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Alfonso Ossorio: A Shot of Painterly Heroin

by [Howard Hurst](#) on October 15, 2013



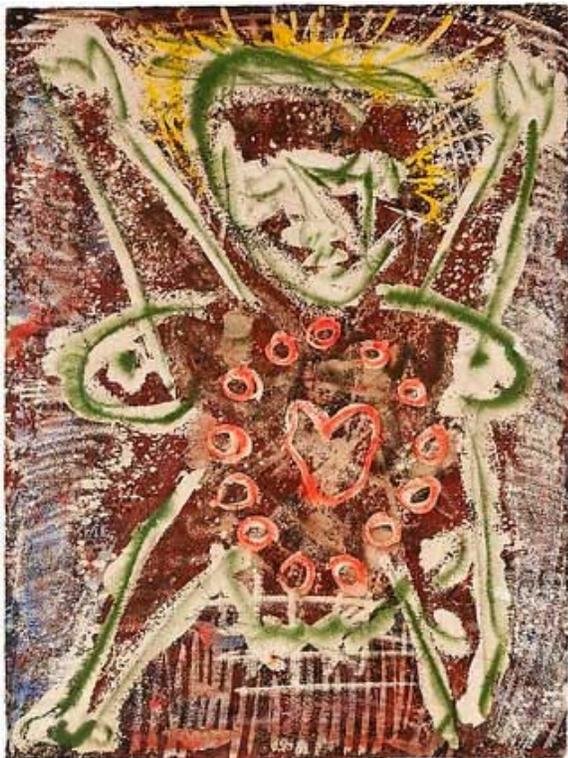
Alfonso Ossorio, "Beach Combers" (1953), oil on canvas, 84 3/8 x 144 3/8 in (all photos courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery)

When I first became aware of the work of [Alfonso Ossorio](#), it was through his off-the-wall (no pun intended) assemblages from the 1960s. Though they're extremely approachable, these works can also make one feel uneasy; they vibrate with the sort of psychedelic energy that marks that decade. However powerful they might be, though — and they are indeed a testament to the staying power of a lifetime dedicated to art — Ossorio is best known for his connection to the Abstract Expressionists. The exhibition [Angels, Demons, and Savages: Pollock, Ossorio, Dubuffet](#), organized by Klaus Ottmann and Dorothy Kosinski for the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC, and currently on view at the Parrish Art Museum in Watermill, Long Island, traces the fruitful connection Ossorio had to both Dubuffet and Pollock. In [his review](#) of the show, Hyperallergic's John Yau lamented:

The exhibition focuses on a five-year period, from 1948 to 1952, when these three very different artists enabled each other to change his work. I think the dates are slightly off; I would have begun at 1949, the year Ossorio changed his mind about Pollock's paintings, which he thought were too messy, and bought "Number 5 (1948)" (1948), the first of several major Pollocks that Ossorio would obtain. ("Number 5" was later owned by David Geffen, who sold it in 2006 for \$140 million). Also, in April of that year, Betty Parsons introduced Pollock and Lee Krasner to Ossorio. I also would have ended the show in 1953, the year Ossorio installed Dubuffet's collection of Art Brut at his expansive house in the Hamptons ...

[Alfonso Ossorio: Blood Lines, 1949–1953](#) at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery seems to rise to Yau's challenge; it's the perfect compliment to the Parrish exhibition. Though we lack the immediate comparison to works by Pollock and

Dubuffet, their influence is made more believable and profound through absence. I first walked into the show last month without knowing about the Parrish one and could immediately feel the influence of Pollock and Dubuffet. As the exhibition's press release points out, Ossorio met Pollock and his wife, Lee Krasner, in 1949 and spent the summer with them at their house in the Hamptons. The next year, at Pollock's urging, he went to work with Dubuffet in France, where the two had an enormous impact on one another. The exhibition dates mark the period in which Ossorio seemed to find his place in the world. It was at this time that he bought the Creeks, the 60-acre estate in the Hamptons where he would spend the next 40 years of his life.



Alfonso Ossorio, "Untitled" (c. 1950), ink, wax and watercolor on paper, 30 3/8 x 22 1/2 in (via michaelrosenfeldart.com)

It's certainly true that there are major anagogical correspondences between Ossorio, Dubuffet, and Pollock. In Ossorio's c. 1950 "Untitled," we see traces of Dubuffet's neo-expressionistic body language, and overall, Ossorio's work has an overtly neo-expressionist bent that makes one wonder if Basquiat was familiar with it. Indeed, the subject of the painting seems lovingly adorned with a crown or halo.

I have to admit that some of Dubuffet's work is just a bit too gritty, crusty, and raw for me. I appreciate art and music that makes me feel like I need to shower, but I've always felt that some of Dubuffet's work lacks the necessary chops to hold it all together. Ossorio rises to that challenge: his free-ranging lines provide the ideal childlike armature, a sort of tuning fork that renders chaos melodious without reducing its potency. His 1951 "Mothers and Children" seems to dissect the primitive vocabulary he learned from Dubuffet, submerging it in the atomized tangle of Pollock's paint skeins. The result is greater than the sum of its parts. This is one of several ambitious, major oil paintings on view at Michael Rosenfeld that remind us how formidable the artist is. (The exhibition is made all the more essential by the fact that these works are missing from the Parrish show.) These paintings evoke the physical experience of the body while maintaining an esoteric energy that's not easily definable. They resist the immediately knowable, opting instead for what is on the cusp of recognition.



Installation view, “Alfonso Ossorio: Blood Lines, 1949–1953” at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, with the large-scale oil painting “Mothers and Children” (1951) at left

The works on view mark an especially productive period of invention for the artist — during this time, he made leaps and bounds into abstraction. But what’s so impressive about Ossorio is his refusal to stop once he arrived on fruitful ground. He seemed to reject any one style, movement, or influence. To tie Ossorio solely to his better-known Ab-Ex peers would be to try to fit him in a box that he quickly outgrew. The power of these works lies in how they synthesize a number of influences into one continuous stream of creative thought. Glimpses of painstakingly detailed surrealist figures peak through ink, watercolor, wax, and oil concretions. In his own time, this refusal to stick to one style might have been a crippling disadvantage; an artist was supposed to develop a signature look. In our time, it’s this evolution of form that reveals him as a fearless explorer and cements the importance of his legacy.

In this spirit, I’m convinced that the latest pieces in the exhibition, “Beach Comber” (1953) and “Bloodlines” (1953), are also the best. Both are flat, geometric, and bright; they eschew the messiness of Pollock and Dubuffet, instead boasting masterfully pristine surfaces. The twisting, anthropomorphic forms are childlike and full of life. Looking at these paintings makes me wish I liked getting high so I could take a bunch of drugs and come back for another look. “Beach Comber” forces the viewer to get inside: I’ve never been so happily abducted by a painting. Its mass of jostling forms threatens to ooze off the surface and consume you. I feel as if someone ground up a late [Arshile Gorky](#) piece and shot it straight into my veins like painterly heroin.

[Alfonso Ossorio: Blood Lines, 1949–1953](#) is on view at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery (100 Eleventh Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan) until October 26.

[Angels, Demons, and Savages: Pollock, Ossorio, Dubuffet](#) is on view at the Parrish Art Museum (279 Montauk Highway, Watermill, New York) until October 27.

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