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ART REVIEW

A Go-Between as Intriguing as the 2 Men He Linked Alfonso Ossorio, Who Knew Both Pollock and Dubuffet



Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

Left, "Crucifix: Seek & Ye Shall Find," by Alfonso Ossorio. Right, Jean Dubuffet's "Landscape With Dog," top, and "Landscape With Walker Greeting the Public." [More Photos](#) »

By KAREN ROSENBERG
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WATER MILL, N.Y. — This summer, the Parrish Art Museum is hosting an all-too-rare meeting of Ab-Ex and Art Brut, one that sweeps away myths surrounding both movements and their central figures, Jackson Pollock and Jean Dubuffet, who never met but interacted through the artist and collector Alfonso Ossorio.

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"Angels, Demons, and Savages: Pollock, Ossorio, Dubuffet" pivots around Ossorio (1916-1990), a go-between who is fascinating in his own right. Gay, Roman Catholic, Harvard-educated and the Filipino-American heir to a sugar fortune, Ossorio cut against just about every stereotype of the Abstract Expressionist painter. He supported Pollock critically and financially, buying important works like "Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)" and hanging them at his 80-acre East Hampton estate, but

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the relationship had some reciprocity; Ossorio worked alongside Pollock and absorbed his signature method of drip painting in oil and enamel, as the intricate skeins of his 1951 canvases indicate.

Ossorio also took Pollock's suggestion that he visit Paris and introduce himself to Dubuffet, thus beginning a long friendship with the champion of Art Brut, or "raw art" — defined, by Dubuffet, as works by artists of a "spontaneous and strongly inventive character." In 1952, Ossorio installed Dubuffet's entire Art Brut collection at his home in the Hamptons, where it remained for a decade.

Curiously, he was never able to introduce Pollock to Dubuffet; there was at least one near miss when Pollock failed to turn up at his own dinner party in the Hamptons. (Dubuffet was there.) And at the Parrish, too, Pollock and Dubuffet don't really connect, except through Ossorio. The immediacy and virtuosity of the Pollocks make the Dubuffets look like muddy fossils; at the same time, Dubuffet's earthiness can seem like the bolder affront to popular taste.

Ossorio deftly paid homage to both artists, heaping oil and sand onto a Masonite panel, à la Dubuffet, and, the same year, covering canvases with controlled dribbles of oil and enamel. It wasn't always a one-or-the-other situation; his breakthrough works, the wax-and-watercolor drawings he made in 1950 while completing an altarpiece commission in the Philippines, share DNA with both Pollock and Dubuffet.

These frantic, radiant, spontaneous works on paper — some made on pieces of torn Tiffany stationery, or whatever was at hand — are one of the show's revelations. They are not nearly as well known, today, as Ossorio's late assemblages of beads, rhinestones, shells and other trinkets, even though Dubuffet admired them enough to write an essay about them for an exhibition in Europe; he praised them as "rapture within a ritual of symbols."

In them, angels, heads of Christ and other Christian icons give off orange and magenta auras or vibrations. Ossorio used the wax-resist technique, often drawing with sharpened candles over one layer of watercolor and under another, which made the figures look spectral and otherworldly.

While Ossorio was in the Philippines, Pollock and his wife, Lee Krasner, were staying in his Macdougall Street town house in Greenwich Village and receiving shipments of Ossorio's watercolors. The show finds some striking affinities between these Ossorios and Pollock's "Black Pourings," a perplexing group of black-and-white screen prints and related drawings in which Pollock uses reproduction and repetition to undermine his signature "action-painting."

The persistence of the figure, even in late works by Pollock, is another of the exhibition's surprises. It suggests that Ossorio, who never had a problem reconciling abstraction and representation, exerted his own influence on Pollock. As Dubuffet observed: "In Ossorio's eyes, the embodiment of things seems fortuitous, as inessential as the fact, for example,



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that a gas may assume a liquid state. Each body seems to him as a spirit occasionally passing into a field where human eyes can perceive it.”

“Angels, Demons, and Savages: Pollock, Ossorio, Dubuffet” was organized by Klaus Ottman, a curator at large at the Phillips Collection in Washington, where it had its debut this past spring. Although the exhibition is relatively small, with about 50 works, it has a substantial catalog, with essays by Mr. Ottman and the Parrish’s chief curator, Alicia Longwell.

The many references to Krasner in that catalog raise a question: why wasn’t she included anywhere in the show? As countless photographs and anecdotes reveal, she was a key part of the social dynamic between Pollock and Ossorio (as was Ossorio’s partner, the ballet dancer Edward Dragon), and, as a fellow painter, part of the creative dynamic as well. Ossorio collected [her paintings](#) alongside Pollock’s and Dubuffet’s.

Incomplete as it may be, though, this triangle of Pollock, Ossorio and Dubuffet is a timely reappraisal of postwar painting, well suited to an art world that’s trying to do away with vexing terms like “insider” and “outsider.” Art historians and curators should be on the lookout for other examples of mutual-admiration societies like this one, formed by three artists with vastly different experiences of, and attitudes toward, privilege and education.

“Angels, Demons, and Savages: Pollock, Ossorio, Dubuffet” runs through Oct. 27 at the Parrish Art Museum, 279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, N.Y.; (631) 283-2118, parrishart.org.

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