

John Altoon

The short career of John Altoon unfolded largely in Los Angeles, from the early 1950s until his untimely death in 1969. Trained in fine art as well as commercial illustration, Altoon used both abstract and figurative vocabularies in his paintings and drawings. Some of his works demonstrate affinities with Abstract Expressionism; others adopt the style of advertising while incorporating erotically charged imagery and sociopolitical content. Altoon's lack of a singular, definitive mode may have seemed problematic in the wake of painters like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, whose signature styles were instantly recognizable, but it presages the work of Postmodernists such as Gerhard Richter who move fluidly between abstraction and figuration.

Born in Los Angeles in 1925, Altoon studied here before moving in 1951 to New York, at that time the international center of contemporary art. A grant in 1954 allowed him to travel to Europe, where he was artistically productive but fell prey to severe depression. He returned to Los Angeles in 1956 and quickly became affiliated with the renowned Ferus Gallery, which exhibited his work from 1957 to 1963.

Well known within L.A. art circles, Altoon has always been an "artists' artist." Contemporaries such as Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, Frank Gehry, Robert Irwin, Ed Ruscha, and Barbara T. Smith recall his remarkable facility as a draftsman and his engaging, charismatic personality. Although younger artists have had limited opportunities to see Altoon's work, it has nonetheless resonated significantly with many of them, including Monica Majoli, Paul McCarthy, Laura Owens, Monique Prieto, and Charlie White, among others.

Altoon and Women

Women played an essential role in Altoon's life and art. Between 1958 and 1962 he had a tumultuous relationship and marriage with actress Fay Spain, and in 1965 he married Roberta (Babs) Lunine, who by all accounts was a stabilizing and supportive influence. Altoon's two marriages spanned the 1960s, a banner decade for women's rights in the United States with milestones including the marketing of the first oral contraceptive (the Pill) in 1960; the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963; the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which among other things prohibited discrimination based on gender); and the founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966.

It was during this period that Altoon made many images of women that—almost counterintuitively, given his macho reputation—can be read through the lens of feminism. In several, women physically and psychologically dominate men, defying 1960s expectations of gender stereotypes. In others, their roles are ambiguous. Although Altoon's works often feature frank sexual imagery, the women in his compositions are anything but passive objects.

Altoon and Pop Art

Given his training as a commercial artist, it is not surprising that Altoon's work has much in common with Pop Art. Like Andy Warhol (who was only three years younger), Altoon began his career as a professional illustrator and adopted imagery from advertising into his own art. The tone of the two artists' work differs distinctly, however. While Warhol's appropriation of commercial imagery tends to be reverent and cerebral, Altoon's riffs are usually satirical and visceral.

In addition to his advertising satires—which are clearly informed by his training in commercial illustration—Altoon also made drawings in a very different style that focus on everyday objects. Rather than the parallel lines and cross-hatching traditionally used in illustration, these drawings employ what fellow Ferus Gallery artist Ed Moses has called “an active, scratchy, searching line” in ink along with, at various times, airbrushing, pastels, and watercolors. The subject matter of these later works includes the artist's striped pants, a figure sitting in front of a roller skate, a broken jar of Smucker's jam, and a can of motor oil spilling its contents. All of these images also depict an oversize phallus intruding on the activities of daily life. Although Altoon's work is more overtly sexual in content, this aggrandizement of the ordinary recalls 1960s sculptures and drawings by Claes Oldenburg, whom Altoon had known and admired.