

HYPERALLERGIC

With a Room of Her Own, Emily Mason's Ethereal Abstractions Bloomed

Mason's expansive Chelsea studio became her tuning fork — the barometer she used to check that colors and shapes were humming at the right frequency.

by Karen Chernick

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Emily Mason in her New York Studio in 2016 (Image courtesy of the Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY; Photo by Steven Rose)

It took years for Emily Mason to get a painting studio of her own, though she'd always had keys to others. At first there was the series of Manhattan studios rented by her mom, pioneering abstract painter Alice Trumbull Mason, where Emily made her first brushstrokes with professional-grade paints. Then there was one at 813 Broadway set up by her husband, landscape painter Wolf Kahn, near their downtown apartment and which they shared for years. "She would describe just being sort of stuck with not as much space to work [on] her own pieces," says Steven Rose, Mason's longtime studio assistant and director of the Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation. "She really needed something."



Emily Mason, *In Dormant Nature*, (1984 – 1985), oil on canvas, 44 x 42 inches (© Artist Rights Society [ARS], Image courtesy The Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY)

Mason got herself a room of her own in 1979, when she was in her late forties, opting to spend an inheritance from an aunt on a down payment for the top floor of a former garter factory in Chelsea. The original plan was to split the loft with Kahn, but it quickly became clear that he preferred to stay on Broadway. All 4,700 square feet would be hers, alone.

Chelsea Paintings, the newly opened exhibition at Miles McEnery Gallery, is the artist's first gallery show since her death in 2019 and showcases 22 abstract paintings Mason made after moving her brushes and cat food tins full of pigment to 20th Street. These canvases are layered with saturated reds, turquoises and purples that defy gravity, floating like iridescent veils despite their density, and date mostly between 1978 and 1989 — the first decade during which she claimed her own space.

Mason tried new things in her Chelsea studio. The paintings she made there were bigger, and on canvas. In the 1960s and 70s she'd worked mostly on paper because "she could shuffle them away when the kids came home," Rose explains. Once she had an entire floor to cover with works in progress, she could work on canvases in the 50 and 60-inches range. She could even work on ten of these at a time, letting the paint speak to her, as she liked to say.



Emily Mason, *Untitled ('Vermont')*, (1985), oil on canvas, 52 x 52 inches (© Artist Rights Society [ARS], Image courtesy The Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY)

The storage racks in Mason's studio — which is still exactly as she left it, down to the slippers and a January 2019 copy of the *New York Times* lining the work table — are packed with paintings from this mid-career period. It represents a moment before she hit her commercial stride, but was steadily cranking away in her studio. Today these are the bulk of her unsold inventory, after galleries eventually found buyers for her later works.

“These paintings are very flat but she would either add a bit of articulation that would come off the surface, or she would mine it and pull back using [turpentine] and a rag, or a scraper, to almost illuminate by subtraction,” notes Rose, pointing to *“Untitled” (1984)* which features rough pink brushwork on the left, balanced by thinned-out blue planes on the right. Other paintings are harder to decipher, with one of the hallmarks of a Mason painting being that you can't tell which layer is on the bottom and which is on top.

Mason hatched other tricks, too. In works like *Untitled (“Vermont”)*, there are feathery veins of paint and uneven pigment goosebumps. When asked how Mason created such effects, Rose acknowledged to Hyperallergic that he still doesn't know. “Emily would always mischievously giggle and say, ‘I'm not sure. Magic, I think.’ She was really coy about it.”



Installation view of *Emily Mason: Chelsea Paintings*, Miles McEnery Gallery, 2021 (Image courtesy The Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, NY; Photo by Christopher Burke Studio)

Mason started many of these works in Vermont, where she and Kahn had a country home and spent every summer for around 50 years. “I work better in Vermont than I do in New York,” Mason explained in a short 2017 documentary about her painting practice. Her Vermont studio was in a former chicken coop, overlooking a frog pond instead of skyscrapers.

But no matter where she started a painting, Mason’s expansive Chelsea studio became her tuning fork — the barometer she used to check that colors and shapes were humming at the right frequency. “These are all things that are gonna be reassessed in New York,” she remarks in the documentary, in a scene where she’s packing up her Vermont studio to return to Manhattan. It’s the candid admission of a seasoned painter who relied on a specific workspace for its north-facing light, and maybe also for its precious solitude. After a thoughtful pause Mason adds, “I really won’t know what these look like until I get them back in the city.”

Emily Mason: Chelsea Paintings continues at Miles McEnery Gallery (520 West 21st Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 13.