

## Emily Mason: *Chelsea Paintings*

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Miles McEnery Gallery

520 West 21 Street, NYC

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## Miles McEnery Gallery to present the first posthumous gallery exhibition of works by seminal colorist Emily Mason

Featuring work primarily created between 1978 and 1989, *Chelsea Paintings* explores a distinct and transformational phase in the career of an artist whose circle of influence spans three generations of art history—from being nurtured into the American Abstraction movement by way of her pioneering mother’s close circle of friends including Josef Albers; Ad Reinhardt; and Piet Mondrian, to serving as a professor and lifelong mentor to contemporary artists including Nari Ward

**New York, NY – January 2021** — Miles McEnery Gallery is pleased to present *Chelsea Paintings*, a new show of 22 works from the painter Emily Mason (1932 – 2019; BFA Cooper Union, 1955). *Chelsea Paintings*, which coincides with a retrospective at the Bruce Museum in Connecticut on view through March 2021, is the late artist’s first posthumous gallery exhibition following her December 2019 death. The exhibition comprises 20 works made between 1978 and 1989, and two works completed in the 1990s.

Emily Mason was just a few years old when she began to experiment with professional-grade art materials in her mother’s studio. Mason, born in New York City in 1932 to on-the-scene painter Alice Trumbull Mason, came of age in the 1940s-1950s New York art world, attending her mother’s regular social engagements at the Eighth Street Club with Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler, John Cage, Mark Rothko, and others. Mason’s family was particularly close with Sally and Milton Avery, as well as Willem and Elaine de Kooning; the latter would babysit Mason from time to time. Mason credits the small female contingent of the Club, especially Elaine de Kooning and Joan Mitchell, with empowering her to chart her own stylistic course after having been encouraged at Cooper Union to maintain a more rigid developmental trajectory in her practice.

*Chelsea Paintings* is named for the career delineation that occurred in 1979, when Mason moved her studio practice from the 12th-and-Broadway space she had shared with her husband, the painter Wolf Kahn, since the 1950s to her own floor-through, 4,700-square-foot loft on 20th Street in Chelsea. From then on, regardless of where she started a work of art (she also had a studio in rural Vermont), she would always bring it to the Chelsea studio to ‘finish’ it in the distinct light and aura of that space. Located on the 11th floor of a former garment factory built in 1906, Mason worked in her Chelsea studio until her death; it remains intact as she left it, filled with 40 years of art and ephemera.



Northeast view of Emily Mason’s Chelsea studio in 2014. Photo by Gavin Ashworth.

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An avidly independent-minded colorist and mark-maker, the early works on view in *Chelsea Paintings* were created when stark minimalism was on trend in the Chelsea art scene; Mason's vivid, chromatically intense abstractions evolved in a contrasting manner to the formal restraint being exercised by her peers such as Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Sol LeWitt.

Mason's approach to hue was rooted in an intuitive grasp of 'analogous color theory,' in which multiple pigments are selected for their capacity as falling adjacently on a color wheel rather than in contrast or in a traditional complimentary position. She did, however, delight in "breaking her own rules;" a habit which can be clearly recognized in stark and deliberate gestures within certain canvases. In terms of mark-making, some of Mason's paintings exhibit evidence of underpainting, glazing, scraping, layering, sanding, paint pouring, and scumbling on top of dry areas—while others appear to have manifested virtually without human touch. Critic Karen Wilkin, who spoke at length with Mason in her final years, explains that "Mason's canvases first compel our attention with their radiant hues, but they soon insist that we concentrate on subtleties that reveal the history of the painting's evolution... Mason delights in color and revels in the fluidity of her chosen medium."

While Mason worked exclusively in oil, she enjoyed experimenting with new paints, oil types, and solvents. If something had a unique translucency or reflective quality that would move the eyes, she wanted to work with it to see how it might be more deliberately incorporated into future compositions. Her mastery of opacity manipulation and her custom arsenal of highly varied paints allowed a certain degree of illusionism in the work that in many compositions suggests the presence of three-dimensional space. However, Mason was not particularly preoccupied with the flatness of the picture plane or with creating a distinct field; her aim was instead to create a unified image that has been described by critic David Ebony as a "shadowless illumination." The most characteristic examples of Mason's work offer an intuitive, dreamy quality of something otherworldly.

Mason's namesake, and a perennial influence in her life and creative work, was Emily Dickinson. Her mother gave her a book of Dickinson poems when she was 12, and from that day, it rarely left her side. Mason believed that the way she painted corresponded with Dickinson's cadence and observation of nature. Further, many of Dickinson's specific verses curiously and inadvertently pair with any number of Mason's paintings, even if matched up at random. Her current retrospective at the Bruce Museum is in fact named for one of her favorite Dickinson poems: *She Sweeps with Many-Colored Brooms*.

Mason's paintings are resolutely nonrepresentational, though in the tradition of the New York painterly abstraction movement to which Mason belongs, there are inevitable options for associative readings. Karen Wilkin insists that Mason's canvases are "far from arbitrary improvisations. Rather, they seem to be distilled from unnamable but specific experiences. Each painting has an individual mood, a particular emotional and chromatic temperature. Some seem superheated, others are cool and serene, and still others seem to embody lively oppositions."

Existing alongside Mason's drive in the studio was her nurturing instinct to teach. From 1979 until just before her death, Mason taught art at Hunter College. A lengthy list of contemporary artists credit Mason's mentorship as a guiding force of their career development. Says one former student of hers, Nari Ward:

"I was fortunate to have Emily Mason as an instructor during my formative years as a young artist. I was enrolled in her beginners painting class, and wasn't quite sure if I wanted to be an artist. Meeting her at that moment in my life changed everything. Emily always encouraged her students to experiment, and she would often bring in materials for us to work with. Her criteria for success wasn't only making art, it was helping you find what worked for you. Her method of teaching was radically informed by empathy. Making aesthetic decisions with emotive power while shining a light for others was a part of Emily's self-assigned rigor, and this humanistic approach undoubtedly fueled her remarkable vision. Over the years Emily became not only a mentor but also a friend. For her, being an artist was about limitless options, and she understood that it meant sometimes breaking the rules."

*Chelsea Paintings* will be on view at Miles McEnery Gallery's 520 West 21 Street space on a walk-in, socially distanced basis in alignment with public health guidelines. Opening hours are Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. **Walk-in access is subject to change and advance appointments are encouraged.** Members of the press may schedule an appointment via the press contact information above.