

# Norton Simon Museum For Immediate Release

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February 2022

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## *Alternate Realities: Altoon, Diebenkorn, Lobdell, Woelffer*

May 13–August 22, 2022

**Pasadena, CA**—The Norton Simon Museum presents *Alternate Realities*, an exhibition focusing on four groundbreaking painters who were active in Los Angeles or the Bay Area in the 1950s and 1960s: John Altoon, Richard Diebenkorn, Frank Lobdell and Emerson Woelffer. Each of these artists worked in a style closely associated with Abstract Expressionism, but they did not reject representation outright. Instead they forged a productive dialogue between the two modes, incorporating references to recognizable imagery and emphasizing the artist's own process as an alternate approach to realistic depiction.



**John Altoon** (1925–1969), a trained illustrator, developed idiosyncratic arrangements that allude to body parts, organic objects, even a pair of striped pants, while refusing to cohere into legible narratives. His *Ocean Park Series #8* (1962), named for the street in Santa Monica where he lived and worked, distills traditional landscape painting into its base elements to evoke a vivid sense of place. Short, parallel strokes of yellow and brown paint convey powerful rays of sunshine, while a playful spade-like form conjures a crashing wave throwing off drips of blue paint. Along the lower margin, a green shape suggestive of a cactus stretches upward behind horizontal bands of sandy brown pigment, perhaps an allusion to a fence or a well-trodden path. By excising the connective tissue of a background, Altoon's landscape floats free as if hovering on the surface of the canvas, hinting at visceral associations with warm sun and refreshing spray rather than literally depicting them.

**Richard Diebenkorn** (1922–1993) produced richly colored, non-representational pictures for nearly a decade before turning to still lifes, interiors and figure studies in the mid-1950s. The artist’s long-standing fascination with color relationships is evident in an early sketchbook, now disassembled, and probably made around 1950. Several of the sheets are painted vigorously on the front and back with gouache and watercolor, creating a graphic equivalent to stained glass, with bright fields of yellow, red, orange and purple bordered by winding black lines. *Bottles*, painted in 1960, reveals Diebenkorn extending these principles into representational space, with the recognizable forms of a translucent glass bottle, opaque ink jar and other items perched on the tipped-up surface of a table comprised of loosely rendered planes of blue, turquoise and lavender.



Diebenkorn shared a commitment to drawing with fellow artist and art instructor **Frank Lobdell** (1921–2013). While both painters were teaching at the California School of Fine Arts in the mid-1960s, they honed their treatment of light and shade through a weekly practice of sketching the nude. Lobdell did not consider these figure studies to be works of art in their own right, but the activity of making them—and the open-minded method of creation that they engendered—nourished his approach to abstraction. In a series of lithographs created at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in 1966, vaguely biomorphic shapes in black, red and yellow lean and stretch across the page, offering some sense of the ways that figurative drawing could undergird an otherwise nonrepresentational mode of depiction. To develop this suite of prints, Lobdell often reused his stones, examining an image from different points of view by reversing it, making additions or inking the design differently to consider the work anew.

This emphasis on process was also fundamental to **Emerson Woelffer** (1914–2003), who created compositions with torn paper and painted pictographic marks using a method he termed “abstract surrealism,” in which shapes emerge unconsciously through the act of making. In compositions like *Winterscape* (1955), a palette of cool greens, gray and black, bisected by calligraphic characters in black and orange, intimates the mood and atmosphere of seasonal change in Colorado, where Woelffer was then living. Yet overt subject matter seems to have been more of an afterthought to the artist. As Woelffer put it, “Paint first—think later,” suggesting that the act of interpretation generates new meanings and associations, unintended at the time of the work’s creation.



Drawn entirely from the Norton Simon Museum's expansive holdings of postwar American art, *Alternate Realities* explores the ways in which Woelffer, Lobdell, Diebenkorn and Altoon challenged the notion of a pure, gestural abstraction by exploring the expressive potential of figural forms. The exhibition is organized by Chief Curator Emily Talbot and will be on view in the Museum's lower level exhibition wing from May 13 through August 22, 2022.

*Image credits from top to bottom:* John Altoon (American, 1925–1969), *Ocean Park Series #8*, 1962, oil on canvas, 81-1/2 x 84 in. (207 x 213.4 cm), Norton Simon Museum, Anonymous Gift, © Estate of John Altoon, Kohn Gallery; Richard Diebenkorn (American, 1922–1993), *Bottles*, 1960, oil on canvas, 34 x 26 in. (86.4 x 66 cm), Norton Simon Museum, Gift of the Artist, © Richard Diebenkorn Foundation; Frank Lobdell (American, 1921–2013), *Untitled*, 1966, lithograph, 32 x 20-1/4 in. (81.28 x 51.44 cm.), Norton Simon Museum, Anonymous Gift, © Frank Lobdell Trust; Emerson Woelffer (American, 1914–2003), *Winterscape*, 1955, oil on canvas, 34-1/8 x 22 in. (86.7 x 55.9 cm), Norton Simon Museum, Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Harold P. Ullman, © Estate of Emerson Woelffer

### **About the Norton Simon Museum**

The Norton Simon Museum is known around the world as one of the most remarkable private art collections ever assembled. Over a 30-year period, industrialist Norton Simon (1907–1993) amassed an astonishing collection of European art from the Renaissance to the 20th century, and a stellar collection of South and Southeast Asian art spanning 2,000 years. Modern and Contemporary Art from Europe and the United States, acquired by the former Pasadena Art Museum, also occupies an important place in the Museum's collections. The Museum houses more than 12,000 objects, roughly 1,000 of which are on view in the galleries and gardens. Two temporary exhibition spaces feature rotating installations of artworks not on permanent display.

**Location:** The Norton Simon Museum is located at 411 W. Colorado Blvd. at Orange Grove Boulevard in Pasadena, Calif., at the intersection of the Foothill (210) and Ventura (134) freeways. For general Museum information, please call (626) 449-6840 or visit [nortonsimon.org](http://nortonsimon.org). **Temporary Hours:** The Museum is open Thursday through Monday, 12 p.m. to 5 p.m. It is closed on Tuesday and Wednesday. **Admission:** General admission is \$15 for adults and \$12 for seniors. Members, students with I.D., and patrons age 18 and under are admitted free of charge. The Museum is wheelchair accessible. **Parking:** Parking is free but limited, and no reservations are necessary. **Public Transportation:** Pasadena Transit stops directly in front of the Museum. Please visit <http://pasadenatransit.net> for schedules. The MTA bus line #180/181 stops in front of the Museum. The Memorial Park Station on the MTA Gold Line, the closest Metro Rail station to the Museum, is located at 125 E. Holly St. at Arroyo Parkway. Please visit [www.metro.net](http://www.metro.net) for schedules. **Covid-19 Protocols and Guidelines:** For up-to-date information on our Covid-19-related protocols, please visit [nortonsimon.org/visit](http://nortonsimon.org/visit).