

Why Abstract Painter Emily Mason's Star Continues to Rise

A new show at New York's Miles McEnery Gallery celebrates the late artist's rich, beautiful and long-overlooked body of work.

By Carol Kino | 17 December 2023

Sometimes, an artist's life can obscure a full understanding of their work. This seems to have been the case for painter Emily Mason, who frequently exhibited her vividly hued abstractions alongside the more geometric work of her mother, Alice Trumbull Mason, a cofounder of the American Abstract Artists group, and the landscape paintings of her husband, Wolf Kahn.

Now, four years after her death, buoyed by the growing interest in overlooked late-career and female artists, Mason's paintings are finding their own unique audience. Her auction prices have been climbing, peaking a year ago when *Like Frost Upon a Glass* — a 1985 oil on canvas billowing with clouds of fuchsia — achieved \$100,800, against a \$15,000-to-\$20,000 estimate, at Phillips.

And last month, when her longtime New York gallerist, Miles McEnery, mounted a mini-survey at the ADAA Art Show of her oil paintings made between 1987 and 2018, the booth sold out on opening night.

"Interest has been steadily building over the last eight years, and it just continues to grow," says McEnery, who opened his fourth show of Mason's paintings, "*The Thunder Hurried Slow: Emily Mason Paintings, 1968–1979*," on December 14 at his gallery in Chelsea. "Emily certainly has a stellar reputation, and she's left behind this rich and expansive and beautiful body of work that is finally being celebrated and recognized."



The Thunder Hurried Slow, 1978, Oil on canvas,
54 x 54 inches, 137.2 x 137.2 cm

Mason took the title of 1978's *The Thunder Hurried Slow* from a line in Emily Dickinson's "The Thunderstorm!"

The new show, up through February 3, 2024, will showcase paintings made earlier in Mason's career, when she and Kahn, a glorious colorist himself, were newly returned from Europe with two young daughters and trying to establish their careers in the city of her birth.

"It was a very experimental time for Emily," says Steven Rose, Mason's former studio manager, who is now director of the Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation. "She was making, but she was also a mother. She was being pulled in different directions." The work from this period, he adds, "shows her evolution."

Born in New York in 1932, Mason was heir to a formidable tradition of American painting and, specifically, American Abstraction. Her mother cofounded American Abstract Artists with peers like Josef Albers and Ilya Bolotowsky and was also a member of the famed Eighth Street Club, a members-only hangout where the Abstract Expressionists partied and argued about the cultural and philosophical issues of the time. Mason grew up surrounded by such notable abstractionists as Milton Avery, Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline. (An ancestor, the Revolutionary War-era painter John Trumbull, was known for military portraits and battle scenes.)



New York gallerist Miles McEnery is about to open a show dedicated to abstract painter EMILY MASON, seen above in her studio in Manhattan's Chelsea in 1991 (photo by Tommy Naess).



Hear the Wind Blow, 1972, Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 inches, 127 x 101.6 cm
It is one of the more geometric works included in the new exhibition.

But Mason's talent was also molded by many powerful women, like Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell and Elaine de Kooning, her occasional babysitter, who supervised the young Mason as she doodled with professional-grade art supplies.

In many ways, Mason later said, it was the women around her, including her mother, who had the most lasting influence, as they struggled for recognition against greater odds than their male counterparts.

In the 1950s, after studying art at Bennington College, Cooper Union and Maine's Haystack Mountain School of Crafts — where the color theories of the textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen had a profound effect on her — Mason traveled widely throughout the Mediterranean on two Fulbright grants. These allowed her to spend years looking at art and making paintings, primarily in Italy. Along the way, she married Kahn, a German Holocaust refugee she'd met at the Eighth Street Club just before leaving for Europe.



Mason works in her Chelsea studio in 2015, four years before she died, in 2019.
Photo by Gavin Ashworth

According to the current show's catalogue essay, by curator and critic Barbara Stehle, Mason's decision to marry a representational painter dismayed her mother, who advised, "Watch your head. Art first." But by the time younger Mason returned to New York, in the 1960s, she had set her own course.

The exhibition reveals her figuring it all out. Color Field painting and other strains of abstraction are at play in the works on view, but so are all the centuries of art she observed in Europe, from stained glass or frescoes.



Left: Mason washes pigment onto a canvas in her studio in 2016 (photo by Steven Rose). She often said that her process required "letting the painting talk to you." Right: *Like Some Old Fashioned Miracle*, painted from 1972 to 1974, will be on view as well.



Throughout the 1970s, Mason had no studio, working instead from her bedroom at home. She took the Chelsea space, seen here in 2020, in 1979. Photo by Steven Rose

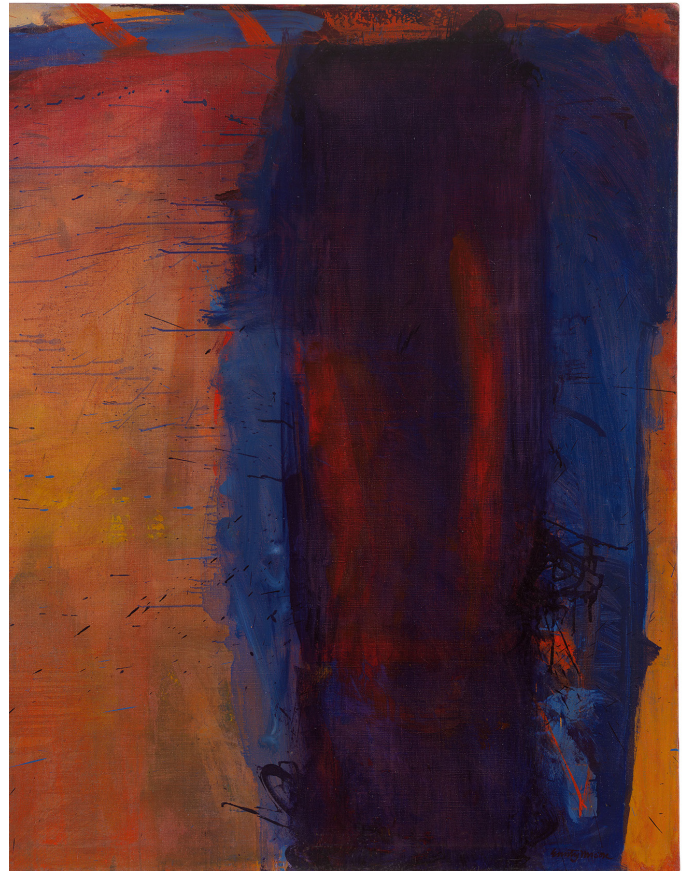


Mason, who throughout the 1970s had no studio in New York City and so worked in her bedroom, weaves these various threads together in a highly intuitive fashion. She combines gestural marks with pours, washes and fields of luminous color, while her shapes veer from biomorphic, as in the painting *Quiet Fog*, to near-geometric, as in *Hear the Wind Blow*, where a violet oblong vibrates against two yellow rectangles.

The show includes several paintings whose titles are derived from poems by Mason's namesake, Emily Dickinson. Among them is *The Thunder Hurried Slow*, a swathe of dripping blue paint shot through with red, taking its name from a line in "The Thunderstorm."

Quiet Fog, 1976, Oil on canvas, 22 x 18 inches, 55.9 x 45.7 cm

Mason often described her process as “letting the painting talk to you.” To her, this meant working on a canvas, letting it sit for a while and returning to it later. She once compared this approach to playing chess. “Pick it up, make a move — wait — let time go in between,” she told a newspaper in 2005 in Brattleboro, Vermont, where she and Kahn had begun living part-time four decades earlier. “Then I know what to do.”



Two more works in the show are 1972's *Defiant of a Road* (left) — whose title is taken from another Dickinson poem — and *Lignite*, a relatively early work, from 1968. All artworks courtesy Artist Rights Society (ARS) New York / The Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation / Miles McEnery Gallery

In 1979, at the end of the period covered by the exhibition, Mason finally got a studio of her own. She also began teaching at Hunter College. There, she was a beloved mentor to decades of students, such as the found-material sculptor and installation artist Nari Ward, who credits Mason with being the first to recognize his talent and setting him on the path toward becoming an artist. Although their oeuvres seem entirely different, he explains, “Emily talked about being in the journey with the work, with the material, and I feel like that’s an important part of my way of working.”

McEnery says that a lot of young artists and painters are still looking at Mason’s work. “I think it serves as this bridge between a moment of art history and the present and into the future. I think a lot of roads are going to lead to Emily Mason.” And, it would seem, from her, too.