

Late Painter Emily Mason's Intuitive Abstractions Are Earning Overdue Acclaim

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Born in 1932, Emily Mason was uniquely positioned to become an artist. Her mother, Alice Trumbull Mason, was a successful painter and founding member of the influential mid-century American Abstract Artists group that shepherded in the rise of abstraction in the nation. Growing up surrounded by artists, including Josef Albers, Elaine de Kooning, and Joan Mitchell, Emily Mason was acutely familiar with prevailing movements of the 1950s and '60s. Bridging multiple genres, including Color Field and Lyrical Abstraction, she developed an intuitive style of abstract painting characterized by vibrant layers of different hues, informed by her innate understanding of color theory. "I sit here and I dream about them," she said, of colors, in a 2017 documentary. "I think, 'Well, if I made that magenta come a little further or used bright colors, then there's also a neutral area that sets off the bright colors,' which I like."



Quiet Fog, 1976, Oil on canvas,
22 x 18 inches

While she worked for over 60 years, painting in her studios in Vermont and New York until her death in 2019, Mason's work was largely overlooked during her lifetime. Now, a new exhibition at Miles McEnery Gallery seeks to correct this. Focusing on paintings made between 1968 and 1979, "The Thunder Hurried Slow" highlights formative years of Mason's career, during which she forged a path to create her own style and eschew the popular artistic trends of the day.

"Here we have a group of works that reflect, in their making, a sort of defiance in the New York art world," said Steven Rose, executive director of the Emily Mason and Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation. "While critics were declaring abstract art as dead, Emily Mason was moving steadfastly forward, developing her singular voice."

Drips and splashes bear evidence of the artist's unique, spontaneous process in which she combined pigments and solvents in cat food tins, pouring the mixture onto the canvas and spreading and scraping the colors with a paintbrush, as well as with her hand. Working without a preconceived plan, Mason instead responded to the way the paint moved and dried. She experimented with different proportions of pigment and solvents and embraced the inherent qualities—including translucency, crackling, and gloss—of each material and combination.

Within each layer, the movement on her works' surface reveals Mason's manipulation of paint, as well as the effects of gravity, as colors drip dramatically, sometimes across the entire canvas. Some works contain both horizontal and vertical drips, a result of the artist turning, tilting, and reworking the composition as she applied additional layers, seen in *Defiant of a Road* (1972).



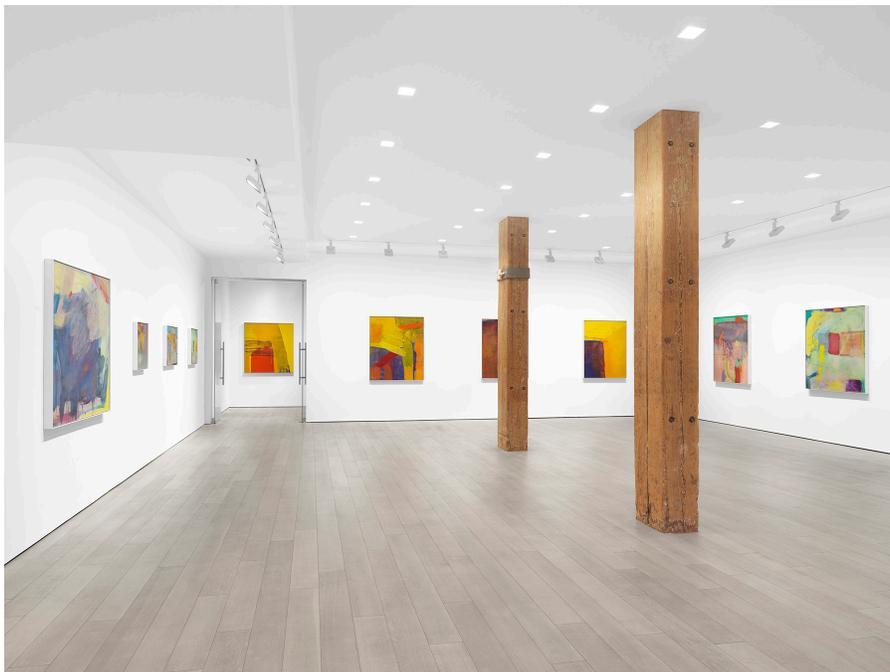
Defiant of a Road, 1972, Oil on canvas,
52 1/4 x 40 1/4 inches



Pleasure Garden, 1970, Oil on canvas,
52 x 44 inches

In other works, the colors seem to pool. In *Pleasure Garden* (1970), large patches of intense yellow, orange, and red cross the surface, deliberately brushed and scraped atop layers of pooled yellow, green, and purple. Further enlivened with visible drips, the work is emblematic of the varied techniques and love of vibrant, layered colors that characterize Mason's intuitive practice.

The 1970s marked a period of personal and professional challenges for the artist. In 1971, Mason's mother passed away. At the same time, the career of her husband, Wolf Kahn, an artist who combined elements of Abstract Expressionism, realism, and Color Field painting, began to grow, and Mason took on domestic duties, including raising their two children. "Still, she painted regularly and productively, mostly on paper but increasingly on canvas as the decade progressed," said Rose. "With this period, we can see the threads she is pulling on to great success with flashes of her brilliance."



Emily Mason, installation view of "The Thunder Hurried Slow" at Miles McEnery Gallery, 2023.
Photo by Christopher Burke.

These challenges contributed to Mason being overlooked and underrepresented in the art market. Like many women artists, in particular artists who were also mothers, Mason struggled to find gallery representation and even opportunities to exhibit her work. The decision not to join a gallery was also partly her own choice. While she exhibited periodically in the 1980s, she didn't find gallery representation until the late 1990s when she began to show with MB Modern Gallery in New York.

"These factors made her less visible, but more importantly, I think there is the obvious fact that she did not paint to the trends of the decades," said Rose. "For a long time, even into the 2000s, it was challenging to neatly fit her into any of the popular art historical categories. We're lucky to live in a time where writers and curators are looking beyond the very linear progression of art history to make space for singular artists like Mason and reexamine what significant work may have been overlooked due to one bias or another."



Portrait of Emily Mason in her Chelsea Studio by Tommy Naess