HYPERALLERGIC

Emily Mason's Quest for Color and Truth

The late painter was influenced by Abstract Expressionism, but she had none of the hubris of its male artists. For her, painting was not about an experience, it was an experience.

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Mason standing behind one of her works in progress with Wolf Kahn (left) and Martin Ackerman (right), c. late 1970s or early 1980s
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Emily Mason was always reluctant to accept a label for her art. In 1972, when asked which movement she belonged to, Mason firmly said, "I really resent that but if somebody said, 'What kind of painter are you?' I guess I'd say Abstract Expressionist." Asked the same question in 2005, Mason offered a nuanced answer: "[I] probably was a product of Abstract Expressionism," to which she quickly added, "of course John Cage says: 'Get your mind out of the way.'"

Cage had reached New York in 1942. He got involved with the New York School a decade later. His activities at *The Club*, the headquarters of the Abstract Expressionists, took place during Mason's formative years. The composer was a family icon; Alice Trumbull Mason had introduced her daughter to his work when she was still a child, and later as a teenager, when they went to *The Club*. There, she rubbed shoulders with all the Abstract Expressionists who would come to Friday night meetings. Elaine and Willem de Kooning were friends with Trumbull Mason. It was a small community; everybody was in touch and traveling through the same spaces.

Willem de Kooning was one of the uncontested leaders of the New York School. He was one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, and so was John Cage, the godfather of process art, conceptual art, and Fluxus, who inspired a whole generation to rethink art. However amazingly influential both artists were, it is very unusual to claim both de Kooning and Cage as mentors to one's practice. Mason is that unusual painter, which is why she took American art in an unexpected direction.

Mason belonged to a generation that stepped away from the easel and its verticality — painterly techniques initially developed by Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler. It liberated the process; painters now moved around the work freely, even set foot on it. Pollock's "action painting" and Frankenthaler's "soak and stain" technique led the way. After them, artists explored the possibilities of painting on the floor, flat or on an incline, or on a tabletop.

Mason would start flat and end up on the wall. She would pour paint and tilt the surface to direct its flow. The movements could gain speed or be slowed down. A dialogue back and forth with the painting would begin. While you can see the influence of Abstract Expressionist techniques in Mason's work, she had none of the hubris of the male protagonists she saw as giants on the scene. Her quest for color expression and structure was more in tune with the sensitivity and unimposing sincerity of a Mark Rothko. For both of them, painting was not *about* an experience, it was an experience.

Mason in her studio in Brattleboro, Vermont, c. 1970s
(© 2025 Emily Mason | Alice Trumbull
Mason Foundation/ARS; photo by Nancy Ellison)

Of all the painters of the New York School, Mason admired de Kooning the most; she never missed his shows. De Kooning had a mastery of oil painting and its movements that everybody envied. He also shared a love for Italy, the old masters, and its landscape. De Kooning admired the sensuality and atmospheric climate of Titian and Giorgione in particular, Mason the crisp light and hieratic beauty of Piero della Francesca and Giotto. De Kooning noted about Italian Renaissance artists: "The paintings seemed to work from whatever angle one chose to look at them. The whole secret lay in freeing oneself from the force of gravity."

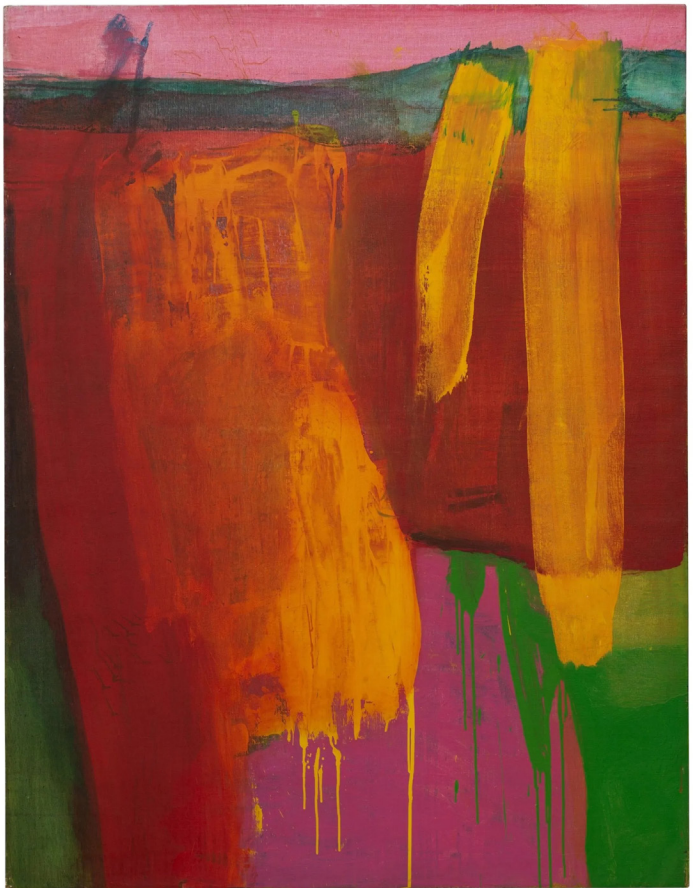
Mason admired de Kooning's non-literal approach to art. She repeatedly pointed out that he described himself as a "glimpser," and noted that it was something she often felt about herself: "I like it. I work indirectly, I am not confronting anything, but just sort of letting it come out." Memories, impressions, and feelings inform art but in a meandering manner. One of Mason's favorite Emily Dickinson poems was "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" — glimpsing indirectly was for her the way to be.

During her tumultuous marriage with de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning had stayed independent in her stylistic development. She had a sharp eye and was one of the best art critics of her time. After Mason married Kahn in 1957, Elaine continued to be a familiar visitor. She was very supportive of both their practices, and they were of hers as well. They would exchange works; Wolf and Elaine would pose for each other.

Emily Mason, *Marrow of the Day*, 2005, Oil on canvas.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Elaine occasionally babysat Mason's daughters Cecily and Melany. Cecily remembers the painter's strong and fun personality: With a bottle of scotch available for the night, she would happily try her poker and gin rummy strategies on the girls. At a time of feminist uprising, she gave them sound advice: "Always be dressed to do somersaults, forward and backwards." Like many women artists of the time, de Kooning chose to concentrate on her art. She never had children of her own, but she was the godmother to Ibram Lassaw's daughter and a presence for Mason's children.

In the days of 8th and 9th Streets activity, when few women were getting shows at important galleries, Joan Mitchell was a notable exception — she showed more than most. Around 1953–54, Mason saw Mitchell's work and thought: "Oh this is too Expressionist for me." She spoke with Lassaw about it, whom she reports pointing to her: "[If] you feel uncomfortable about it maybe there is something there that you should look at more." Lassaw had been romantically involved with Alice Trumbull Mason from 1936 to 1941, and they had remained very good friends after Mason's father came back to live with the family. His words mattered to Mason, and she followed his advice.



Emily Mason, *Stillness is Volcanic*, 1966, Oil on canvas.

Mason and Kahn visited Mitchell in Paris during the summer of 1958. Mason was shaken up by what she saw. "I was appalled at first," she recounted to Robert Wolterstorff, "but I thought, 'there's more here that I am not letting in.'" Mitchell's athletic marks and pictorial architecture made an impression on Mason. Some of that energy comes through in Mason's *Wet Paint Spring* (1963), her calligraphic entanglement over thin green washes evoking some of the characteristics of Mitchell's work of the period, such as *Garden Party* (c. 1962).

After her European trips, Mason came back to settle in New York in 1965. Within a year, she had produced remarkable works. The luminous *Equal Paradise* and *Stillness is Volcanic*, both from 1966, mark the beginning of her significant contributions to the New York School. Mason was already showing her uncanny capacity to express light and create highly sensual surfaces that were to push art beyond Abstract Expressionism. The textural presence of these two paintings comes close to the sophistication of lacquer in its color contrasts and reflectivity, and calls to mind the work of Zao Wou-Ki, the Parisian Chinese Art Informel painter. Mason's surfaces already contain an Eastern sensitivity, which, over time, would become progressively more perceptible.

As early as the 1950s and as late as the 1970s, the Beat generation and the hippies embraced East and South Asian philosophy. To various degrees, many of the youth in the creative community practiced meditation and learned from Buddhism. While Mason was never a Buddhist herself, she meditated and took in some of the principles of Zen. Her journey with Eastern philosophy likely began with John Cage at *The Club*.

One late night in 1949, several artists gathered around the kitchen table of Ibram Lassaw's loft and decided they would find a space to call their own. That space became 39 East 8th Street, the headquarters of the New York School known as *The Club*. It gave them a private space to get together, to party and talk, meet old and new friends. From 1949 on, the loft would play an essential role for a wide community of artists, and not least for Mason, as she met Wolf Kahn at *The Club* in 1956.

Fridays at *The Club* were a time for lectures. Cage had long been frustrated with the Western approach to art and turned toward Eastern philosophy and its concept of vacuity. Under the influence of Buddhism, Cage had come to the daring position of letting go of intentions during the act of creation. The composer was most interested in the philosophy of the Japanese Zen Master D. T. Suzuki. In her study of Cage and Zen Buddhism, Kay Larson notes: "Cage had allies at *The Club*. One of them was Ibram Lassaw . . . Lassaw's favorite religion was Zen." When

Suzuki came in 1952 to lecture at Columbia University, Cage and Lassaw attended together. Lassaw's interest in Buddhism had developed in the early 1930s. The young Mason would have been around Lassaw then, and again in the early 1950s.

Art historian Valerie Hellstein writes: "During *The Club*'s earliest years, from 1949 to 1955, artists discussed Zen more than any other single topic; on at least ten separate evenings, they explored Zen and its relation to music, art, and psychology." According to Larson's research, during that time, Cage lectured six times at *The Club.* Unfortunately, no records were kept of attendees. It is possible that Mason was in the audience for some. What is certain is that she was deeply receptive to Cage's teaching. She would quote him until the end of her life.

Cage's take on Zen Buddhism and creativity came as a counterpoint to the self-involved and emotional input of the Abstract Expressionists. "Art can be practiced in one way or another," Cage wrote, "so that it reinforces the ego in its likes and dislikes, or so that it opens the mind to the world outside, and outside inside."

Mason, like Cage, cultivated the art of letting go. In 1975, in discussing her creative process with Lona Foote, Mason said: "I like to feel that I work on a painting until something magical happens. Until it becomes something outside of myself, a new vision . . . You lose a kind of control, but you gain something else." In her best pieces, nothing comes between her and her canvas. The work appears akin to a natural phenomenon, activated by forces that are beyond the artist. This is how Mason perceived it herself: "I feel as if I'm a conduit, but of what I don't know until the paintings are finished." She initiated and followed. She would say, "Not knowing is my mantra."