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EMILY MASON

THE THUNDER HURRIED SLOW

CURATED BY DR. BARBARA STEHLE

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525 WEST 22ND STREET

“There was no one way to be in the 1970s. The period was about self-definition and experimentation,” said the art historian and curator Dr. Barbara Stehle, who recently rediscovered Emily Mason’s presence in a 1974 group photo featuring Andy Warhol, Cy Twombly, Robert Indiana, Nancy Graves, Jo Baer, John Chamberlain, Robert Rauschenberg, Richard Serra, James Rosenquist, Joseph Kosuth, and others. “They embody the 1970s: long hair, short skirts, shades, and free spirits. Some laugh, some smile, some are cool, some aren’t. They are artists, and that means something different to each of them.”



The Thunder Hurried Slow explores a distinct phase in the career of an artist whose circle of influence spans three generations of art history—from being nurtured into the American Abstraction movement by way of her artist-mother Alice Trumbull Mason’s close circle of friends including Josef Albers; Ad Reinhardt; and Piet Mondrian; to serving as a professor and lifelong mentor to contemporary artists including Nari Ward.

Rather than a career survey, this exhibition and its literary accompaniment deliberately stop short of Emily Mason’s 1979 career delineation that occurred when she moved her New York art practice to a sprawling art studio of her own. Instead, *The Thunder Hurried Slow* conveys honest insight into a deeply inventive early period of Mason’s career—a time in which the 1970s cultural climate melded with a pressure cooker of personal circumstances to yield a foundational body of work that fascinatingly speaks to the larger oeuvre that Mason would round out in the four decades that followed.

Born in New York City in 1932 to on the scene painter Alice Trumbull Mason, Emily came of age in the 1940s and 1950s New York art world, attending her mother’s regular social engagements at the Eighth Street Club with John Cage, Helen Frankenthaler, Franz Kline, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and others. Mason’s family was particularly close with Sally and Milton Avery, as well as Elaine and Willem de Kooning; the latter would babysit Mason’s daughters from time to time. Emily Mason credits the small female contingent of The Club, especially Elaine de Kooning and Joan Mitchell, with empowering her to chart her own stylistic course after having been encouraged at The Cooper Union to maintain a more rigid developmental trajectory in her practice.

Formally, Mason is perhaps best known for her vibrant pigments and her intuitive grasp of color theory, as well as her unusual painting method that she mastered over the course of her career: using cat food tins, she mixed pigments and solvents to specific and varied consistencies, then poured them directly onto the canvas in a curious interplay with her painting’s other ‘pours.’ Crucial to the overall process was the time (or sometimes, the lack thereof) elapsed between these poured layers. Often, Mason would gesturally spread out the poured paint layer with a paintbrush (the one she had used to mix that tin), or apply other physical treatments such as scraping, sanding, finger painting, or contact with an unconventional tool such as an old t-shirt. Each of Mason’s paintings represents a calculated series of interactions between each mixed paint tin’s distinct alchemy; perhaps a given paint mixture would yield a crackling effect, a glossy sheen, or an ‘oil and water’ dispersion.

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In 1965, just years before the earliest work in this exhibition was created, Emily Mason and her artist-husband Wolf Kahn (a German-born Holocaust survivor to whom she was married for 62 years at the time of her 2019 death) settled in Mason's hometown of New York City after residing in Europe on and off since 1956. On the top floor of a Greenwich Village walk-up, they lived with two young daughters, one an infant, and Mason kept an art studio within the couple's bedroom. In the early-1970s, Kahn began to experience significant recognition as an artist, and while this meant more financial stability, it compounded Mason's household responsibilities and reduced her time in the studio. "The '70s were difficult times as bringing up children, running a household, and continuing to paint all pulled me in different directions," reflected Mason in 2003.

On one hand, Emily Mason's life in the 1970s recounts the archetypical struggle of women balancing societal expectations, a love for their families, and the monumental-on-its-own task of managing one's career. On the other hand, it also reflects a unique struggle in her sense of duty to preserve the legacy and dignity of her artist-mother Alice Trumbull Mason, who died in 1971 at age 68 after an open battle with alcoholism that was brought on by the unfathomable trauma of the presumed suicide of her son, Emily's brother Jo, in 1958. "It is difficult to articulate, but I felt a desire to have my mother and her work and career acknowledged before I felt comfortable going out to pursue my own career," said Mason in 2003.

Particularly difficult for Mason was the disparity in how she viewed her mother before Jo's death, and how that dynamic shifted as her mother succumbed to the disease of alcoholism in the 12 years that followed. Alice Trumbull Mason had been a leading, avant-garde force within the "boys club" of Abstraction in the 1930s-1960s New York art world, even co-founding the American Abstract Artists group in 1936 alongside canonical names such as Josef Albers. Her archives reveal extensive and meaningful correspondence with influential figures of the time such as Piet Mondrian and Gertrude Stein. As Ad Reinhardt remarked in the early 1960s: "Were it not for Alice Trumbull Mason, we [the Abstract painters] would not be here, nor in such force."

The exhibition's title and eponymous painting, "The Thunder Hurried Slow" (1978), are informed by Emily Dickinson, Mason's namesake and a perennial influence in her life and creative work. Alice Trumbull Mason gave Emily Mason a book of Dickinson poems when Emily was 12, and from that day, it rarely left her side. Mason believed that the way she painted corresponded with Dickinson's cadence and observation of nature. In the selection for this show, seven paintings bear Dickinson quotes. "The Thunder Hurried Slow" (1978) poetically embodies the paradox of true power. When she named the painting, Mason chose this verse from "A Thunderstorm," a poem also known by its first line: "The wind begun to rock the grass." It calls on elemental forces and nature's capacity to transform. It captures Emily Mason in the 1970s perfectly: a moment of awakening and change, a tremendous rising.

A large factor of Mason's development during the years represented in the exhibition is her shed-turned-studio on the property of the modest Vermont farm that she and her husband purchased in 1968, and thereafter spent summers. Mason would paint all summer long then bring the canvases back to New York to finish. First, it was her bedroom-studio at 813 Broadway—then, in 1979, she purchased a 4,000-square-foot Chelsea loft that launched a new chapter.

Miles McEnery Gallery proudly represents the Emily Mason|Alice Trumbull Mason Foundation.

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Image: Emily Mason, *Quiet Fog*, 1976, Oil on canvas, 22 x 18 inches, 55.9 x 45.7 cm