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CURBED

Artist Emily Mason's 4,700-Square-Foot Studio Is Just As She Left It She Painted There for 40 Years

by Wendy Goodman

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The Studio: Emily Mason's sunny top-floor loft is hung with paintings she made from 2011 to 2018 (the year before her death).
Photo: Daniel Greer; Courtesy of Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation

The artist Emily Mason died at age 87 in December 2019, but you can still feel the joyful presence of her work in her bright studio in the Flatiron District. She painted here for 40 years (in the winter months, anyway; from May to October, she worked at her country place in Vermont). Her paint-flecked smocks are still hanging on a hook, and the small footstools she perched on to study her work are in place. Her rocking chair, another vantage for studying her paintings, is nearby, as are a pair of her favorite velvet gondolier slippers, which she would buy on every trip to Venice.



Mason was weaned on art. Her mother, the well-known abstract painter Alice Trumbull Mason, was a descendant of John Trumbull, whose *Declaration of Independence* (1819) was used on the reverse of the \$2 bill. Mason grew up with Milton Avery as an occasional babysitter and watched Joan Miró paint, since his studio was next door to her mother's. She attended the Little Red School House and the High School of Music and Art. After a stint at Bennington College, she graduated from Cooper Union in 1955 and went to Venice to study painting on a Fulbright grant. In 1957, she married the painter Wolf Kahn.

The Painter: Photographed in her studio in 1991 by Tommy Naess. Photo: Tommy Naess, Courtesy of Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation

She found this studio in 1979 and thought she would share it with Kahn, but instead she kept it to herself — all 4,700 square feet of the top floor of a building with magnificent views of open sky dotted with the water towers and handsome turn-of-the-past-century cornices of the neighboring buildings. Architect Michael Rubenstein added walls, dividing some areas to create the open studio, storage and office space, and a separate studio apartment, where the archive of Mason's mother's work is kept.



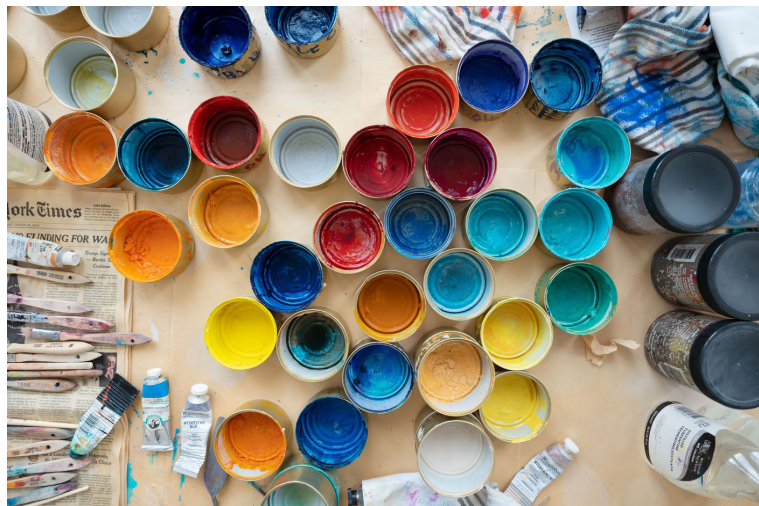
The Office: Mason's working area features her own collection of paintings on one wall and postcards and photographs of family and friends on the other. Photo: Christopher Burke, Courtesy of the Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation and Miles McEnery Gallery



The Back Room: This is where Mason's work is stored and prepared for exhibition; her most recent show, at Miles McEnery Gallery, closed on February 13. Her plants used to travel with her to spend summers in Vermont, where her studio was in a converted chicken coop. Photo: Steven Rose, Courtesy of Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation

It is a place of solitude and industry. "Rain or shine, holiday, non-holiday, even when she didn't feel so good, she would come," says Steven Rose, who worked with Mason for more than a decade and is now the president of the Emily Mason & Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation. "There is a significant amount in this studio that's based on things she found on the street. She was so resourceful that way, just like any good artist," he adds.

The loft will be preserved to house her archive, and it will always feel as it did when Mason was alive. "Just in January, Em's daughter Melany and I were going through her stationery cabinet," Rose says, "and found this little Rite Aid cotton-ball box wrapped in brown paper and marked with a Sharpie." Inside was a handwritten letter and some treated cotton balls — "cotton healing amulets" — that Mason's friend the artist Nari Ward had given her in 1992. "It was just the type of thing that meant the world to Em and that she cherished on a deeply personal level. We put it right back."



The Paint: Mason used empty cat food tins to hold her paint. Photo: Steven Rose, Courtesy of Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation