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You knew Bob Mason's voice as soon as a single word left his mouth. It was as distinctive as his unmistakable face with eyes that seemed boyish and a thousand-years-old at the same time and a rhythm of deep lines, worn into his skin by who knows what force of care and laughter and exposure to the elements. They were strong, living lines, that sang with canoe trips and Canadian winters and travel abroad, and Mason's whole face, the rugged, harmonic set of it, was like something he himself might've gouged out of a surface in his studio while thinking about a landscape. It was the face he needed to have. There was an almost artistic necessity to it. And his voice was every bit its equal, diaphragm-deep, textured and reedy, as though an old wise wind, yet still full of youth, was propelling the sound of it. If Bob was like a tree for the arts in Hamilton, his voice was a rustling in the branches. I'd hear that voice whenever he came to me with a story idea he had, a cause he was championing, and what struck me was how measured it was, that voice, at once gentle and forceful. I would always marvel at how much passion and vigour and equanimity he could bring to fights he had sometimes lost three or four times already. Don't get me wrong. He won some too. He won his art. And he won the hearts of at least two generations of Hamilton artists. Not many people are as distinctive on so many levels as Bob Mason was. His look, his character, his humour (inseparable from each other, and from his art) were among his many gifts. And few artists have a body of work at once so varied and yet all so unmistakably his. So, a long way to get in to it, but I was walking through the Art Gallery of Hamilton the other day and while I knew there was a big retrospective coming I didn't know it was already up. When I stumbled upon it, these big airy rooms full of Bob's work, full of Bob, I found myself quite unexpectedly having to fight back a lot of feeling and then giving up. It felt a bit as though I had walked into a cathedral, and for that, thank guest curator Shirley Madill and her team at the AGH, including contemporary curator Melissa Bennett. The works (the show includes some of his biggest paintings,

including the epic triptych *A Mari Usque Ad Mare*) are set off beautifully, given lots of room to breathe, and the whole space is full of light. Madill knew Mason when she was curator at the AGH, a few short years ago, and she worked with Bob on the show, before he died in 2005. So perhaps he had a hand in how it looks. In any case, Madill has captured him. There is so much here from his long career -- his Erie lighthouse series, the installation work, the outdoor work, the more cosmic-flavoured pieces of his last years.

Mason, in his art, loved to pull jokes and play games. He was very interested in those shifting, often arbitrary boundaries between nature, architecture, geometrical abstraction, landscape and the psychological interior. He loved to blur those boundaries. Some of his abstract and semi-abstract canvasses look as though storms have blown across them, scattering the paint and colour in seemingly organic, sometimes random, ways. They are full of scrapes and gouges. But in the midst of it he would introduce a graceful, precise red arc or a hard-edge minimalist band of colour. He played with the idea of the architectural column as humanity's riff on a tree. And the stylized berry clusters and floral motifs of the classic Corinthian capital become, in Mason's work, actual leaves and fruit. Mason liked to break out of convention, so he put art out in natural spaces -- he fashioned foam caribou and floated them in Cootes Paradise -- and he put nature into art spaces, once featuring a live finch as part of a piece of his in the AGH. Many knew Bob Mason far better than I did. As the program notes to the exhibit say, "Mason was considered Hamilton's greatest ambassador when it came to supporting local artists" I'd be surprised if many others don't share my sense of his presence in this space. Sometimes we have to be reminded just how much we miss someone.