird After the Sing Sing" is a straight shot of ecstasy. Cotton candy trees strung with lights rock under a banana moon. A two-faced mountain in the foreground sings out of both sides of his mouth. Random long strokes of high-toned color punctuate the ground and serve as some kind of resolution. Without them, this painting could be accused of hysterics.

In "Animal and Woman," a female whose stubby legs serve to emphasize her ridiculously elongated torso — either a homage or a dig at Modigliani — lies restlessly on the ground, face averted from the skyborne wolf overhead. Birds are the wolf's lecherous chorus and time stands still, with the pink sun bracketed by two wolf-gray, half-moon parentheses. Few do this kind of thing better.



Alden Mason's 5-by-6-foot acrylic "Lunar Tryst" (detail shown) is on display at the Greg Kucera Gallery.

MIKE SEIDL