Connecting the Pieces: John Altoon's *Ocean Park Series* Fragments

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Abstract: In 1962, the artist John Altoon (1925-1969) produced a series of large-scale paintings named after his studio location—the Ocean Park neighborhood of Venice, California. The legendary Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles first exhibited the series later that year. Altoon had schizophrenia and, throughout his adult life, battled periods of extreme psychosis. In 1964, during a psychotic episode triggered by the disease, Altoon went into the Ferus gallery storeroom and slashed some of the eighteen *Ocean Park Series* canvases. After the artist's death, fragments of the slashed paintings entered the commercial art market. The fact that they were pieces of larger compositions was either unknown or undisclosed. When considered with the seven extant autonomous *Ocean Park Series* paintings, the fragments are a case study for issues of artistic intent, institutional stewardship, and conservation of damaged artworks.

Keywords: *John Altoon, Ferus Gallery, painting conservation, painting fragments, Abstract Expressionism*

Introduction

The artist John Altoon (1925-1969) was much-loved in the Los Angeles art community of the 1960s. He was a core member of the now legendary Ferus Gallery, where he had three solo exhibitions between 1958 and 1963 that led to immediate recognition and acclaim for his abstract expressionist paintings. Irving Blum, the proprietor of the Ferus Gallery, said of Altoon, "If the gallery was closest in spirit to a single person, that person was John Altoon—dearly loved, defiant, romantic, highly ambitious—and slightly mad" (Krull 1996, 49).

Blum's description of Altoon as "slightly mad" refers to his mental illness—he had schizophrenia. During a psychotic episode triggered by the disease, Altoon went into the storeroom of the Ferus Gallery and slashed some of the eighteen large-scale canvases of his acclaimed *Ocean Park Series* (Barton 1980, 7). The event shocked the close-knit Los Angeles art community and has since been an oft-repeated tale. Nevertheless, an important question has gone unasked: what happened to the destroyed canvases?

Only seven paintings from the series are extant; black and white photographs document two others.[1] Seven additional paintings in Altoon's oeuvre are visually characteristic of the series but are atypically small. The alignment of color and form between these smaller works strongly suggests that they are fragments of the paintings Altoon slashed in 1964 (Figure 1). This paper chronicles the *Ocean Park Series* and provides evidence of the existence of several fragmented paintings. I argue that the fragments should not be considered or presented as autonomous pictures because doing so obscures their essential character as abstract self-portraits composed of mental images expressed as gestural ideograms. Furthermore, I propose approaches to their exhibition, conservation, and restoration to preserve the intent of the artist.

The article continues with Figure 1 on the following page



Fig. 1: Three *Ocean Park Series* fragments. Clockwise from top left, John Altoon, *Untitled*, 1962, 32 x 38 in.; *Untitled*, 1962, 40 x 40 ¼ in.; *Untitled*, 1962, 30 x 32 in.; Laguna Art Museum. Photograph by the author at the museum's collection storage facility.

The Series's Origin and Title

At the beginning of 1962, Altoon moved to a studio in Venice, California. Within ten months, he had produced a series of eighteen paintings named after Pacific Ocean Park, a nearby nautical-themed amusement park. Later that year, in October, the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles exhibited the series (Nordland 1967, 11). By that time, Altoon already had a well-established reputation as an artist; the Ferus Gallery exhibition was his seventh with the gallery.

The *Ocean Park Series* paintings are notable for their exuberant colors and biomorphic forms which float within a white field, playfully straddling the line between figuration and abstraction. Each of these large-scale paintings is roughly

square—about 80 by 80 inches (Nordland 1984, 2). They are distinct in Altoon's oeuvre, diverging from the bold painterly marks which filled the entire canvas in his late 1950s and early 1960s abstractions. After this series, Altoon adopted a deeper-hued palette (forest green, blood red, deep purple, slate blue, or muddy brown) for the background of his next paintings, the *Hyperion* and *Sunset* series. Thus, the *Ocean Park Series* paintings are easily identifiable (see Figure 2).



Fig. 2: John Altoon, *Ocean Park Series #8*, 1962, oil on canvas, 81-½ x 84 in. (207 x 213.4 cm), Norton Simon Museum, Anonymous Gift. Copyright The Estate of John Altoon.

By the late 1950s, Altoon customarily referred to his paintings by the series title and its number, for example, the *Trip Series #8*, which he first exhibited at the *1960 Annual Exhibition Artists of Los Angeles and Vicinity* (Los Angeles County Museum 1960). Although the *Ocean Park Series* was not the first time that Altoon had used a series title to identify a group of paintings, it was the first time that the title referenced his studio location. The title signified more than a locale; it grouped his paintings and drawings into aesthetic statements rooted in a place—his

domestic and creative environment. The personal nature of the series title indicates an evident connection between the artwork and the artist himself.

Altoon further personalized the *Ocean Park Series* paintings by boldly scrawling his name and the date at the bottom of the canvas with the same gestural technique used in creating the objects in the paintings (see Figure 3).



Fig. 3: John Altoon, *Ocean Park Series #8*, 1962, oil on canvas, 81-½ x 84 in. (207 x 213.4 cm), Norton Simon Museum, Anonymous Gift (detail). Copyright The Estate of John Altoon.

The combination of his name, the date, and the title's reference to his creative environment suggests that the series has an "autobiographical dimension" (Bann 1985). By adding three self-referential elements, Altoon transformed abstracted forms into self-portraits based on mental images, as I will argue later in this paper.

Unlike their Ferus Gallery debut where they were untitled, subsequent exhibition catalogs and reviews referred to the paintings by the series title and number. *The Pacific Coast Invitational*, an exhibition organized by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, included two paintings from the series and was the first to list the *Ocean Park Series* title in the catalog (Santa Barbara Museum of Art 1962). The titles changed when the invitational traveled to five other museums. A marked-up exhibition checklist in the archive of the San Francisco Museum of Art (now the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) includes handwritten notes appending "#4" and "#8" to the typewritten title *Untitled, Ocean Park Series* (San Francisco Museum of Art 1963). Early in 1963, *Art in America* magazine and *Artforum* magazine featured

illustrations captioned *No. 5 Ocean Park Series* and *#6 Ocean Park Series*, respectively (Langsner 1963; Monte 1963). It is unclear what prompted the change in the title of the *Ocean Park Series*. Still, it is safe to conclude that Altoon was involved in the alteration because he had previously similarly identified his other abstract paintings.

There is no extant checklist of the 1962 Ferus Gallery exhibition, but it is unlikely that the title numbers correspond to such a list. It is more likely that the numbers indicate the order in which Altoon created the paintings, a conventional method used by other artists working and exhibiting in Los Angeles at that time. For example, John McLaughlin, the elder statesman of Los Angeles painters, titled his paintings using a number indicating the order of completion during a given year (e.g., *#9, 1959*). Correcting the titles after the exhibition opening was feasible because the artworks were recent; Altoon could have easily recalled the order in which he created the paintings. After the Ferus show, as the gallery loaned his paintings to other museum exhibitions and provided images for publication, Altoon would have had the opportunity to assign his paintings the numbers used in catalogs and reviews.

Before the artist's death, there was no published reference to a number for some artworks in the series, such as the paintings in the collections of the Orange County Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Also, there are slight variations in the published titles of some numbered paintings. For example, in some instances, the number precedes the series name, and in others, it follows (e.g., *#6 Ocean Park Series* versus *Ocean Park Series #6*). To accommodate the various title configurations of all the paintings in the series, I will adopt the titling convention used in the catalog for the artist's first and only museum retrospective before his passing. I identify the paintings as *Ocean Park Series*, followed by the painting number if known (e.g., *Ocean Park Series #12*).

Identifying the autonomous paintings and the fragments by the series, rather than referring to them as *Untitled*, is critical because of their autobiographical nature. Disconnecting the pictures from their place of origin—the artist's creative

environment—omits a central aspect of their meaning. This has happened with two of the larger fragments; *Ocean Park Series #5* and *Ocean Park Series #6* were frequently exhibited as *Untitled* despite published accounts of their series title and numbers. In addition, through fragmentation, these paintings lost their connection to the *Ocean Park Series* and, thus, their identity as manifestations of Altoon's psyche.

Destruction and Damage

Despite immediate acclaim and recognition, Altoon slashed many of the canvases during a psychotic episode. While this incident was notorious in the Los Angeles art community, the fragmented condition of the paintings he had damaged was unknown. The conflicting accounts of Altoon's destructive act have led to an assumption that the damaged paintings were obliterated. Reconciling the narratives, which I detail later in this paper, with Altoon's mental state can help identify the paintings that he had damaged while reconnecting the fragments.

Altoon battled periods of extreme psychosis. In the early 1960s, Dr. Milton Wexler, a prominent Los Angeles psychologist, diagnosed Altoon with schizophrenia, a neurodevelopmental disorder with symptoms including illogical thinking and impulsive behavior (Nordland 1984, 1; National Institutes of Health). People with schizophrenia are not necessarily violent or prone to aggressive acts—such as destroying paintings—but erratic behavior induced by hallucinations or paranoia is common. In other words, Altoon's act of destruction was likely unplanned and involuntary. His close-knit group of artist friends was anxious about his mental health. When they brought him to Wexler for treatment, he threatened to damage their art as well as his own.

Wexler recalled that a group of Altoon's friends carried him into the office after Altoon "threatened to destroy every last art production on display in every gallery" on La Cienega Boulevard, the nexus of art activity in Los Angeles during the 1960s. Wexler went on to recall that "the beautiful and delicate boxes created by Larry Bell were on exhibition and it would have taken John hardly thirty seconds to wipe out years of dedicated and creative work" (Hales and Davies 1997, 11). This anecdote

dates Altoon's introduction to Wexler to November 1963 when Bell first exhibited his glass cubes at the Ferus Gallery (Bernstein, Varnedoe, and Gagosian Gallery 2009, 60).

Contradicting Wexler's account, Robert Creeley, a poet and a life-long friend of Altoon, recalled that Altoon destroyed paintings from the later *Harper Series* of 1966. Though, when writing about the incident later on, Creeley conceded that "I can't trust my memory of the time pattern" (Hales and Davies 1997, 16). Contrarily, Bell dates the destruction to 1960 after he helped Altoon move into a studio next door. Shortly after that, he recalled that "John went off the deep end and decided that the best thing for me would be if he destroyed all my work." However, rather than destroying Bell's work, Altoon damaged his own (Hales and Davies 1997, 7). The 1960 destruction date has been often cited in writings about Altoon, which is likely because the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's exhibition *John Altoon* and its catalog—the source of Bell's quote—is still the most complete source of information on the artist (Duncan 2012, 66; McKenna 2009, 20). However, if the destruction at the Ferus storeroom occurred in 1960, as Bell recalled, Altoon would not have destroyed the *Ocean Park Series* paintings created two years later in 1962.

This episode was not Altoon's first mental breakdown. While living in Spain, he suffered extreme depression and severe psychosis. In 1956, his brother traveled to Europe and brought him back to Los Angeles to recover (Eliel 2014, 56). Subsequently, Altoon was hospitalized for at least two other psychotic episodes (Nordland 1984, 1). In May 1963, he was admitted to Camarillo State Mental Hospital for several months (McKenna 2009, 267). That tumultuous year ended with his friends bringing him to Wexler's office for treatment. The conflicting accounts of Altoon's destructive act and his mental illness contributed to the confusion about the date when the paintings were damaged. The most conclusive evidence for establishing a proper timeline comes from the paintings themselves.

The fragments of two works lent to traveling exhibitions by the Ferus Gallery around the time of Altoon's breakdown in 1963 help establish the date the damage occurred. The gallery

submitted *Ocean Park Series #5* to the *Pacific Coast Invitational* in 1962, which opened at the Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, before subsequently traveling to four other museums (Smith 1963, 8; Santa Barbara Museum of Art 1962). After the exhibition concluded at the Portland Art Museum in June of 1963, the museum returned Altoon's paintings and drawings to the Ferus Gallery (San Francisco Museum of Art 1963). Therefore, by sometime in late June or early July of 1963, *Ocean Park #5* was already back in the gallery's storeroom.

Three fragments of another painting also assist in determining when the series was damaged. The Whitney Museum of American Art included two paintings, *Ocean Park Series #12* and another of unknown number, in the exhibition *Fifty California Artists* from October 23 until December 2, 1962. After closing at the Whitney, the exhibition traveled to three other museums. Some of the paintings exhibited at the Whitney did not travel to the other venues. *Ocean Park Series #12*, which was illustrated in the exhibition catalog, went to all four venues. The other painting, identified as *Untitled* and not illustrated in the catalog, appeared in a photograph in the *Philadelphia Tribune* taken during the Whitney show (see Figure 4).



Fig. 4: Left: *Philadelphia Tribune*, 1963 showing *Untitled (Ocean Park Series)* painting at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Right: John Altoon, *Untitled*, 1962, oil on canvas, 40 x 40-¼ in., Laguna Art Museum (detail).

In the photo, a female model poses beside the painting in the Whitney galleries. The caption reads, "Romantic Victorian rose-printed silk short dinner dress, wrapped at the waist with a soft sash–from the Harvey Berin Spring 1963 collection…. Photographed in New York at the Whitney Museum against a painting 'Untitled' by John Altoon lent by the Feris Gallery [sic], Los Angeles" (Philadelphia Tribune 1963). Only about two feet of the painting's right edge is visible in the photograph; however, its shapes—a pink "claw" grasping a striped, rock-like form, and a cloud-like green mass—unmistakably identify it as a portion of the now fragmented painting, which is in the collection of the Laguna Art Museum. The Whitney returned this painting to the Ferus Gallery sometime between the exhibition's closing date in December and its opening at the next venue in February 1963. Therefore, this places two of Altoon's damaged paintings in the Ferus storeroom by June of 1963.

The final clue to the date of destruction comes from *Artforum*. An essay published in the magazine during the summer of 1964 about abstract expressionism in Los Angeles illustrates *Ocean Park Series #6* (Figure 5, Hopkins 1964).

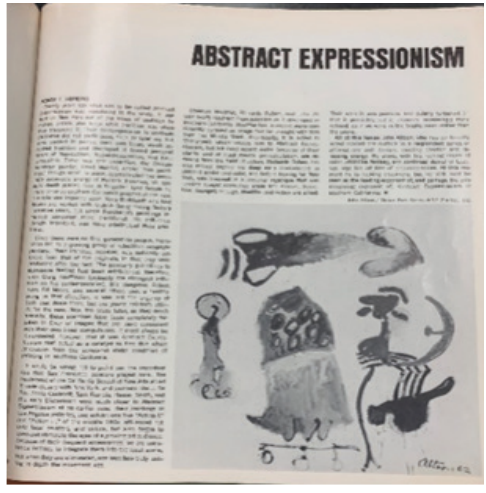


Fig. 5: *Artforum* 1963, illustration of *Ocean Park #6*, 1962 (misidentified as *Ocean Park #7*).

Altoon later slashed that painting; a fragment of the lower two-thirds of the canvas is now in the Laguna Art Museum collection. Had Altoon damaged the canvas earlier than mid-1964, it is unlikely that the gallery would have provided the magazine with an image of an unsaleable painting for it would have negated the marketing opportunity. Moreover, the image caption does not credit a gallery, so it is unclear who submitted the picture. In 1964, Altoon left the Ferus Gallery and moved to the competing David Stuart Gallery. Given the date of publication, the Ferus Gallery most likely still represented Altoon before the issue went to the press since his first exhibition at David Stuart opened in May 1964 (Barton 1980, 16). Although circumstantial, this evidence strongly suggests that the notorious incident involving Altoon's destructive actions towards his paintings occurred in early 1964.

If Altoon broke into the Ferus storeroom and severely damaged his paintings, that act could have strained his relationship with Blum, prompting Altoon's move to another dealer. Stuart, Altoon's dealer after Ferus, attributed the move to the fact that "Blum refused to show the 'Vogue Satires' drawings." Although Stuart was aware of Altoon's mental illness, he may have been willing to overlook the issue because Altoon was already undergoing medical treatment. According to Stuart, Altoon was at times "so depressed that he couldn't work," but under the care of Wexler, he "leveled off and was quite himself until the day he died" (Barton 1980, 16). This timeline implies that Altoon had been under Wexler's care by the time he damaged some of the *Ocean Park Series* paintings.

Establishing the date of Altoon's destructive act confirms which series he had damaged, but it does not identify the factors that contributed to his actions. Did the symptoms of schizophrenia cause Altoon to slash his paintings, or was there some other cause? For example, artists sometimes destroy their own work as an act of repudiation or catharsis. Altoon's mental health is key to determining if the paintings were damaged under duress or as an act of disavowal by the artist. His intent provides insight into whether the fragments should be considered part of the artist's oeuvre.

One possible alternative explanation is that he destroyed the paintings as a critique. Did Altoon slash his paintings because he judged them to be of poor quality, like Claude Monet who, in 1907, destroyed thirty canvases he deemed not worth developing (Spate 1992, 258)? There is no account from Altoon, published or otherwise, describing his judgment of the series. However, he was involved in organizing an exhibition of his work at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1967, which featured three *Ocean Park Series* paintings including one used as the cover image of the catalog (Nordland 1967). Shortly after the show opened, writing to a friend in his journal, he mentioned the "strong reception" of the show with no indication of dissatisfaction with the selection of pictures (John Altoon art work and papers). From this anecdotal evidence, it is possible to infer that Altoon considered the series to be significant.

The critical reception of the series was almost universally positive except for an *Artforum* review—which described the paintings as "coarse jokes," alluding to their sexually suggestive forms—and a *San Francisco Examiner* critic who referred to them as "infantile, gaga abstractions" (McClellan 1962; Frankenstein 1963). The two negative reviews could not have outweighed the many positive critiques. Gerald Nordland, writing in *Arts Magazine*—a national publication with a wider circulation than *Artforum* in the early 1960s—provided a glowing review of the series's introduction at the Ferus Gallery. Of Altoon's artistic skill, Nordland wrote, "his is a supple grace that brings these strange forms and animated color-areas to life with a buoyant vitality" (Nordland 1962). A later, second review in *Artforum* described the series as "a rare achievement in directness and untrammeled innocence. Like explosive shouts of laughter (in the aftermath, who knows, of unbearable tears and pain)" (Smith 1963). Another review, written about the Whitney Museum's *Fifty California Artists* exhibition, also published in *Artforum*, stated that "the erotic imagery of John Altoon makes for the funniest and best painting of aggressive goo-goo eyed lust and self-gratification" (Bogat 1963). Based solely on critical reception, Altoon would have no reason to repudiate the work and destroy it.

Considering the conservative environment of Los

Angeles in the early 1960s, paintings with sexual imagery would have challenged the tastes of the art-buying public, especially given the small collector base for contemporary art at the time. Nevertheless, at least two collectors purchased large *Ocean Park Series* canvases before Altoon damaged his paintings. The Pasadena Art Museum (now the Norton Simon Museum) received *Ocean Park #8* as a gift from an anonymous donor in 1964, and Dr. and Mrs. Eugene Ziskind acquired *Ocean Park #12* in 1962 and shortly thereafter donated it to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Both donors likely purchased the paintings from Altoon's 1962 Ferus Gallery exhibition. Rather than retreating from sexual imagery, his next large body of work which was a series of figurative drawings, became even more explicit. Commenting on the new work, Altoon wrote, "I am currently working on a series of sexual phantasy things—I am going to show them in a month—I will really be sticking my neck out in a way, but I am going full ahead anyway" (John Altoon art work and papers). These are not the words of a man who destroyed his paintings solely because they did not meet standards of social acceptability. He was intent on continuing in this direction regardless of the critical and market reception.

If he did not destroy the canvases because of their quality or acceptance, then was it an act of catharsis? Less than a decade after Altoon's destructive action, fellow Californian John Baldessari burned all his formative works in his studio at a local crematorium to signal a new direction for his work (Morgan and Jones 2009, 50). Could Altoon have had a similar motivation? Destruction as a means of renewal seems unlikely since he had painted the series only one year earlier. Slashing early paintings that were no longer representative of his artistic motivations is conceivable, but for Altoon to destroy recent, critically acclaimed, museum-worthy work is improbable.

Baldessari's systematic process of incineration—a conceptual artwork later titled the "Cremation Project"—plays on the stereotype of the crazy artist. Unlike Baldessari, Altoon's uncontrolled and unintended act was a product of mental illness. Therefore, the paintings should be considered fragmented, damaged artworks in need of conservation and not pictures that

the artist intended to disavow.

There are seven known *Ocean Park Series* fragments: pieces of *Ocean Park Series #5* and *#6*; three untitled paintings in the Laguna Art Museum collection; a fragment in the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego collection; and an untitled fragment now held in a private collection.[1] Presenting the fragments as autonomous paintings, as in recent exhibitions, detracts from a proper evaluation of the artist's oeuvre (Eliel 2014). For example, the top and left-hand side of *Ocean Park Series #5* is severely cropped, negating the intended free-floating forms and obscuring the color harmonies, which will be further analyzed later in this paper. By misrepresenting a piece as a whole, the viewers cannot understand the artist's intentions. Furthermore, the misidentified fragments diminish the artist's reputation since judging an artist by fragments of their complete works is not only misleading but also detrimental. The three small paintings in the Laguna Art Museum collection are good examples of pictures that are minor and unresolved when taken individually. However, if they were combined into three-fourths of a whole, the viewer could observe a connection among the forms. Identifying the fragments as incomplete paintings will allow for proper analysis and appreciation of arguably Altoon's best work.

Making and Meaning

With the *Ocean Park Series*, Altoon changed his paint application technique from daubing, wiping, and scraping with a brush or palette knife to spontaneous wriggles, squiggles, splashes, and drips. His paintings from late 1950s were informed by "action painting"—famously described by the art critic Harold Rosenberg as an "event" resulting from the material encounter of paint and canvas (Rosenberg 1959). The style was popular during the late 1950s among Los Angeles artists who followed the lead of the New York School painters, such as Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. In Altoon's paintings, the gestural paint application is evidence of the physical act of the paint brush dragging across the canvas, manifesting forms that reference a dream-like scene of the mind.

Although he was the same age as some of the first-

generation abstract expressionist painters of the New York School, such as Joan Mitchell (both were born in 1925), Altoon painted his breakthrough series in 1962—a year that coincided with the rise of Pop art. Three months before the *Ocean Park Series* debut, Andy Warhol had his first show at the Ferus Gallery featuring thirty-two paintings of Campbell's soup cans (McKenna 2009, 247). Since Altoon's breakthrough occurred in Los Angeles, not New York, and at the same period as the ascent of Pop art, he was excluded from the history of abstract expressionism.

Altoon did not make preparatory drawings for his paintings. He was, however, trained as a commercial draftsman and frequently used illustration boards or paper to create paintings with water-based paint or ink. In 1961, the quasi-natural forms of the *Ocean Park Series* began to appear in his works on illustration boards as simple compositions of separate, free-floating color forms with a bright, high-key palette. These drawings and paintings on the illustration boards are the genesis of the biomorphic forms floating on a white ground, which reached an apex the following year as Altoon moved to his Ocean Park studio.

Andrea Halls, the curator of Altoon's 1977 retrospective exhibition, attributes the biomorphic forms to automatism and free association, a technique of dream analysis used by Freudian psychoanalysts like Wexler in their therapeutic practices. The procedure involves the therapist asking hypnotized patients what ideas or "associations" come to them in their "dream" state (Hales and Davies 1997; Freud 1935, 94).

Surrealist automatism, the process of making art by suppressing conscious thought, influenced Altoon's transition from gestural abstraction to abstract biomorphic form. Altoon lived in New York City from 1951 to 1955 when abstract expressionism was the dominant mode of painting (Hales and Davies 1997, 12). He found "intrigue and puzzlement" in the work of Arshile Gorky whose paintings were seminal to the development of abstract expressionism (Nordland 1984, 2). The art critic Barbara Rose described Altoon's paintings as "Disneyland surrealism" derived "equally from Gorky" and the Southern California theme park (Rose 1966, 111). He may have been thinking about paintings

such as Gorky's *Garden in Sochi* (ca. 1943)—which has abstract forms on a white ground—when Altoon moved away from gestural abstraction; however, the paintings are not derivative. Altoon transformed Gorky's "clustered biomorphism" into expressive forms that manifest the act of creation: splatters of paint and dashes of color fly across the canvas (Anfam 2016, 21). The paintings are unworked and spontaneous, almost slapdash. Gestural marks create distinctly separate forms that interact through touching extremities and torqued positions that imply interconnectedness, tension, and action (e.g., Figure 2, *Ocean Park Series, #8)*.

Since Altoon underwent years of Freudian analysis to treat his schizophrenia, it is logical to use psychoanalytic theory to analyze his artwork. Ernst Gombrich, the eminent art historian and author of *Art and Illusion, A Study of the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, observed that "confusion and ambiguity are the characteristics of the dream," a state of mind upon which psychoanalysis relies. Gombrich continued (1985, 234), "if you could induce such a state, you might open the gates of the psyche to the unnamed and the unnamable." Having undergone hypnosis repeatedly, Altoon understood the dream state and manifested images of his psyche onto canvas.

With the *Ocean Park Series*, he exorcised his repressed feelings about sex and violence, concerns that frequently recurred in his figurative drawings. Two of Altoon's sketches serve as exemplars of how sex and violence were primal themes in his work. In one of the sketches, a flaccid, dismembered penis lies in a pool of gasoline with a nearby lit match threatening destruction. In the other, a man holds a gun to his head with one hand and uses the other to masturbate his erect penis while looking away from a picture of a couple engaged in sexual intercourse (Figure 6). The gentleman's striped shirt is strikingly similar to the clothes that Altoon wore in many photographs. The existence of these drawings in his sketchbook, which he used like a diary, suggests that his artwork, such as the *Ocean Park Series*, contains autobiographical content.

The article continues with Figure 6 on the following page



Fig. 6: John Altoon, pencil on sketchpad paper. John Altoon Art Work and Papers, circa 1940-1969, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Central to Freudian psychology is the fear of emasculation, known as castration anxiety (Freud 1935). The free-floating phalluses in Altoon's drawings and paintings, such as the gray, phallus-shaped object in *Ocean Park Series #8*, speak directly to Altoon's use of art as a tool to understand himself. When the sexual iconography is cut away or missing from the pictures, as it is in the fragments, we are unable to understand them as statements of sex and violence—two aspects of Altoon's nature with which he struggled.

The semi-abstracted forms in Altoon's paintings have led to a literal interpretation of the series title. For example, a didactic panel accompanying the Norton Simon Museum's painting reads:

> *Ocean Park Series #8*, although abstract and seemingly spontaneous, is actually a unique view of the California coast. Although painting on a two dimensional canvas, Altoon depicts a landscape's depth in the way that the fore-, middle-, and

> backgrounds are all included in the composition. Broad, gestural strokes reveal the yellow and orange rays of the sun streaming down over blue and white cresting ocean waves that crash onto the brown landscape on which green vegetation grows.

This description proposes that the painting depicts an oceanside park landscape; however, the white ground of the canvas flattens the composition, contrary to what the description suggests. None of the forms recede behind or advance in front of another. Another problem with this narrative is that the black and grey phallus-shaped form in the upper right corner is unexplained by the description of a sunny day at the beach. The black phallus with a grey scrotum is indicative of Altoon's sexualized iconography. Ejaculating from its tip, a stream of black paint splatters into a yellow circle intersected by diagonal, vertical, and horizontal yellow and black lines. The "blue and white cresting wave" could also be seen as a heart toppled on its side and pierced by a long, blue spike. Smears of white paint and blue drips, like blood running from an open wound, obscure the pale pink heart (see Figure 2). All his forms, like the blue-green daubs of color at the lower right, can be any number of objects—a jumping dolphin or a cactus to name two—reinforcing the dream-like nature of the series.

Although I do not agree with the museum's characterization of the painting as an oceanside park, one of the joys of the *Ocean Park Series* paintings is their openness to interpretation, an aspect acknowledged by other artists. For example, Laura Owens describes how Altoon makes "an incidental squiggly mark that never fully develops into depicting anything, but is itself an object" (Eliel 2014, 26). The familiar yet mystifying shapes invite contemplation and wonderment. However, even when the forms are not overtly sexual, they are smashed up, joined, or pierced, alluding to sexual coupling and further enhancing their dynamic energy.

The fragments do not have the energy and cohesion of the complete paintings, which is why it is crucial to identify them as

fragments rather than autonomous pictures. *Ocean Park Series #6* is a good example as the top third of the painting is lost. The missing fragment included a phallic-shaped "rocket"—two thick hash marks exude from the base like contrails—on the verge of touching its tip to a heart-shaped, vulva-like shape (see Figure 7).



Fig. 7: Photographic reconstruction of *Ocean Park Series #6*, 1962, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, Laguna Art Museum. Extant fragment shown in color with the missing section in black and white.

The lost forms diminish the exuberance of the complete work. Fragmentation also reduces the negative space, cramming the remaining forms—possibly a burning candle, a jellyfish hovering above a three-wheeled skateboard, a long-stemmed green vegetal form, an orange crescent, and four parallel red squiggles extruding from a two-handled pot—within the space of the smaller canvas. Color harmony is interrupted in the fragmented paintings because each form is a different hue. The interrelation of each element relies on sophisticated coloration which is altered by the missing objects. As a result, the painting fragments lack the intended forms and colors.

Pentimenti—elements that were painted over by the artist

yet are still visible—are present in every painting. The painted-over elements usually affect color not form. For example, in the autonomous painting *Ocean Park Series #8*, the giant purple heart-shape in the center of the canvas was initially pink (see figure 2). Altoon then painted over parts of the pink with an earthen brown. In turn, he painted over the lower brown section with dark blue lines, swirls, and drips, and the upper section with white. The blue paint overlays the pink creating purple. In contrast, the missing piece of *Ocean Park Series #5* diminishes the compositional color harmony. The slashed canvas is missing a large area of bright purple, a compliment to the yellow, which harmonizes with the secondary colors orange and green (see Figure 8).



Fig. 8: Photographic reconstruction of *Ocean Park Series #5*, 1962, oil on canvas, 78 x 79 inches. Extant fragment shown in color with the missing section in black and white.

In a handwritten note regarding the legacy that Altoon left behind, the artist Billy Al Bengston wrote, "he was his work, and his work was him" (Billy Al Bengston papers). Examining the existing fragments and the known missing pieces provide valuable information about what was lost when Altoon slashed his paintings. Without those fragments, Altoon's self-portraits of the mind become more blurry than his dream-like and colorful free-floating forms.

Conservation or Restoration of the Fragments

The fragments are incomplete works of art that pose questions about classification and stewardship. Developing a standard practice of stewardship is problematic because four different private and public collections own the fragmented paintings. All of the fragments, including the ones held by museums and the two held by private collections, previously belonged to the prominent art collectors Ruth and Murray Gribin.

The Gribins were generous donors to many Southern California museums including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Hammer Museum, the Laguna Art Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Before Murray's death in 2011—his wife passed away before him—they gave over three hundred artworks to museums.

A document in the Laguna Art Museum's accession file indicates that the Gribins purchased at least one of the *Ocean Park Series* paintings from Altoon's estate. Their earliest gift of an *Ocean Park Series* painting to a museum occurred in 2001 when the Gribins donated the four fragments now in the Laguna collection. This chronology establishes that the works would have been acquired from the estate sometime between 1969 and 2001. Over thirty years, it is likely the history of the damaged paintings was lost and that the Gribins were unaware they were fragments when they purchased them. It is also possible that the seven fragments and one undamaged painting they bought were the only *Ocean Park Series* works remaining in the estate. Therefore, considering that all the fragments came from one collection, it is improbable that additional fragments will surface.

What is the best way to document and conserve the fragments assuming no others are found? Since not enough missing pieces have yet resurfaced to reconstruct a painting, artworks by other artists in a similar fragmented state can provide case studies of the best practices for classification and preservation. According to Tim Whalen, the Getty Conservation Institute's director, the preferred practice among institutions that handle cultural objects is "the stabilization of an object and the protection of that which exists, as opposed to the replacement of that which is now missing" (Whalen 2019). Therefore, restoration

of the fragments may not be an appropriate approach to preserving Altoon's work.

Two well-known paintings by other artists provide examples of preferred conservation and exhibition practices. Edouard Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian* was cut into pieces that were later purchased and reassembled by Edgar Degas while Vittore Carpaccio's *Hunting on the Lagoon* is half of a painting that had been sawed apart.

Manet began painting his second version of *The Execution of Maximilian* in 1867, and at the time of his death in 1883, the painting appears to have been intact. According to the French art dealer Ambroise Vollard who altered his story on various occasions, the previous owner cut it and "used the head of Maximilian to light the fire" (Adler 1986). Vollard sold the four fragments to Degas, and the National Gallery in London purchased them from Degas's estate in 1918, combining them onto one canvas in 1992 (National Gallery, London, n.d.). The museum arranged the fragments on a large piece of stretched linen approximating the original size and composition of the undamaged painting.

The Laguna Art Museum could use a similar solution to reconstruct the three fragments of an *Ocean Park Series* painting in their collection. By unframing and placing them on a single canvas, the painted portions that wrap around the sides of the stretchers would become visible, allowing viewers access to a better approximation of the original. Viewing the three paintings together outside their frames would provide a cohesive visual presentation that is not possible when they are framed separately. The composition and color relationships that Altoon intended would be restored, to the best degree possible, considering that the upper right section is still missing (Figure 9). However, this solution would only be beneficial to multi-fragment paintings.

The article continues with Figure 9 on the following page



Fig. 9: Photographic reconstruction of *Ocean Park Series*, 1962, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown from three fragments: *Untitled*, 1962, oil on canvas, 32 x 38 in.; *Untitled*, 1962, oil on canvas, 40 x 40-¼ in.; *Untitled*, 1962, oil on canvas, 30 x 32 in., Laguna Art Museum. The extant fragments are in color, the actual size of the original canvas in indicated by the grey background.

Vittore Carpaccio's *Hunting on the Lagoon*, now in the J. Paul Getty Museum collection, is a model for the exhibition and conservation of single fragments, such as *Ocean Park Series #5* and #6. There is no evidence about when, why, or who sawed the painting in half, but in centuries past, it was not uncommon for art dealers to cut large paintings into smaller pieces to maximize their profits (Norris 2007, 23). The division created two pictures of different settings, moods, and compositions. The top portion is a scene of six boats with archers hunting waterfowl in a Venetian lagoon. The only indication that something is amiss with the picture is a single, misplaced lily stem extending out from the lower left of the painting. Its presence is foreign to the waterscape, and its large size is out of proportion to the other objects in the background. In the original state of the painting, a vase—perched on a terrace balustrade of a Venetian palazzo on which two fashionable ladies sit—held the lily. The other half of the painting, now known as *Two Venetian Ladies*, is in

the collection of the Correr Museum in Venice. In 1962, Giles Robertson and Carlo Ragghianti proposed that the two paintings were halves of a whole, a hypothesis that has since been verified by scientific analysis (Norris 2007, 24).

The Getty's picture is on permanent display at the museum. Its didactic panel includes a statement that reads: "This sophisticated waterscape is the upper portion of a larger panel that was cut into two parts long ago." The panel also includes a photographic reconstruction of the painting with a red dashed line indicating the position of the division. Since museums in two different countries own the two halves, it is not possible to permanently rejoin the panels. Nevertheless, the paintings were temporarily brought together for an exhibition at the Correr Museum in 1999. By making the viewing public aware of the division and providing an image of the undamaged painting, the Getty offers information transparency and is a prime example of excellent stewardship of fragmented works of art.

Ocean Park Series #5 and *#6* could benefit from a similar plan. Identifying and exhibiting the paintings as fragments while providing photographic reconstructions (e.g., figures 7 and 8) would improve the accuracy and transparency of information given to the art-viewing public as well as facilitate the future identification of missing pieces. Exhibiting the paintings with images of their reconstructions would clarify their intended composition and original meaning. The images of the reconstructed paintings would illustrate the missing sexual iconographical elements and other forms which are critical to visualizing the dream state Altoon developed through free association and automatism.

Conclusion

Altoon's destructive act is legendary in Los Angeles's art history. Despite contradictory accounts, the evidence implies that Altoon slashed at least five of his *Ocean Park Series* paintings in early 1964. It was an act provoked by his mental illness, not an act of repudiation nor artistic catharsis. Altoon kept the fragments and never exhibited them, which suggests that he valued them, but considered them incomplete. Perhaps he was not able to

repair them or lacked the resources to do so. In any event, the fragments are damaged portions of a whole—not autonomous paintings. They should be exhibited and conserved in a manner that acknowledges their original state and preserves their essential character.

Even though *Ocean Park Series* pictures are abstract, their structural elements—color, form, proportion, and symmetry—combine to create a unified whole. When part of the composition is missing, as with the fragments, the pictures lack harmony and cohesion. Identifying the status of the fragments and removing them from consideration as autonomous paintings allow for a proper critical analysis of the series and Altoon's creative endeavor.

Documenting the complete history of the fragments and the autonomous paintings to which they belong serves two purposes. First, when exhibiting the fragments, sharing their status with the public allows them to be presented as the artist originally intended. Second, museums, scholars, and collectors will be able to better identify additional fragments if they surface in the future.

Biographies of Altoon remark that "some of the artist's best canvases were destroyed by him" (Tuchman and Livingston 1971). Only six of the eighteen *Ocean Park Series* paintings remain as a testament to his artistic achievement, which is a unique and significant contribution to American abstract expressionism. Altoon made mental self-portraits by combining dream-like imagery with self-referential elements, as denoted by the series title—a referent to Altoon's living and working space. If the incomplete fragments are not distinguished from the autonomous paintings, the free-floating forms which Altoon coalesced onto canvas to represent his inner turmoil become as enigmatic as a dream.

Endnotes

1. An image of the painting I identify as *Ocean Park #6* appeared in the May 1963 issue of *Artforum* as *#6*, *Ocean Park Series*. An image of the same painting later appeared in the Summer 1964 issue of Artforum as *Ocean Park Series #7*. Because the horizontal dimension of the complete painting identified as *#6* more closely matches the size of the fragment, I use that title to identify the painting.

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