

WASHBURN

Art in America

DASH OF EARTH, FLASH OF SKY: ALICE TRUMBULL MASON AT WASHBURN GALLERY

By Jackson Arn January 7, 2022



View of "Shutter Paintings," 2021–22, at Washburn Gallery, showing Bearings, 1965 at center.
COURTESY WASHBURN GALLERY

“Like ordinary everyday experience, except about two inches off the ground”—that’s the Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki explaining what enlightenment feels like, but he might as well be talking about the late style of Alice Trumbull Mason, the subject of a quietly superb exhibition at Washburn Gallery. Nothing she paints is all that bold or new—yellow triangle here, thin white rectangle there—but each shape is ever so slightly intensified by a mystical rightness of color and balance. Some of the time, the effect is faint enough to miss entirely, and even when you notice, it’s easy to get frustrated with Mason for not floating up to showier heights. But isn’t it enough that she’s floating at all?

For decades, gallerists’ answer was, more or less, “no.” Mason didn’t have a solo show in New York until she was almost 40, and at the time of her death in 1971 she was a pretty minor figure, well-connected but hardly well-known (a 1973 Whitney retrospective changed this somewhat, but not much). Even today, the art world has struggled to give Mason her due, since her style is neither passionately gestural (i.e., easy to interpret psychologically and thus biographically) nor big and boastful (i.e., easy to sell to rich idiots). The resurgence of interest in neglected female artists has worked wonders for epic abstractionists like Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell—deservedly so—but it’s also inspired too many rushed, muddled surveys like “Labyrinth of Forms: Women and Abstraction, 1930–1950,” currently on view at the Whitney, in which Mason and twenty-six others push and shove for attention while, two floors above, Jasper Johns gets wall after graceless wall to himself.

WASHBURN GALLERY

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Alice Trumbull Mason, *White Parenthesis*, 1965, oil on canvas, 42 by 33 inches.
COURTESY WASHBURN GALLERY

Mason deserves better. She's not a push-and-shove kind of artist, but given a room of her own she's as riveting as any of her better-known peers. The paintings at Washburn consist almost entirely of bright, tapered vertical stripes, with the odd earth-tone diagonal thrown in for variety's sake (the compositions are so consistent that any difference at all, even a horizontal line, feels like an O. Henry twist). Mason has a way of topping a hot, acidic color with an even hotter, more acidic color—before her paintings achieve any of their subtler effects, they have to burn. As your eyes adjust to the glow, though, colors start to ripen and shapes start to rhyme: the banana-yellow diamonds in *White Parenthesis* (1965), for example, recall the peach one in *Bearings* (same year), so that each painting seems like a mirror of the other's secret depths. Flatness seems more and more illusory. Every splinter of blue suggests a flash of sky—I'm reminded of the way T. J. Clark described Paul Klee's mature work: "The surface came to look as if it were a kind of transparency 'really' hung across a glimpsed infinity."

Are these "minor" works? They're modestly sized, it's true, and though they were painted at a time when Mason was still mourning her son's sudden death, none wears its heart on its sleeve. But a tiny window to a glimpsed infinity is still a window to infinity, and not all placid pictures are passionless. Mason gestures at infinity more than she confronts it head-on, but it's there, all the same, in the columns of color tirelessly pushing out beyond the frame, the style too briskly confident to bother with showing off. The exhibition is called "Shutter Paintings"—an apt, lovely title, though "I Contain Multitudes" would have worked too.

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