

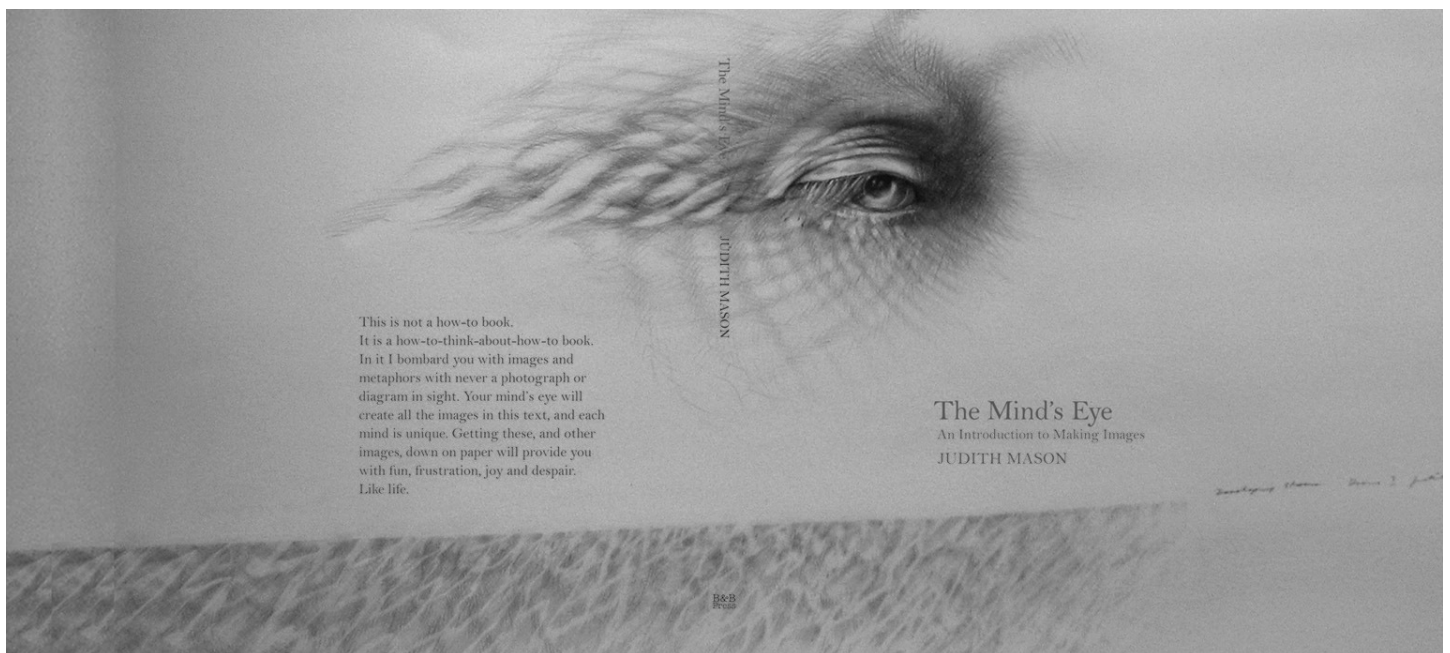
The Mind's Eye: An Introduction to Making Images

By Judith Mason

Books & Books Press, 2015, pp.93

ISBN: 9780991327157

Review by Gregory Kerr



In the late 1960's I was a student of Fine Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand. I was not a good student; I tended to take the lecturers for granted or to get into conflict with them. I was a difficult student. I think I wasted some splendid opportunities to improve myself. I was a lazy student. It was not their fault I was indolent, but some of the indolence came from a refusal to buy into the current fashions, which were flat, hardedge, and to me, sterile and pointless. I was a cocksure little bastard, for sure, and deserved everything I didn't get from the brilliant academics who ran the show.

However, there was at least one person on the teaching staff for whom I had nothing but the utmost respect and affection, and that was the astonishing Judith Mason. Judy was teaching senior students in the department, but no one objected if there were gatecrashers at her crit sessions and though very callow and junior, I was a gatecrasher of note. She stuck in the brain like a special kind of revelatory sage, speaking with the tongues of angels and art students. She was not puffed up; she got to the nitty-gritties of the everyday existential crises of being an imaginative painter (and thus a demonstrably frivolous and irrelevant person) in a world of conscientious pragmatism. And she was neither flat nor hard-edge! She took it for granted that we all wanted to slay the plastic beast of painting, to find the path and the truth and the way and the light. She was a shining example of the artist, the ham-fisted wrestler with the craft and sullen business of finding, but she was also something else, something so rare that it intoxicated. She could find the words and the images and the poetics to speak directly to the acolyte. She made sense that was not the elegant sense of the art historians and design lecturers, but the thew-and-sinew- sense of the maker.

Reading *The Mind's Eye* was to be taken back forty-seven years into that studio in the John Moffat Building, listening to the dark-haired young woman with the strangely plat accent and the twinkle - the inevitable twinkle - of anti-earnestness sweetening the stern seriousness beneath the monologue. In this slim but rich volume - a wonderful companion to art-making - Mason allows herself the freedom to write as she speaks; from the hip, from the heart and (you'd better believe it) from the head. She addresses all the departments - the neuroses, the need for discipline, the compulsion to form. How does one tackle the metaphysics of the human face, the living anatomy, the stagnant psyche that refuses to paint? What is beautiful? (The answer will surprise you, but you must first draw or paint shrouded things, shadowed things, moving things, harsh, gross and edible things.)

Since I left Wits and her diverse influences, I have been making a living as a teacher of art - theory, education, drawing, painting, even history - god help us - and have developed strategies that address a range of issues: conceptual, perceptual, technical, historical, philosophical and psychological. I am quite proud of the strategies. I didn't know until I read Mason's book how very much my well-worn ideas, theories and methodology must have been shaped by her. I kept saying, "but I say that!" and I do, but so does she and so well, and she probably said it first. I shall be setting her text as prescribed reading for my professional students because she says things that absolutely are required drumming-into-the-head stuff for anyone faced with the prospect of making art. She is gung ho on looking very hard at things and choosing things that do not immediately declare themselves to be lovely. She is stern with base matters like techniques and (contra mode) believes passionately in the dark and numinous power of the creative imagination expressed in a stern and controlled emotion - what Yeats called, "the rag and bone shop of the human heart".

Anyone who knows the history of Judith Mason, as do I - the clot-fisted schoolboy acolyte who saw her drawings in the 101 Gallery in 1967 (and had a damascene experience right there and then) and who has followed this straight talking mystic over fifty years of poetics, romance, religion, Africa and her place in it, who has learned from her what it is like to stand aghast and amused at the demented business of making paintings, despite all kinds of logic and reason - will recognize in this pearl of a book much of the commentary that has accompanied her artwork over the years; what she herself has described, quoting T.S. Eliot, *'the fragments that shore up our ruins'*.

From the rich soil of a fabulously informed and intrepid imagination, Mason has grown a history of dark metaphors for our singular place in the evolution of Africa. Her book, despite her disclaimer, "this is not a how-to book. It is a how-to-think-about-how-to book," is the perfect concordance to that history. Read it, artist, and learn!

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