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ALDEN MASON ■ *The 1970s: A Time of Change* ■ June 1 - July 15, 2017

For Alden Mason, the 1970s was a decade of great challenges and rewards as an artist, wherein he produced some of his most memorable and groundbreaking work. Mason pushed his natural inclination for watercolor toward a new boldness, abstraction and scale. The rich, earthy quality of these watercolors featured large ovoid shapes, simultaneously grounded and buoyant. The gestures both swirled around the pods and dripped into the grounds holding them, often including brilliantly colored details.



Alden Mason in his studio, 1960



ALDEN MASON
VERTICAL GARDEN, 1974, Oil on canvas, 32 x 16 inches

varnishes and driers. In this liquid state, the paint was like watercolor and Mason dealt with it similarly— but now on an heroic scale, typically about 70 x 80 inches. Though he didn't typically correct finished works that he felt had failed as a whole, Mason could edit them by cutting out the "good parts" as smaller works.

VERTICAL GARDEN (*above left*) is the rare Mason painting, a complete though small canvas, like a miniature of one of the larger Burpee canvases. Mason has scaled down his gestures and softly edged pools of paint to make use of the slender, vertical shape of this painting. The moss greens, warm roses, and vibrant yellows all resonate with each other to make a voluptuous composition cascading down its surface.

In the watercolor painting BUTTERFLY DAY (*below right*) Mason uses the large width of house painting brushes to capture the boldness of earth, and cycles of growth and renewal. The seed pod shape of the center seems to be on the verge of sprouting. The floating shapes in the upper part might refer to butterflies but Mason's titles are often suggestive without being subjective.

The "Burpee Garden" series dates from 1972-73 specifically but, in sensibility, goes on until 1977. The series title derives from the Burpee Seed Company catalog which Mason remembered from his Skagit Valley childhood. With their audacious color, surprising scale, and exuberant abstraction, they represented a break with the somber colored spiritually inspired motifs and poetic narratives that had typified the Northwest School.

The audacious quality of the "Burpee Garden" works is in their lack of predictability as the color is pooled and poured on, then dragged, pushed and pulled around by house painting brushes, rags, even brooms. The artist hovered over his paint surface, often kneeling on boards a few inches above the surface. With this method, Mason had surprisingly great control of his gesture and imagery but rarely showed a "brushstroke." His brilliant, jewel-like color itself came from fine quality oil paint, thinned down with all manner of thinners,



ALDEN MASON
BUTTERFLY DAY, 1973, watercolor on paper, 22 x 26 inches

Alden Mason's UNTITLED (*right*) is a detail excised from a larger Burpee-era painting. If a painting didn't work out overall, Mason would often "cut out the good parts" and offer them as selections unto themselves. In this one, the green swath of the landscape is countered by the smaller, liquidly edged orbs of blacks, browns and oranges. As with Anderson, Mason often painted during this era with house-painting brushes but also rags and mops. One can easily see the gestures coalescing into the dramatic passages of this lovely painting.



ALDEN MASON
UNTITLED HEAD, c.1970, oil pastel on paper, 48 x 40 inches

His drawings then were large works as well, often 50 x 40 inches, drawn with oil pastels and rubbed with thinners, conveying some of the same aqueous nature of the watercolors. These drawings ranged from landscapes to figure drawings, often completely overwhelmed with sexual energy and innuendo. Rock formations, seen during trips through the Southwest deserts and parks, became loopy phalluses and swollen breasts. Large head drawings suggested representation of personality but were entirely lacking the specificity of portraiture.

The freshness of this very direct watercolor work, UNTITLED (ROCKY BEACH) (below right), begins to suggest the watercolors Mason would make in the 1970s. As a student of Ray Hill in the 1940s, Mason would often accompany the elder artist on hikes through the Skagit Valley to get to dramatic viewing points. Deception Pass was a favorite place for both artists.



ALDEN MASON
UNTITLED (green center), ca. 1973-76
Oil on canvas, 40 x 26 inches



ALDEN MASON
DOUBLE BREASTED LANDSCAPE, 1973
Oil pastel on paper, 39.25 x 45 inches



ALDEN MASON
UNTITLED (ROCKY BEACH), 1950, watercolor on paper, 12.5 x 15.5 inches

We also have several Mason works on paper available. If you would like to see images, or if any of the works listed here are of interest to you, please contact us.