



Alfonso Ossorio: Dissolving Crucifix, 1951, oil and enamel on canvas, 46 by 35 inches. Photos this article courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York.

Obsessive Congregations

Alfonso Ossorio drew upon Surrealism, Art Brut, Abstract Expressionism, folk art and collage for the paintings, sculptures and assemblages recently shown in a 50-year survey.

BY JONATHAN GILMORE



Above, Untitled, 1945, ink, gouache and watercolor on paper, 20 by 14 inches.

Top right, The Bow Breaks, 1967, mixed mediums on panel, 36 by 28 by 12 inches.

Bottom right, Klan Picnic, 1949, gouache on paperboard, 40 by 60 inches.

Although he moved from Manila to the U.S. at the age of 14, attended Harvard University and served in the U.S. Army, Alfonso Ossorio (1916-1990) produced a body of work that remained consistently international in scope. His early work evinced a fascination with Surrealism. Even as he fell under the influence of Abstract Expressionism, he continued to draw on such sources as the Catholic folk art of his native Philippines, German woodcuts, the Spanish Baroque, and modernist practices of *Informel* and assemblage. "Alfonso Ossorio: Horror Vacui," a 50-year survey at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery (with a smaller concurrent exhibition at the Ossorio Foundation in Southampton, N.Y.), brought into relief these manifold origins of the artist's work. In addition, it showed that his evolution through some of the major currents of 20th-century art involved not so much relinquishing one style in favor of the next as continually incorporating features of each new style into those already present. The resulting compositions are as complex and multifaceted as the plurality of styles from which they emerged.

In an untitled 1945 watercolor and ink on paperboard, Ossorio

exploits a by-then familiar Surrealist vocabulary to create two monstrous figures. One is presumably male, with a hand reaching out of its decapitated neck to ring a bell (with a tiny human figure for a clapper) that substitutes for its head. The other figure, more or less female, is composed of green, globular, fruitlike forms punctuated by several vaginal apertures. As if to suggest a *vagina dentata*, golden teeth float about its orificelike head. Here, as well as in related images of male/female pairs, Ossorio's debt to the psychosexual currents animating Surrealism is clear, but his graphic realism may also reflect his training as a medical illustrator in the army the year before. A similarly gruesome but much more politically grounded work of this period is the gouache-and-paperboard *Klan Picnic* (1949), a tumultuous composition of fiery reds and oranges suffocatingly packed with ghoulish hooded and goggled Klan figures; with bloody hands, they hover grotesquely over their African-American victim.

In the early '50s, Ossorio's compositions largely dispense with such illustrative tendencies in favor of surging, over-

lapping lines, such as those of *Dissolving Crucifix* (1951), created by pouring oil and enamel on canvas. There is a figurative element in such works—here a red cross forms the axis of a face—but the dominant impression is of a multilayered, tangled skein of lines whose allover effect and expressive potency place it firmly within the orbit of Abstract Expressionism. (Ossorio, an early collector of Pollock's work, owned his seminal *Number 1, 1950* [*Lavender Mist*].)

Later, Ossorio moved away from the violent, sometimes manic quality of such compositions. In *Primrose Path* (1954) for example, soft, Miró-like squiggles and curlicues fill the composition, abstract except for the suggestion of two figures, one on either side, clasping hands across the brightly colored center.

Ossorio not only collected Pollock's work but in the late '40s he began buying Jean Dubuffet's as well. He met Dubuffet in 1949, and after he purchased the East Hampton estate known as "The Creeks" in 1951, he arranged to house the French artist's Art Brut collection there. In the late '50s, Ossorio began to create works that drew upon the low-relief quality of Dubuffet's assemblages. He affixed an enormous array of disparate objects—shells, animals bones, driftwood, nails, plastic dolls' eyes, cabinet knobs,



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dice, costume jewelry, mirror shards and children's toys—to the panel surface. Dubbed “congregations,” these works, which were Ossorio's most original, offer a nod to the unconventional Outsider art mediums and subjects of Art Brut and draw on some of the early 20th-century collage strategies of integrating material fragments of high and low culture.

Ossorio's works also reflect such contemporary forms of assemblage as Joseph Cornell's box constructions and Rauschenberg's “combine” paintings through their use of abject or banal materials and objets trouvés. (He was represented alongside those and nearly 140 other artists in the Museum of Modern Art's 1961 exhibition “The Art of Assemblage,” which introduced the practice to a broad public.) But whereas much assemblage had

a structural unity despite its incongruent parts, in Ossorio's work the relationship among the different elements is finely balanced on the edge of disjunction. Rather than functioning as unified wholes, the compositions seem willfully threatened with disintegration into their wildly heterogeneous parts. In an ironic coun-

terpoint to its title, the brightly painted panel *Plenty of Room* (1961) is crammed with costume jewelry, rope, plastic rods, feathers, chains and bicycle reflectors, all suspended in thick, poured polyvinyl acetate. Although the array of objects hints at a pictorial motif of two or three seated figures, the emphasis is on the intensely worked surface, which has the appearance of a grotto or exposed artifacts lying in just-uncovered archeological ground.

“Congregation” has a religious connotation, and indeed many of Ossorio's works in this mode draw, if sometimes inchoately, on religious themes. In some cases it is through a pictorial motif, such as the stump-headed figure with a sheet-metal body of *Resurrect (II)*, 1965, a densely filled image of the risen Christ amid plastic-pearl necklaces, bones, glass eyes, gilded wood and handcuffs at his feet. In other works, the religious dimension is that of a totem, or jewel-encrusted reliquary, in which an ordinary object of folk significance is invested with a power that distinguishes, for example, an ordinary bone from a saint's knuckle or a sliver of wood from a splinter of the True Cross. *Searcher* (1963), a congregation contained within a deep, octagonal, gilded frame, overflows with a garish panoply of bone fragments, a wooden fish head and a walking stick. At its center is a figure whose open mouth and large eyes imply a kind of primitive fetish.

Other works of the 1960s develop into freestanding constructions. *Enchanted Wheel* (1963) is a conglomeration of bells affixed to spinning wheels on posts. It alludes as much to Duchamp as to Tibetan prayer wheels, while offering such Surrealist-inspired incongruities as a wooden duck decoy and a strange owl/fish creature that is one of several dozen small assemblages created on wooden shingles and incorporated into this larger work.

The most powerful of these late sculptural works is *The Bow Breaks* (1967), a complex of large horns, protruding nails, plastic eyes affixed to chopped bones as well as a bonelike branch bent into the shape of an arch. Although created on a flat panel, the composition appears to erupt from its neo-classical gilded oval frame. Like many of Ossorio's congregations, the work synthesizes refinement and barbarism, enlightenment and superstition, nature and art. The folk myth of the evil eye (against which a horn is sometimes worn as protection) is combined with the innocence of a nursery rhyme (which was originally an allegory of political disorder), and the impulses of primitive, nightmarish aggression are barely quartered within a civilizing frame. □

“Alfonso Ossorio: Horror Vacui” was presented at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York [May 9-Aug. 2, 2002] and the Ossorio Foundation, Southampton, N.Y. [May 30-Sept. 1, 2002]. It was accompanied by an 80-page illustrated catalogue with an essay by Helen A. Harrison.

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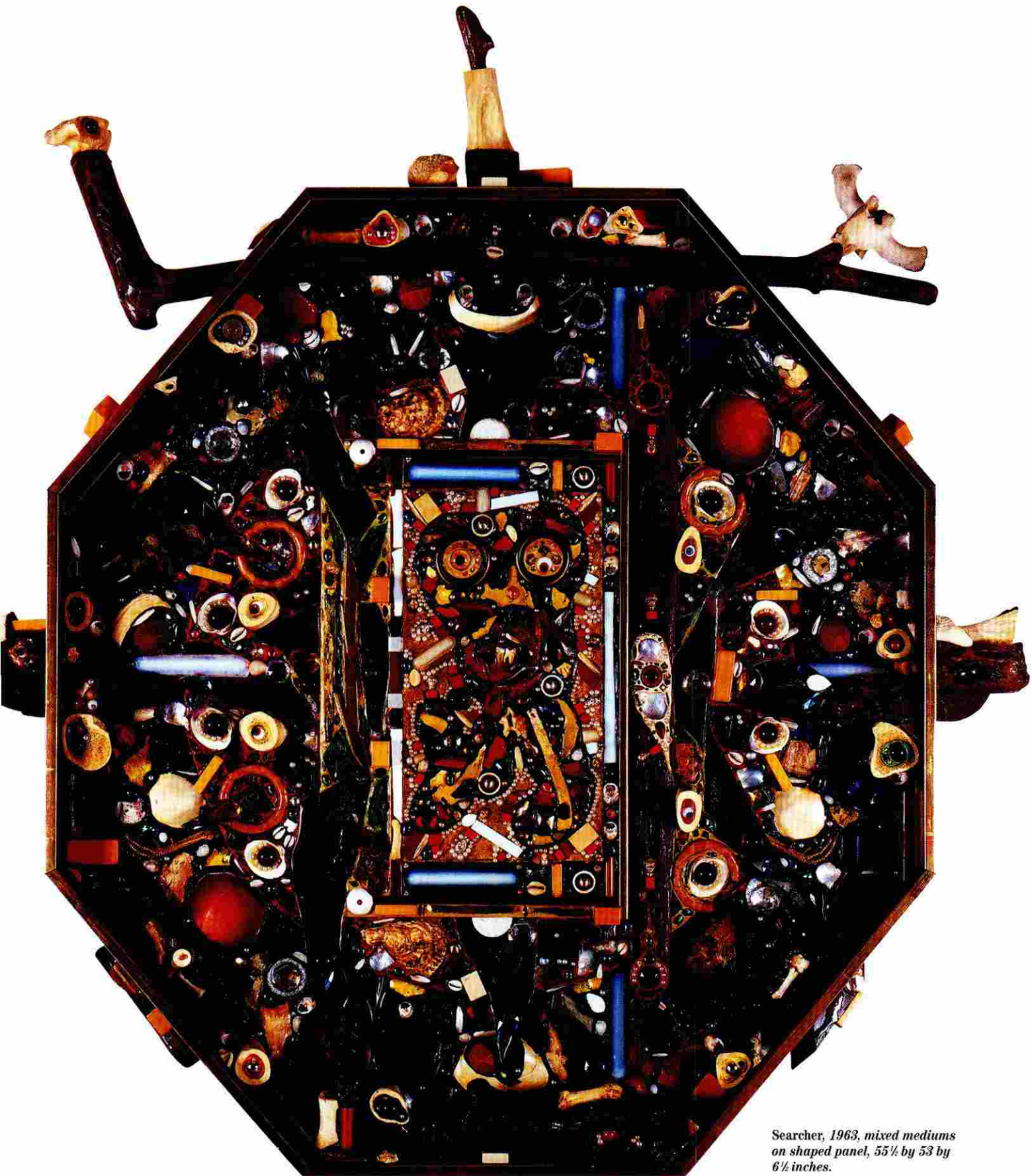


Above, Primrose Path, 1954, oil on canvas, 38 by 51 inches.

Top right, Resurrect (II), 1965, mixed mediums on panel, 40 by 32 by 3 1/2 inches.

Right, The Improbable Cross, 1955, oil on masonite, 60 by 48 inches.





*Searcher, 1963, mixed mediums
on shaped panel, 55 1/2 by 53 by
6 1/2 inches.*

