

Art in America

May 2006

Alice Trumbull Mason, Emily Mason and Cecily Kahn at Hunter College

If an argument were to be made that an art gene selecting for abstraction exists and may pass through successive members of a family, "Three Generations of Abstract Painting" would provide evidence. This carefully organized exhibition offered a visual context for an informed reading of the works of Alice Trumbull Mason (1904-1971), her daughter Emily Mason (b. 1932) and granddaughter Cecily Kahn (b. 1959). The Mason family descends from John Trumbull, a celebrated Neo-Classical painter of the late 18th century. Trumbull Mason, married to an often absent ship's captain, was a student of Arshile Gorky in the late 1920s; she was an early advocate of non-objective painting and a founding member of American Abstract Artists. She was influenced by the geometric, architectural abstraction of Mondrian, evident in some of her later works included here.

Through her mother's milieu, Emily Mason became acquainted with prominent artists of the day. She studied at Bennington and Cooper Union and teaches painting at Hunter College today. Her recent paintings and prints are generally Color Field in temperament but suggest the influence of the first generation Abstract Expressionists. She is married to the artist Wolf Kahn. Their daughter, Cecily Kahn, engages in a more readily apparent dialogue with the work of her grandmother, Trumbull Mason, with rhomboids and trapezoids overlaid with biomorphic forms. Kahn studied at RISD and is married to the painter David Kapp.

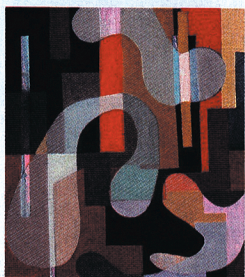
Two relatively small works by Trumbull Mason, one a study in pencil on paper 20 inches high, the other a painting in oil on wood nearly 30 inches high, are both titled *Latitude of Identical Shapes* and dated 1945. They show her midcareer involvement with geometric abstraction. In the former, two vertical ranks of interpenetrating, rectilinear forms face each other across a central field, the intended colors represented by letter. If

the finished painting deviates in both order and projected hue, taken together these intelligent works provide insight into process. Mondrian's spirit comes to the fore in the 19-by-22-inch *No. 1 Towards a Paradox* (1969), with squares and rectangles deployed on a field that resembles an urban intersection. The paint handling reveals real enjoyment of the medium.

Emily Mason's colorful canvases are also in oil and here span 25 years. At 4 feet square, *Bee Loud Glade* (1959) shows the gestural influence and palette of de Kooning. *Equal Paradise* (1966) and *Mitred Afternoon* (1970), of roughly similar dimensions, are handsome, landscape-oriented abstractions. A grid of carborundum prints dated 2002 and 2004 are suffused with color, while the 6-foot-high *Embraced* (2004) has the sunny look of a summer's day, with an easy brightness and a stained surface more often associated with acrylics.

Kahn's paintings evoke her grandmother's geometric formats, interlocking planes and bright, highly worked palette, with a facture that ranges from dense texture to, in more recent instances, what appear to be spills or stains of ink. The underlying grids of the 17-by-15-inch *Hovering Wishes* (1999) introduce biomorphic shapes, while, among a subsequent similar-scale group, *Cloud* (2004) seems to open up to a greater freedom of application. The same attention to the details and edges can be observed in several gouaches and ink on paper works included here. This thoroughly interesting exhibition rewards the attentive eye. An accompanying catalogue traces the recent lineage of an American art matriarchy.

—Edward Leffingwell



Left, Cecily Kahn: *Hovering Wishes*, 1999, oil on linen, 17 by 15 inches; bottom left, Alice Trumbull Mason: *No. 1 Towards a Paradox*, 1969, oil on canvas, 19 by 22 inches; below, Emily Mason: *Embraced*, 2004, oil on canvas, 72 by 52 inches; at Hunter College.

