

# Growing old or up isn't for Alden Mason

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There are plenty of ways to avoid taking one's assigned place at the table with the rest of the adults, and Alden Mason's is one of the most socially acceptable. Now in his late 60s, he's the Peter Pan of Northwest art.

His drawings, currently at the PONCHO Gallery in the Seattle Art Museum's Art Pavilion in Seattle Center, celebrate the dreamy distortions of an idealized childhood.

Children, when they draw, are freed by their ineptitude from the burden of Western-style representational reality. What they can't do, Mason won't do. But where children wander, only occasionally scoring a vividly realized form and orchestrating it into a composition, Mason is consistently on the mark.

## Bodies as cities

Because he is a facile artist gifted with a fluid, cursive line and a glowing, buoyant sense of color, his drawings are condensations of celebratory sensation. His figures are rainbow-colored goofballs, stumblebums and fall guys, all of whom exude an innocent, pre-pubescent sexuality. They won't grow up. They're having too much fun.

In their natural egotism, children sometimes imagine that their bodies are cities. They move carefully on those days so a sudden motion won't disturb roadways coursing inside their arms and legs, houses nestling behind their rib cages, movie houses and carnivals dotting their spines and ducks floating on ponds somewhere in the vicinity of their big toes.

Mason's figures are cities in this sense. They are gleefully punch-drunk with the activity



Detail from Alden Mason's "Larry, Mary and Child," at Seattle Art Museum's PONCHO Gallery.

## ART REVIEW

Alden Mason's drawings, spanning the last 20 years, are at the PONCHO Gallery in the Seattle Art Museum's Art Pavilion in Seattle Center as part of curator Bruce Guenther's "Documents Northwest" series on Northwest artists. The show runs through April 6. Admission is free Thursdays; the museum is closed Mondays.

they contain. Mason, heartily in favor of eyes, breasts and sex organs, gives nearly every figure a multitude. The trio in "Larry, Mary and Child," from 1976, have eyes in the fronts and the sides of their heads. Each of them is a crowd, yet they have a low-density lightness of being.

Visible brush strokes of

browed white enclose the swollen head and dwarfed shoulders of "Medicine Man," from 1972. This single figure would be uncharacteristically static except for the thin streams of white paint that circulate through its face, functioning as air currents, never

letting the features settle into one place. The nose, smashed off to the left, is hooked like a propeller or a white flag, possibly waving to the tiny bird-plane floating toward it from the left.

Being surrounded by a room full of these drawings could take the starch out of even the most serious art viewer. Some people, however, seem immune to the infectious gaiety of Mason's work.

He takes heat from some members of the local art community, particularly younger artists who see his heavily patterned paintings as decorative in the worst sense and his drawings as sugarcoated, precious, pseudo-primitive affectations.

## Art credentials

Mason is painting not to confront but to comfort and entertain — goals not ordinarily viewed as despicable. Admittedly, his work is lightweight. Lightweight is not the same as inconsequential.

In his catalog essay for this show, curator Bruce Guenther does an admirable job of describing Mason's art credentials, linking him to the surrealistic abstraction of the late Arshile Gorky and the funk-pop of the late West Coast painter John Altoon.

Those who want to read about that should certainly pick up a copy of the catalog. Those who don't can go ahead and enjoy these portraits of high-stepping, empty-headed revelers, these malice-free monsters and charming ghouls. There are no pop quizzes at the exit gates.