

An abstract painting by Robert Mason, featuring a central vertical channel of dark blue-grey paint that flows downwards. The surrounding areas are filled with thick, textured brushstrokes in shades of brown, tan, and light blue-grey, creating a complex, layered composition. The overall effect is one of organic, geological or perhaps biological growth and decay.

# Robert Mason

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Shirley Madill, Guest Curator

Known for his dedication to arts and education in Hamilton, Robert Mason is remembered and honoured through this large-scale exhibition that uncovers significant stages in his art career. Born in 1933 in Tillsonburg, Ontario, Robert studied at the Ontario College of Art and received his B.A. in Fine Arts from McMaster University. He taught art classes at Lord Elgin High School in Burlington and enjoyed a prolific career that spanned over three decades. Mason was considered Hamilton's greatest ambassador when it came to supporting local artists, connecting the City of Hamilton culturally with the rest of the world, and integrating art within the natural environment.

Expressed through painting, installation, photography and sculpture, Mason's interests can be contextualized within larger artistic movements in North America such as land art and painterly abstraction. Recurring motifs and themes in Mason's paintings include the landscape and the natural environment, the planets and the cosmos, migration and immigration, and the animal world. Large outdoor and indoor installations, such as *The Floating Gardens*, *Moving Home*, and *emigration/MIGRATION/immigration*, evoked his sensitivity and concern for the natural environment in the face of increased industrialization and the compelling desire for all species to move freely through new territories. Included in this exhibition are selections from his *Self-Portrait* works that explore the artist's perception of himself through monochromatic images of clothing; the

*Erie Lighthouse* series, often described as "landscape balanced between the accident of nature and the rational imposition of man"; the exquisite and gestural *Romantic Geometry* series, paintings intended to imply wisdom and rational thought; and the final cosmic paintings produced prior to his death in 2005.

To develop a stronger relation to nature, Mason understood how to generate procreative models for human culture and civilization. The ebb and flow of energies that are part of the process of life in our biosphere refer to the procreative core of our desire to transform, enrich, express, and improve our environment. On a fundamental level, Mason could be considered a landscape artist; yet his works are driven by a sense that natural phenomena are at once both transformative and determined. Mason's work resonates as a potent reminder that nature still manages to nurture, inspire and humble us.



***emigration/MIGRATION/immigration*** 1994

mixed media

installed variously at the Art Gallery of Hamilton; Cootes Paradise, Hamilton; Villa Bruna on Lago di Garda, Abruzzo National Park, Abrezio, Italy. Caribou heads constructed by students at Sir John A. Macdonald High School, Hamilton.

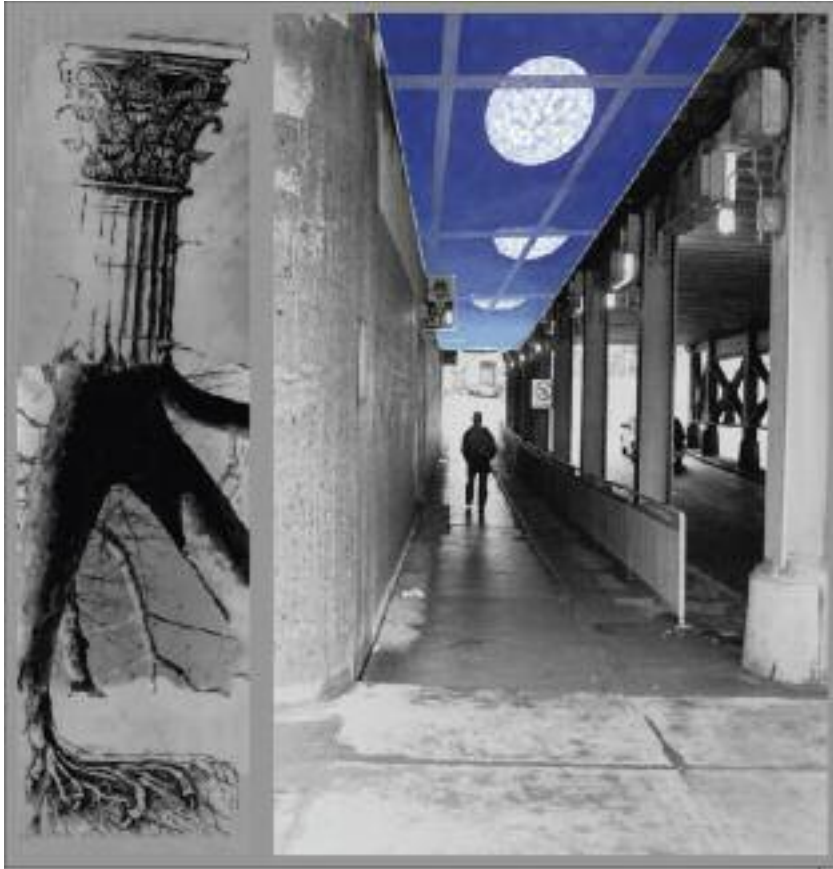
Examining issues of social mobility, xenophobia and pride of place, in this installation Mason focused on Canada's first "immigrants" – migratory animals, caribou and birds. The inspiration for the caribou installation came to the artist during a visit to the Canadian Museum of Civilization where he saw a video of migrating caribou swimming across a river. The image planted the seed for themes he was to continue to explore such as the natural environment and human migration.



***MOVING HOME*** 2001

mixed media installation  
installation at Macdonald Stewart Art Centre,  
Guelph, Ontario

In this seminal work, Mason addresses the notions of permanence and impermanence, stasis and movement and the migration of people, animals and ideas. The tensions and resolutions between human culture and primordial nature that have informed his work throughout his career are encapsulated in this work. Evolving from the earlier installation *emigration/MIGRATION/immigration* that focused on human and animal migration, this installation focuses on the compelling desire of all species – plants, animals and humans – not only to migrate but also to seek a home.



### ***A Transformative Project for Negative Spaces*** 2004

Proposal for public art project for James Street South, Hamilton.  
Prototype exhibited at *Future Cities* exhibition, 2004, AGH/Jackson Square

A convergence of two distinct streams in Mason's *oeuvre* appears in this work: painting and photo-based art. For the artist, both streams had deep roots in the tripartite relationship between man, nature and architecture. This proposal began with the assumption that the urban core of Hamilton is not a desirable destination and artists may provide creative solutions. Mason shows that the "in-between" spaces, their proportions, potential and relationship to the city whole, are as important to those who move through them as the built environment that surrounds them. These open and public spaces have an influence on the emotional and psychological well-being of the community. The ceiling of this installation is a painting that attempts to open a dark subterranean space to the illuminated cosmos.





*The Floating Gardens* 1993

latex balloons

installed variously in Hamilton at the Royal Botanical Gardens, and in Serbia

The forty circular yellow and pink intergalactic spheroids were various colourful latex balloons measuring six to twelve feet in diameter, and strategically placed by the artist. In Hamilton, they were placed along the path of the now defunct Desjardins Canal, a waterway that once connected Dundas with Burlington Bay.



*Third Eye II* c. 2004, photographic print, pencil on Mylar, gold leaf, beaver sticks, tackle, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Gift of the Estate of Robert Mason

## Robert Mason

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