

ARTFORUM

Los Angeles

John Altoon

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART (LACMA)

5905 Wilshire Boulevard

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In a 1954 de Kooning knockoff called *Mother and Child* hung at the beginning of John Altoon's long-posthumous (and very politely hung) retrospective, a lone squiggle floats like an errant feather across the surface of seething figures. Laura Owens points it out in the show's stellar catalogue (which also includes a brilliant, anal-recussive screed by Paul McCarthy that would make Pere Ubu blush). Altoon's singular career flows out of that single, wholly deliberate, slightly sploogy mark.

A little fleshy, a little gross, his spacey pastel abstractions sometimes look like reassembled fourth-dimensional space aliens, but like the East Coast AbEx defector Philip Guston, all the primordial ooze coalesced mid career into figures. For Altoon, these figures shape into jangly lined porno drawings and reworked advertisements, their barely suppressed lusts splurting to the top. His muted palette of tertiary turquoises and lavenders rocks steady throughout with levity, but the play of the purposeful squiggle expands out of the necessary self-seriousness of midcentury abstraction and into the freewheeling '60s, the postwar abstract angst swirling into form around the new found sexuality. Collected by Mike Kelley and McCarthy, Altoon inspired with a blithe spirit in life and work a few generations of Los Angeles artists including Monique Prieto, Monica Majoli, and Barbara T. Smith, all also contributors to the catalogue.



John Altoon, *Untitled*, 1964, pastel and ink on illustration board, 56 × 40". From the series "Hyperion," 1964.

Altoon ultimately turned whimsy to a purpose—individual desire wrought fearlessly and joyfully can be a revolutionary act within a regimented society. In 1966, Altoon collaborated with Robert Creeley on a series of lithographs and poems titled *About Women* (a favorite subject). Creeley matched the corporeal joy blossoming out of his collaborator near the end of his life (snipped short by a heart attack at forty-four in 1969): “Always your / tits, not breasts, but / harsh sudden rises of impatient flesh . . . which flower / against the vagueness / of the air you move in.”

— Andrew Berardin

