

Alice Trumbull Mason: *Shutter Paintings*

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Washburn Gallery

177 Tenth Avenue, NYC

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**In a new exhibition, nearly 50 years after her  
Whitney Museum retrospective, the work of American Abstraction pioneer  
Alice Trumbull Mason is contextualized anew**

*The new presentation of 16 works from the 1960s, Shutter Paintings, was conceived following the discovery and Rizzoli publishing of a trove of correspondence (with Josef Albers, Piet Mondrian, Ad Reinhart, Gertrude Stein, and more) that cemented Mason's contemporaneous status as a leading, avant-garde force within the "boys club" of Abstraction in the 1930s-1960s New York art world*

Additionally, the show's literary accompaniment offers a present-day revisitation of the now-destigmatized circumstances that affected Mason's life and career leading up to her untimely death at age 68, such as her terminal struggle with depression and alcoholism following the disappearance and presumed suicide of her son in 1958

**New York, NY — November 2021** — The Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation is pleased to announce a new exhibition of 16 late-career paintings by Alice Trumbull Mason (1904 – 1971). The show, *Shutter Paintings*, is presented by Washburn Gallery, which has represented the artist's estate since 1974.

Rather than offering up a broad survey that demonstrates the visionary scope and trajectory of Mason's visual language since the late-1920s, when she trained under Arshile Gorky (and her practice's unusual oscillation between strong composition in both biomorphic and hard-edge geometric abstraction, the latter of which she ultimately settled on and developed with an architectural sensibility), the new exhibition has been tightly curated to focus on a museum-quality subset of her "Shutter Paintings" series, with all works in the show created between 1960 and 1966. Long past formal experimentation at this point in her career, these works are serious, technical, and matter-of-fact; striking in their simplicity and confidence. Perspectival depth is nearly absent, yet there is effortless movement offered by the expansion and contraction of the width of the vertical 'ribbons' that create the series' eponymous shutter-like effect. Pigment delineation is characteristically sharp and precise, though in what can only be interpreted as a deliberate treat left for those who take the time to view the works up close, mild process marks remain: pencil, chalk, crude edges, mild opacity variance within solid planes.

Alongside Yayoi Kusama, Donald Judd, and Claes Oldenburg, Alice Trumbull Mason—and her late-career "Shutter Paintings" in particular—were a roster staple of Dick Bellamy's legendary but short-lived Green Gallery, which was open from 1960 to 1965. Mason had met Bellamy as fellow patients at an alcohol rehabilitation center (the storied Towns Hospital) in 1958, after Mason's son, Jo, had been

found dead by presumed suicide. Jo had been missing for over five months before his body washed up in Washington State, identifiable only by dental records, and the unfathomable trauma of this period indelibly affected Mason. Depression and alcoholism would continue to plague the artist and ultimately kill her at age 68, but meeting Bellamy through that circumstance offered new context and purpose to both her life and practice.

During her lifetime, Mason had the vocal support of her now-legendary male contemporaries, who respected her for both her artwork and for the organizational strides she made toward institutional acknowledgement of the Abstraction movement within the canon of Modernism. Remarked Ad Reinhardt in the early-1960s: "Were it not for Alice Trumbull Mason, we [the Abstract painters] would not be here, nor in such force." As the co-founder and longtime president of the American Abstract Artists group (whose members included Josef Albers, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and Ad Reinhardt), Mason fought uncompromisingly for the critical recognition of American Abstract art – even instigating a picketing protest of MoMA in 1940 for the Museum's failure to include any American Abstract artists in its *Art in Our Time* survey exhibition in 1939. Just over a decade later, Mason's work would be shown at MoMA for the first time, and ultimately acquired by the Museum. In addition to MoMA, Mason's work entered (and remains in) the permanent collections of the Met, the Guggenheim, the Whitney, and dozens more.

In the 1950s, while Mason's visual language of Architectural Abstraction continued to evolve antithetically to the Abstraction movement's in-vogue subset of Expressionism, Mason was as on-the-scene as one could be, with regular social engagements at the Eighth Street Club alongside Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler, John Cage, Mark Rothko, and others. Mason was particularly close with Sally and Milton Avery, as well as Willem and Elaine de Kooning; the latter would babysit Mason's daughter from time to time.

The timelessness and contemporary resonance of the *Shutter Paintings'* formal qualities is evident in a 1960s *ARTnews* review that reads, "Alice Trumbull Mason, a founding member of American Abstract Artists, showed hard-edge abstract oils from 1960 on and graphics of the early 50s. A favored theme is the interplay of vertical bars and cropped oblique triangles. What is rewarding is the sense of introspective intensity and deliberation in the way she works out problems."

Conceptually, the *Shutter Paintings* seem to culminate a compositional exploration that Mason had begun in 1948, of "displacement," which she described at the time as "the displacement of one form by another, every space in the painting being regarded as a separate form working in conjunction with all the others. Displacement should be understood in contradistinction to the idea of representing perspective on a two-dimensional plane. Displacement occurs through the juxtaposition of colors and through formal construction; that is, one form does not stand in front of another but displaces it with color and form."

In terms of success during her lifetime, Mason was self-aware about the detrimental combination of her gender and her refusal to adapt her practice towards the fashionable Abstract Expressionist movement. Still, she fiercely believed in the long-term importance of the work she was doing.

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"I'll be famous when I'm dead," the artist would remark to her daughter, the late painter Emily Mason. She wasn't wrong; two years after her death, she was the subject of a major 1973 retrospective at the Whitney, which traveled extensively. Over the subsequent decades, Mason settled into what Roberta Smith describes as "painter's painter" status, only recently starting to receive contemporary recognition for the magnitude of her contribution to the Abstraction movement.

Mason currently headlines an all-women group show at the Whitney, *Labyrinth of Forms*, named for one of Mason's works and posed by its curator as "an exciting opportunity to reevaluate the history of Abstraction in the United States."

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Alice Trumbull Mason painting in 1954 (photo by John D. Schiff); Alice Trumbull Mason and Ibram Lassaw at a party in the early 1940s (credit unknown); *The Saffron Pitch*, 1963; *Painting with Three Diamonds* (detail), 1964; *The Ideal is the Diamond*, 1964