

JOHN ALTOON (1925-69)  
born and resided in L.A.

1947-49 Otis Art Institute, L.A.  
1949-50 Art Center School, L.A.  
1950 Chouinard Art Institute, L.A.

Untitled (Ocean Park Series), 1962  
oil on canvas

John Altoon, considered one of Southern California's principal exponents of Abstract Expressionism, was an influential personality of the L.A. art scene from the mid-1950s until his early death from a massive heart attack in 1969 (age 43). Although he worked undeniably in an Abstract Expressionist manner, relying upon action painting techniques and the use of Surrealist concepts such as free association, he developed his own personal language of sensual forms, brilliant color and organic line. Works were autobiographical and laden with sexual imagery. Altoon fully improvised his drawings, his paintings and his life.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Los Angeles to two first-generation Armenian émigrés from Turkey, as a teenager he joined the Navy and served as a radar technician in the Pacific during World War II. He returned to Los Angeles, where he attended Otis on the G.I. Bill and subsequently the Art Center School and Chouinard. Altoon demonstrated an exceptional skill as a draftsman, while expressing his distaste for the art schools' formal curricula and required assignments.

The fifties were years of indecision for Altoon, for his facility with line left him increasingly torn between his developing success as a commercial illustrator (which he continued for four years while living in New York<sup>2</sup>) and his strong desire to become a "true artist." Altoon studied in Spain and France after winning a grant from the Emily Lowe Competition.

The artist began an association with the Abstract Expressionist movement, centered around the Ferus Gallery<sup>3</sup>, upon his return to Los Angeles and assumed teaching positions at Chouinard and the Art Center. Altoon became one of the founding members of the gallery and inspired artists around him; he developed friendships with Ed Kienholz, Ed Moses, Robert Irwin, Billy Al Bengston, Ed Ruscha and Richard Diebenkorn.

He suffered from schizophrenia and admitted himself to Camarillo State Hospital periodically for treatment.

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<sup>1</sup> Brigid S. Barton, John Altoon (Santa Clara: Da Saisset Museum, 1980) 8.

<sup>2</sup> In New York the artist became familiar with works by the New York School -- Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Ferus was a unique phenomenon in the L.A. of the fifties, a center of extreme artistic activity and camaraderie in the midst of an otherwise uninspiring artistic environment.

The artist's work as a commercial graphic illustrator informed his own private blend of abstraction. He developed an iconography of biomorphic shapes and line compositions which recall the works of Gorky and Miro. While early compositions were heavily impastoed, later works displayed a lighter touch, quick and energetic.

While known for his expressionistic and lyrical works on paper and canvas, he also made "cartoon" drawings which were satirical and cunning in their lampooning of contemporary culture. For example, one series commented on American advertising's messages of violence and materialism; another addressed male-female relationships. Common themes included sexuality, power and moralism, often rendered in a humorous vein.

In January, 1962 Altoon moved into a new studio in Ocean Park, a section of Venice where an amusement park had operated. Vacant storefronts provided early studio housing for not-as-yet successful young artists. Eighteen paintings, which comprise the "Ocean Park" Series,<sup>4</sup> were completed in less than a year. They are significant in defining Altoon's new direction towards organic, linear forms floating in an undefined space. Altoon's graphic interests carried over into these first major mature abstract works. The large hybrid forms of "Ocean Park" are characterized by unusual spontaneity, direct paint handling and brighter, more highly-keyed color than prior paintings. Each work was painted quickly, without visible alteration and with a minimum of brush strokes.

Untitled (Ocean Park Series), 1962, creates the impression of a spontaneous drawing with paint. Central to Untitled is Altoon's use of a white primed field, a flat, undefined background, on which abstract, organic and surreal forms float; abstracted beach objects, including a lifeguard's chair, appear, in addition to a fish, the sun, etc. This negative white space seems to create a dialogue between line, form and color. Altoon's palette, characteristic of later works, displays a wide range of hues; bright colors are juxtaposed with subtle pastels. Contrasts in paint application are also noticeable; thick patches function as counterpoints to areas which are applied thinly.

-- Phyllis Kleinberg, 1/97

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<sup>4</sup> The term "series" is somewhat of a misnomer for Altoon called any group of works done at a particular address where he happened to be living at the time a series. He moved around quite often, and names of various series, e.g. "Harper" and "Sunset," present a catalog of his various studios in the greater L.A. area.