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Review: LACMA exhibit on John Altoon shows his jazzy, seductive touch

By Christopher Knight



"Ocean Park Series #8," 1962, oil on canvas, by John Altoon. (LACMA)

For a brief, shining moment in the 1960s, John Altoon was the great American painter of the great American sexual revolution.

Voluptuous color and luxurious interpenetrations of sensuous forms conspired to make messy, elegant, often witty abstract pictures. Their hedonistic punch is a delicious indulgence.

Altoon's sudden death in 1969 from a heart attack at the age of 43 cut short a promising career. Where he would have gone is of course impossible to know, but many of his best paintings, made over the previous seven years, landed in museum collections up and down California. Today they look as fresh and fine as any from the period.

Many are included among the 18 works on canvas and 50 on paper or cardboard assembled by curator Carol S. Eliel for the much-anticipated survey newly opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. A prolific draftsman, Altoon destroyed a considerable number of his paintings, so the show is a concise overview.

Altoon was born in Los Angeles in 1925 of Armenian-immigrant parents (the family name was Altoonian). Thanks to military service during World War II and the subsequent GI Bill, he studied commercial illustration and painting at three area art schools — Otis, Art Center and Chouinard. At 26 he moved to New York City and, three years later, to Europe.

Suffering a psychological breakdown abroad — Altoon is believed to have wrestled with schizophrenia or manic depression, which landed him in the hospital several times — he returned permanently to Los Angeles in 1956. Twice married (his first, to Fay Spain, an actress who mostly worked in television, ended in divorce in 1962), he made his living teaching and doing commercial work.

The LACMA show opens with a certainly skillful if uninspired painting of a pair of jazz saxophonists made around 1950. The figures are rendered in a self-consciously arty style — call it "mass-market modern" — that is a kind of Cubist faceting squashed flat.

Like artists as diverse as David Park in the Bay Area and Wallace Berman and William Claxton in L.A., however, Altoon's interest in the cool, seductive rhythms of West Coast jazz informed his work. He designed album covers for Pacific Jazz Records and other companies, but the music's reliance on sensual improvisation is what infiltrated his paintings.

The 1956-57 oil "Ode to Thelonious" (as in jazz pianist and composer Thelonious Monk) applies Cubist structure to nothing but vaporous, colored space. Shifting, angular patches of blue and green shot through with bursts of violet and darting red-orange lines open deep vistas — then suddenly close them down, snapping attention back to the painted surface. Unlike the earlier "Jazz Players," this poetic visual song is fully non-figurative.

Between making these two paintings Altoon fell under the spell of Willem de Kooning, titan of the New York School. The older artist's stature was exploding at precisely the moment the Angeleno was living in New York. De Kooning also dropped the figure for pure abstraction not long before Altoon painted his "Ode."

It's also tempting to tie Altoon's interest to De Kooning's own passionate admiration for the work of another troubled young Armenian American painter — De Kooning's friend Arshile Gorky, who committed suicide in 1948 at 44.

Altoon's large "Mother and Child" (1954), painted with great technical finesse, is a marvelous dance between color and line. A neo-Cubist abstraction, it is aptly likened in the show's catalog to De Kooning's celebrated paintings of women from the late 1940s and early 1950s. Yet it contains none of the New York painter's fierce and violent aggression.

Instead, Altoon's monumental woman, seated with a child in her lap, is a virtual Madonna enthroned. Executed in a lively if serene palette of warm browns and pale, cool greens, the painting is closer in tone and subject to



Gorky's heartfelt figurative paintings of "The Artist and His Mother." (Those were seen in the great 2010 Gorky retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art.) Conflicting childhood memories of security and anxiety within a context of feminine nurturing loom large.

Several years on, as Altoon matured into his mid-30s, those impulses would be caressed in lyrical — and inescapably erotic — reveries.

The canvas becomes a field for the colorful interplay of suggestive, fragmentary signs for buttocks, breasts, phalluses, vulvas, limbs and visceral, sentient animals. Lush, sometimes messy shapes, brush strokes, splatters and forms evoke a feral sexuality engaged in a struggle with cultivation and, often, whimsy.

The tussle is most explicit in his ink drawings, with their thin, quivering, agitated lines often describing body parts and frank sexual activity. The precedent of Picasso's eroticism is evident, especially in an untitled 1959 graphite and ink-wash drawing of a shadowy feminine figure serenaded by a flute-playing satyr or Minotaur.

Sex is also an obvious tool of mass-media commercial art, flooding late-20th century America, with which Altoon was well-versed. Several satirical works play with advertising motifs.

One shows a dapper young couple in a White Owl cigar ad: He smokes, she pouts. Rather than focus on a close-up as a conventional ad would, Altoon pulls back (like a reverse camera-zoom) to show the fashionable pair full-length: Both are stark naked below the waist. The cigar scene turns into an ad for post-coital relaxation.

The '60s sexual revolution was propelled by many things, including a postwar generational shift, scientific developments like the birth control pill, a growing and newly prosperous middle class and other deep transformations in American society. As it unfolded, artists in Altoon's orbit — Kenneth Price, Judy Gerowitz (later Chicago), Craig Kauffman and more — moved sexuality to the forefront of their imagery, often in abstract forms. (A 1964 group exhibition at Ferus Gallery, where Altoon also showed, was notoriously titled "The Studs.") Few addressed the experience in as riveting, seductive and playfully generous a manner as Altoon.

One interesting feature of the LACMA show is the invitation offered to five artists to contribute short essays to the catalog. They make for interesting reading.

None is more incisive than Monica Majoli, who writes on "the omnipotence of flesh" in both human experience and Altoon's work. "Promiscuous abstraction" is the phrase she uses to describe his art in the 1960s, and it is hard to think of a better one.

