

Exhibition: *John Altoon*
On View: June 8–September 14, 2014
Location: BCAM, Level 2



(Image Captions on Page 3)

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents the first major retrospective of John Altoon (1925–1969), an artist whose brief but significant career unfolded in Southern California. Co-organized with the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, the exhibition features approximately 70 artworks (including seven from LACMA’s collection) that cover the full range of Altoon’s artistic production, from the gestural abstraction of his celebrated Ocean Park paintings, to the subversive style of his advertising satires and late figurative drawings.

“John Altoon is distinguished by his extraordinary use of color as well as his mastery of both pure abstraction and detailed figuration. This exhibition offers a rare opportunity to see Altoon’s work in depth,” explains Carol S. Eliel, curator of modern art at LACMA.

The exhibition catalogue, which includes an essay by Eliel and contributions by artists Paul McCarthy, Monica Majoli, Laura Owens, Monique Prieto, and Barbara T. Smith, not only looks at Altoon’s relationship to his contemporaries but also considers his resonance among younger generations of artists. “Altoon has always been an artists’ artist, so it is particularly exciting to present a fresh set of voices reflecting on his work,” says Eliel.

Following its presentation at LACMA, *John Altoon* travels to the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, where it will be on view October 8–December 21, 2014.

Exhibition Highlights

John Altoon is organized chronologically, allowing viewers to follow both the artist’s formal development and his engagement with historical events and social issues of his day. In

works that frequently oscillate between abstraction and figuration, one finds Altoon's virtuosic skills as a draftsman combined with content that moves from perverse sexuality, to humor, to pathos, to self-reflection.

Among the themes the exhibition explores is Altoon's influence on younger generations of artists. Altoon moved to the Ocean Park neighborhood of Santa Monica in 1962, the same year he created his Ocean Park Series of 18 paintings that were shown at the celebrated Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. These paintings (particularly *Ocean Park Series #8* in the Norton Simon Museum's collection) have been an important touchstone for later artists. Monique Prieto has spoken specifically about the impact of his work: "The sequential—almost pictographic—forms strewn across that white expanse struck me as hallucinatory, as though I were looking at an alternate-dimensional reality of a usually familiar scene...I think part of the revelation was #8's distinct 'West Coast' dialect of abstract expressionism... Remarkably, #8 captures not only the light and space, but also the hedonistic air of Los Angeles redefining itself."

In *Untitled* (1964), Altoon skewers the press's depiction of Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, while simultaneously pairing him with Edgar Rice Burroughs's fictional character, Tarzan. The drooping moustache on Tarzan harkens to Altoon's own visage, speaking to the drawing's complexity and ambiguity.

In 1966 Altoon made a lithographic portfolio inspired by the poems of Robert Creeley, whom the artist met in New York in the early 1950s. LACMA's deluxe version of the portfolio, *About Women* (1965–66), includes one original drawing, *Untitled* (1966). This drawing reflects figuration lapping into abstraction and vice versa. On its own, *Untitled* could be seen as pure organic abstraction. As part of *About Women*, however, the forms read as a female figure moving to the right with crown-like hair spreading out behind her (an auburn-haired seductress who calls to mind 19th-century Pre-Raphaelite beauties); rounded blue head, torso, or breast; pink-nailed fingers or toes; one stick leg; and a purple circular foot.

The 1960s were a banner decade for women's rights in the United States, and it was during this period that Altoon made many images that reflected on the feminist movement. In the drawing *Untitled* (1966), a male figure is tethered on a short leash and appears to be literally and figuratively at the end of his rope; he is monitored by a female brandishing a stick. Both sexes are depicted as hybrids: the male has a human head and animal body, while the female is its inverse. The male's tongue hangs out in exhaustion and defeat as the female's lolls in eager expectation. In the background, a couple sits in a sailboat; the woman smiles wryly while the man's head recalls Edvard Munch's *The Scream*.

About the Artist

Born in Los Angeles on November 5, 1925 to Armenian-immigrant parents, John Altoon was raised in Glendale, California, and began his art studies at Otis Art Institute. His schooling was interrupted by service in the US Navy during World War II, after which he came back to Los Angeles, reenrolling at Otis. Soon thereafter Altoon transferred to the Art Center School (now Art Center College of Design) to study commercial illustration. He worked sporadically in advertising during his Art Center years, but ultimately transferred to Chouinard Art Institute (predecessor to California Institute of the Arts) to study fine art. After Chouinard, Altoon lived briefly in Santa Barbara, where he had his first solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Following stints in New York and in Europe, Altoon returned to Southern California and became affiliated with Ferus Gallery; his work was included in the gallery's opening show in March 1957 and in subsequent solo and group exhibitions. A beloved figure in the Los Angeles art community, Altoon died unexpectedly of a heart attack in 1969.

Catalogue

The 136-page exhibition catalogue—the first major book on the artist's career—is co-published with DelMonico Books/Prestel. This publication reproduces many previously undocumented works and includes a historical and analytical essay by exhibition curator Carol S. Eliel, a distinctive text by artist Paul McCarthy, and statements by artists Monica Majoli, Laura Owens, Monique Prieto, and Barbara T. Smith.

Credit

This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University. The exhibition was supported in part by the Fellows of Contemporary Art and the Kimmel Family. Additional support was provided by the Clinton Hill/Allen Tran Foundation.

Image Captions:

(Left): John Altoon, *Ocean Park Series #8*, 1962, oil on canvas, 81 1/2 × 84 inches, Norton Simon Museum, anonymous gift, © 2014 Estate of John Altoon

(Center): John Altoon, *Untitled*, 1964, lettering by Ed Ruscha, ink, pastel, and airbrushing on illustration board, 60 x 40 inches, Private Collection, courtesy Cecilia Dan Fine Art, © 2014 Estate of John Altoon, photo by Jon Gordon, courtesy Cecilia Dan Fine Art

(Right): John Altoon, *Untitled*, 1966, from the portfolio *About Women*, 1965-66, pastel on paper, 19 x 19 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. David Gensburg, © 2014 Estate of John Altoon, photo © 2014 Museum Associates/ LACMA

About LACMA

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, in addition to representing Los Angeles's uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection that includes over 120,000 objects dating from antiquity to the present, encompassing the geographic world and nearly the entire history of art. Among the museum's strengths are its holdings of Asian art, Latin American art, ranging from pre-Columbian masterpieces to works by leading modern and contemporary artists; and Islamic art, of which LACMA hosts one of

the most significant collections in the world. A museum of international stature as well as a vital part of Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collections through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over a million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions through digital initiatives, such as online collections, scholarly catalogues, and interactive engagement at lacma.org. Situated in Hancock Park on over 20 acres in the heart of Los Angeles, LACMA is located between the ocean and downtown.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

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