HYPERALLERGIC
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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Abstract Expressionism's Missing Link

by **John Yau** on September 8, 2013

Alfonso Ossorio, "Couple and Progeny" (1951) (all images courtesy the Parrish Art Museum unless otherwise noted)

1.

Angels, Demons, and Savages: Pollock, Ossorio, Dubuffet, which was organized by Klaus Ottmann and Dorothy Kosinki for The Phillips Collection, Washington DC. (February 9–May 23, 2013) and is currently at the Parrish Art Museum, Watermill, New York (July 21–October 27, 2013), is — for many reasons — both long overdue and a game changer. For one thing, it brings **Alfonso Ossorio** back into view.

Jackson Pollock, "Drawing for Number 19″ (1951)
(click to enlarge)

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, which was called The Creeks — where Pollock would have seen it — and had a show at Betty Parsons of his oil paintings. It is important to note that Ossorio's innovative wax-and-watercolor works are prominently featured in the current exhibition, he did not include any in the Parsons show. The absence of his oil paintings only contributes to the historical lacunae that obscure his achievement. This is only a quibble, however; it is understandable, given the material strengths of the wax-and-watercolors, why the curators would want to focus more exclusively on them.

In the introduction of the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Kosinski felt compelled to state: "We insist upon Ossorio as artist and refuse to allow his artistic practice to be obscured by his roles as friend, author, patron and collector, though inevitably those activities figure importantly in this story."

In one sentence, Kosinski states some of the reasons why Ossorio was, as an artist, ignored, dismissed or marginalized during his life. Despite being the central figure of the three artists in the exhibition, he is also the least known. Born in Manila, Philippines, of mixed ancestry, he considered himself to be Philippine, Spanish and Chinese, and did not want any one of these strands to be subsumed by the others, as he made clear to me the one time we met in the early 1980s.

At eight, he was sent to a Catholic prep school in England. In 1930, he went to a school in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, run by Benedictine monks. By this time, he was committed to being an artist. In the summers of 1933 and '34 he returned to England and studied letterpress printing and wood engraving with associates of the British sculptor and typeface designer, Eric Gill, who believed that oil painting was a decadent, Renaissance idea.

Jean Dubuffet, "Man with Small Nose" (1950) (via **phillipscollection.org**) (click to enlarge)

In 1934, Ossorio started Harvard, where he met another wealthy scion, James Laughlin, who started the press New Directions in 1936. While in college, he became deeply interested in Pablo Picasso's "bone" paintings, which were done under the influence of surrealism, as well as the dreamlike imagery of Salvador Dali and Pavel Tchelitchew, both of whom were meticulous in their painting technique. By his mid-20s, Ossorio had developed into an artist devoted to painstaking drawings and watercolors that combined religious symbolism with surrealistic imagery. In November 1941, a few weeks before Pearl Harbor, an exhibition of his watercolors and drawings opened at the Wakefield Gallery, which Betty Parsons had recently opened in New York City.

Ossorio, who was wealthy, elegant, well-educated, exotic, handsome and gay, doesn't fit the commonplace and by now cliché image of the Abstract Expressionist as a hard drinking, white, heterosexual, bohemian male. He further complicates things because he painted for only about a decade — 1950 to '60 — before moving on to making unclassifiable, jam-packed assemblages during the rise of Minimalism, Pop Art and Color Field painting. None of the critics of the Abstract Expressionist generation or those who followed them championed him. Metaphorically speaking, Ossorio's materially extreme assemblages would have made Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss vomit.

From our perspective, it is now apparent that his assemblages anticipate the baroque excess of Julian Schnabel, but without a trace of the latter's ponderousness and high self-regard. I would also connect Ossorio's material extremeness to Michael Tracy's altar-like constructions and to the paintings made of rings and other found materials by Michael Kelley, who may have learned about Ossorio's assemblages from **Gerome Kamrowski** (1914–2004), an Abstract Expressionist painter with whom he studied at the University of Michigan. I don't know that this guarantees Ossorio anything, but he sure doesn't deserve to remain invisible.

The reason I cite this history, which can be found in the monograph, ***Alfonso Ossorio*** (1973) by B.H. Friedman, is because it helps clarify some of the artistic obstacles — his aversion to oil paint being one — that Pollock and Dubuffet helped Ossorio overcome.

2.

Jackson Pollock, "Number 7, 1952″

I admire Pollock for his restlessness and for his refusal to continue to be what his greatest admirer and earliest champion, Clement Greenberg, wanted him to remain, the dribble and pour painter of allover abstractions. "Number 7, 1952" (1952), a black enamel and oil on canvas, on display in the Parrish show, can be read as a head. In contrast to the layers of skeins, the result of an accumulative process, which we see in a painting like "Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)" (1950), which was shown only at the Phillips and which Ossorio originally owned, Pollock seems to have done the painting in one shot. He has also gone from pouring and dribbling the paint to using a basting syringe, which Krasner thought of as "a giant fountain pen." Interesting to think of Pollock as someone who refused to be branded long before that term began being used.

Alfonso Ossorio, "Perpetual Sacrifice" (1949) (click to enlarge)

In the hundreds of wax-and-watercolors, many of which he did while working in the Philippines on a mural for a church on his family's land, Ossorio was able to undermine his penchant for making meticulous line drawings. The development is evidenced in "Perpetual Sacrifice" (1949), in which he partially covers over a fine-lined ink drawing of a Christ-like figure being crucified. Committed to the figure and religious symbolism at this point in his career, Ossorio used wax and watercolor, sometimes in conjunction with ink and graphite, to make layered, interlocking swirls where the figure and ground are barely distinguishable. Essentially, Ossorio utilized an allover approach, which Pollock's poured paintings most likely encouraged him to develop further.

Dubuffet often used plaster and sand in his oil paintings — he wanted a surface that was textured, scarred and decayed, like a cross between an asphalt street and desiccated elephant skin. His figures are flat and splayed, awkward and grotesque. Their dried-out surface strikes me as funny and morbid, an interesting pairing. Dubuffet wouldn't be as interesting again until late in his life, when moved into the realm of abstraction.

3.

Jean Dubuffet, "Corpse de dame – Chateau d'Etoupe (Body of a lady – Castle of Oakum" (1950) (via phillipscollection.org) (click to enlarge)

Between 1948 and '52, the years covered by the exhibition, these artists found ways to reinvent the figure-ground relationship through the use of new techniques or non-traditional materials. Whereas — in earlier painting — the ground is often used to evoke a secure domain in which the figure can be placed, the figures in their paintings come across as cut off and isolated or dissolving and impermanent. The work resisted domestication by the critical discourses of its times, which is partly why it was ignored and rejected.

More than half a century later, we still seem not to know what to make of this period in Pollock's work. We continue to overlook Ossorio. And we have perhaps forgotten how fresh Dubuffet's works of the late forties and early fifties once looked, and how profoundly he and they would have influenced artists such as Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Claes Oldenberg, June Leaf and others living in Chicago, who heard him speak at the Arts Club of Chicago in the winter of 1951.

Even with all this, I feel as if I have only touched the surface of what makes this exhibition so timely, important and challenging.

Angels, Demons, and Savages: Pollock, Ossorio, Dubuffet *continues at the Parrish Art Museum (279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, NY) through October 27.*

Tagged as: **Alfonso Ossorio**, **Featured**, **Parrish Art Museum**

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