



Courtesy photo

Emily Mason, “According,” 1993, monotype on paper.

## The Arts

### Following her instincts

**Abstract artist Emily Mason doesn't always know where her work will end up, but always enjoys the creative journey**

For more information on the exhibit, contact Mitchell-Giddings Gallery at [info@mitchellgiddingsfinearts.com](mailto:info@mitchellgiddingsfinearts.com) or 802-251-8290.



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By Richard Henke/The Commons

BRATTLEBORO—American abstract painter Emily Mason believes that her creative energy comes from intuition.

“You have to fall back on yourself,” she says. “I never know what a painting will look like when I start a new picture. Every time I face a blank canvas, I have only an inkling where I may go.”

She leaves the rest to her natural instincts.

“What’s the fun of painting if you already know what it looks like?” she asks. “Painting is wonderful when it becomes a conversation between color and shape.”

Mason is known for her work in color field painting and lyrical abstraction.

Although primarily recognized for her abstract paintings, Mason also has pioneered printmaking production which illustrates a richness and spontaneity equal to her work in oil. Working with several master printmakers since the mid-1980s, she has established a singularly rich and distinctive body of prints.

From July 2 to Aug. 16, Mitchell-Giddings Fine Arts at 183 Main St., presents “Chromatic Celebrations,” an exhibition that showcases prints from Mason’s work with four different master printers since 1987: Garner Tullis, Hand Graphics, Lisa Mackie, and Janis Stemmermann.

On July 2, this show will open with a reception from 5 to 7 p.m. in the gallery.

The prints in “Chromatic Celebrations” have been organized into four groups.

The first group, marked with “GTW,” are works Mason completed in Santa Barbara, Calif., at the Garner Tullis Workshop in 1987. These works are all monotypes, unique prints created without a matrix.

Unlike most print presses, where the papers are pushed through a press using rollers, Garner Tullis used a press that impressed the plate onto the paper from above (as with an old letter press). Mason would ‘ink’ up the plate and during the process, the paper would absorb the spontaneous gesture of the original mark.

The works marked “LM” indicate Mason’s work with printer Lisa Mackie. Two of the more experimental moves that distinguishes the early period of their work together is the use of chine collé and the silk collagraph matrix. Areas of fiber and color submerge and emerge under the layers of inks.

In recent years, Mason and Mackie have been creating prints using a technique called Solarplate, a photogravure method developed by Dan Feldman.

In these works marked “HG” (Hand Graphics, a short-term workshop she completed in Santa Fe in 1993), Mason has created monotypes, painting on a couple standard sized plates and printing. Mason overprints marks with veils of color and transparency to elaborate on a composition. Often times, she relies on simple, revelatory mark making, where the touch of the brush or ink roller is apparent.

In the final group, working with Janis Stemmermann (“JS” ), Mason has created two editions, Red Wing and Harvest Moon, 1991, and a large series of carborundum monoprints spanning over 15 years. Stemmermann helped develop Mason’s carborundum printing technique where a substrate of grit and acrylic medium is painted over a plexiglass plate.

Mason estimates there are around 20 of her prints in this show.

“I haven’t seen the show yet,” she laughs. “The work was chosen by an assistant in New York. I usually have

exhibitions in the winter, so this one here in Brattleboro is odd for me.”

In summer, Mason likes to forget promoting her work, and she spend her time in her studio in Vermont working on new pieces.

Mason has been surrounded by art and artists her whole life. Her mother, Alice Trumbull Mason, was a founder of the American abstract artists, and her husband is Wolf Kahn, the German-born American painter whom she married in 1957. Beloved figures in southern Vermont, Mason and Kahn have spent summers in Brattleboro for more than 45 years.

“I guess you could call my husband and me fair weather friends, since we snowbird seven months in New York and five in Vermont,” says Mason. “I love Vermont, but when I am here I would rather be in my studio where it is quiet, the days are long, and I have a fantastic view.”

In the years since she and her husband bought their summer home in Brattleboro in 1968, they have watched area “change and not-change,” she says.

“We saw the hippies move in and change the area in a great way, such as by the commune at Packer’s Corner in Guilford, many of whose members still live here and are part of the community in a vital way. I remember long ago seeing there an incredible Midsummer’s Night Dream which was wonderful.”

Nonetheless, Mason still cherishes her ties in New York.

“I am a New Yorker born and bred,” she confesses. “Manhattan has its own dynamism; so much is going on in the city.”

Mason needs to be part of that rhythm of life, if for no other reason than to promote her work.

“New York allows me the greatest stimulation and allows me to keep in touch with all the is going on in the art world,” she says.

Born in Greenwich Village in 1932, Mason attended New York’s High School of Music & Art from 1946 to 1950. She left the city and first came to Vermont when she attended Bennington College from 1950 to 1952.

“Bennington College was an all-girl school back then, which is why I left,” jokes Mason. “No, the real reason I left was that the faculty there were trying to circulate what was happening in New York five years before.”

In 1952, Mason transferred from Bennington College back to New York at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art.

“At Cooper, I found the professors were in engaged in teaching what the student needed and were more in tune with the current trends in the art world,” she says. “And of course, that school was co-ed.”

Mason’s career began to flourish in the 1960s. She was awarded her first solo exhibition in 1960 at the Area Gallery in New York City.

“The art world was different back then,” says Mason, as she remembers those days fondly.

“For one thing, it was smaller. Things became much more commercial later. In the early Sixties, I was part of

the 10th Street co-operative galleries, which had an atmosphere among artists that was relaxed and supportive. Later artists become aware that a lot of money could be made from some of their work. I remember the excitement when a painting was sold for \$3,000. The change divided people and ended relationships. You know money can do that; it's a matter of perception.”

Since then, she has had many solo exhibitions all over, and now Mason continues to exhibit her paintings in New York at the David Findlay Jr. Fine Arts and LewAllen Gallery in Santa Fe.

In 1979, she began teaching at Hunter College of the City University of New York.

“The main message I try to get across to my students is to trust your intuition,” says Mason.

Although her mother also was a celebrated abstract painter, Mason has had no trouble finding her own voice. “My mother was very formal, using the straight line, very much in the Mondrian tradition,” she says. “I always was much more expressionistic.”

She feels that color and shape are the essence of her work.

“I was very influenced in color by a weaver who dyed a series of skeins of wool, which taught me about the importance of analogous color,” says Mason. “That means you vary your color with other colors, but never black or white. And as far as shape — well, shape and color — one does not exist without the other.”

Her paintings and prints are thoroughly abstract, and if people find her work consequently “challenging,” “that’s their problem,” she says. “Anyway, every painting is based on an abstraction.

“There are many ways to understand my work, such as through the subconscious and psychology. People should just know when it speaks to them. Of course, the more someone understands the language of abstract painting, the easier it is to appreciate what I do. When people come up to me and say they may not know a lot about art, but really liked my painting, I think, ‘Wow, they spent the time to really look at what I did.’”

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