ALMINE RECH

Emily Mason
Other Rooms, Works from 1959–2017

Jan 10 — Mar 14, 2026 | Paris

In January 2026, Almine Rech is dedicating an exhibition at its rue de Turenne space in Paris to the American painter Emily Mason (1932–2019). This will be the first major monographic exhibition devoted to the artist in Europe, spanning nearly sixty years of her creative output. Featuring around fifty works, this retrospective will cover a period from the late 1950s to the second half of the 2010s, offering the chance to discover her paintings on canvas, clayboard and paper.

Although her work is represented in several private collections in Europe, American painter Emily Mason's work has never been the subject of a solo exhibition here, with the exception of a 2004 presentation of her prints in Venice, the city where she studied and worked between 1956 and 1958. This first monographic presentation in France therefore offers an exceptional opportunity not only to engage with it anew but also to appreciate its distinctiveness within a contemporary context that celebrates painting in all its forms.

Mason's story begins, first and foremost, with a significant artistic heritage. Born in 1932 in New York City, she was the daughter of Alice Trumbull Mason, a poet, painter, printmaker, and co-founder of the American Abstract Artists (AAA) organization in the 1930s. In her various capacities, Alice corresponded with William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and Alice B. Toklas, and both within the framework of her AAA activities and beyond, maintained close ties with Josef Albers, Piet Mondrian, Joan Miró, David Smith, Arshile Gorky, Ray Johnson, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Ad Reinhardt, before forming deep friendships with John Cage and Merce Cunningham.

Emily Mason was profoundly influenced by this stimulating environment, through which she gained early exposure to a wide spectrum of complementary aesthetics—a foundation that ultimately shaped a creative approach defined by its refusal to settle into a comfort zone. This may in part explain why her work has remained largely overlooked. From the outset, Mason rejected the notion of a "signature style," instead cultivating a practice that, guided by intuition and sensation, allowed her to continually explore uncharted territory rather than fall back on a fixed repertoire of forms and techniques entrenched in habitual patterns.

Engaging with Mason's body of work means accepting the risk of disorientation—of entering a terrain with shifting boundaries, composed of diverse realms, and surrendering to the vertigo caused by the loss of familiar reference points provided by immediately identifiable artistic practice. Her work was not born ex nihilo. How could it have been otherwise, for an American artist who began her journey in the mid-1950s, frequenting the Museum of Modern Art in New York before studying at Bennington College in the state of Vermont, a place that would come to play an important role in her life? Like many of her generation, she came into contact with Hans Hofmann. And like many of her generation, she immersed herself in European painting while simultaneously seeking to forge her own path, one shaped by both the Abstract Expressionists in New York and the painters of the Bay Area[1].

After spending extended periods in Italy during the 1960s, Mason and her husband, painter Wolf Kahn, purchased a farm in West Brattleboro, Vermont, in 1968. From then on, the family divided their time between the New England countryside and New York City, where Emily began teaching at the prestigious Hunter College in 1979.

Much like the ever-changing atmospheres and shifting light she observed in Brattleboro, Mason constructed a multifaceted body of work defying any notion of stability. Her practice was defined by ongoing experimentation, driving her to constantly renegotiate her chromatic range, revisit her brushwork and gestures, reorganize forms and masses, and alternate between opacifying the surface and rendering it more translucent, depending on the fluidity of the paint.

Mason is, without question, a master colorist, yet this selection also shows that her work cannot be reduced to a single dimension. Her relentless experimentation is equally evident in her ability to exhaust the possibilities of an extended pictorial language while remaining attuned to the specificities of each medium. Whether on canvas or clayboard, her paintings demonstrate a sumptuous array of applications. But particular attention should also be paid to how she explored paper and printmaking techniques, as in her monotypes, which evoke the material qualities of some of her paintings while clearly adhering to their own internal logic. The same holds true for a never-before-exhibited series of small-scale works from 2016, executed in black, white, and shades of gray, which offer an unexpected counterpoint to her more luminous, color-rich paintings. It is through this profusion that Mason's work reveals itself, in its remarkable scope and continual flux.

— Erik Verhagen, art historian and curator

[1] It is worth noting, to highlight a specifically Parisian context, that Mason met Joan Mitchell in the latter half of the 1950s on this side of the Atlantic. In her colleague's work, she discerned the same need she herself felt to renegotiate the boundaries of contemporary painting.