

### Joe Overstreet, Painter as Aesthetic Nomad

by Stephen Maine

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The astonishing fecundity of the downtown New York scene during the late 1960s and early '70s is hardly in need of further evidence, but fortunately Joe Overstreet: Innovation of Flight provides it anyway. The exhibition, which lights up Eric Firestone Loft through May 5, includes 21 works by the 85-year-old artist and East Village denizen. Dating from a chapter of painting's recent history that saw all manner of Post-Minimalist hybridity, Overstreet's idiosyncratic use of paintings as sculptural material still looks fresh. There is nothing time-capsulesque about this spirited show, which includes work that would raise a buzz at the most au courant of art fairs.

Born in Mississippi, Overstreet had a peripatetic early childhood until his family moved to the Bay Area, where he spent his adolescence. He was a merchant mariner for several years before moving to New York City in 1958. Overstreet fell in with the painting-centric crowd at the Cedar Tavern; worked with Amiri Baraka at the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem; and, in 1974, co-founded Kenkeleba House, a gallery and studio building on East 2nd Street dedicated to helping under-recognized artists of diverse backgrounds, which exists to this day.

On the exhibition checklist, the materials making up most of the works are described as "acrylic on canvas construction." The earliest of these is "North Star" (1968, 93 by 85 by 3 inches), an eccentrically shaped painting in which stacked chevrons and spiky, jagged stripes like lightning bolts are arrayed within and against a stately symmetry. Though roughly rectilinear overall, the work's centrifugal visual force is barely contained; it seems that by this time the artist was dissatisfied with the conventional concept of painting-as-window and in search of alternatives.

Overstreet's references to his African-American heritage and Native American influences are oblique, and "North Star" may or may not refer to the celestial guide used by escaped slaves in the 19th-century Underground Railroad, just as it may or may not be significant that the work dates from the year Martin Luther King was assassinated. Similarly, "HooDoo Mandala" (1970, 90 by 89 by ¼ inches) provides, by its title, a clue about the work's cultural inspiration. It is a mashup — in a pungent, landscape-ish palette of orange-yellow, azure blue and a wide range of reds — of concentric, segmented circles and an underlying X. By way of grommets in the corners and at the midpoint of each side, the work is strung up to the ceiling, wall, and floor, ensuring that its physical presence eclipses spatial illusionism.

Those two modes are not always at odds, however. In "Purple Flight" (1971, 136 by 117 by 47 inches, as installed), they are playfully, masterfully entangled. In this densely chromatic corner piece, suspended by ropes (as was by this time Overstreet's wont), two square canvases hung at different levels are attached via a narrow trapezoidal swatch. The painted surface is sprayed or spattered, as if it had been caught in polychrome rain. From a distance of greater than a couple of paces, it's not possible to discern whether the perspectival space, in which the trapezoid seems to bridge the apparent fore and aft positions of the squares, is illusionistic or actual; the view from the side reveals that the answer is "yes."

The square-and-trapezoid motif dominating "Purple Flight" returns as drawing in other works, notably the freestanding "Untitled" (1970, 115 by 67 1/2 by 48 inches as installed) wherein it appears as emphatic, red-orange lines interwoven with patches of alternately high-key and somber colors, and, surprisingly, a schematic figurative silhouette sub-



"Joe Overstreet: Innovation of Flight" at Eric Firestone Gallery, installation view: "HooDoo Mandala" (1970); "Untitled" (1972); "Mandala" (1970) © Joe Overstreet, photo by Jenny Gorman, all images

merged in the geometry like a fly in amber.. Tethered between floor and ceiling (but closer to the floor), the piece suggests entrapment or stasis, rather than flight — though of course there can be no entrapment without the promise or memory of its opposite.

(This “Untitled” relates closely to “We Came From There to Get Here,” also from 1970, which represents Overstreet in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, an exhibition of more than 60 mainly African American artists organized by Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley of the Tate Modern. The exhibition comes to the Brooklyn Museum in September.)

It’s hard to imagine working on shaped canvases during this time without being aware of Frank Stella. A wall-based work, “For Happiness” (1970, 130 by 99 by 75 inches as installed) ditches the square-and-trapezoid for a motif of interlaced circles strongly reminiscent of Stella’s “Protractor” series of 1967–1970. But in contrast to Stella’s industrial palette, Overstreet’s colors are juicy and alive, and the whole thing is looser and jazzier and funnier.

Like many of the works in the show — though perhaps more than most — “For Happiness” invites the viewer to peek behind the exterior surface to glimpse the “back” of the canvas, where a tentative and evidently abandoned start still lurks. Tent-like, the enclosure suggests provisional shelter, painter as aesthetic nomad.

Recalling the art-historical context of the period, members of the Support/Surfaces group (which was split between Paris and Nice) deconstructed painting’s traditional constitutive components in their variously formulated efforts at political engagement in the aftermath of the events of May 1968 — exploring abstraction as a vehicle for ideology.

Stateside, the work of Overstreet’s D.C.-based contemporary Sam Gilliam also brilliantly straddled pictorial and sculptural space, though Gilliam’s approach to the unstretched canvas as substrate strikes me as attuned to geological or even meteorological forms, rather than the built environment. Slightly younger, Al Loving also arrived in New York (from Detroit) in 1968, and eventually found procedural flexibility and freedom in the act of tearing up dyed canvas and reassembling the strips and scraps, suspending the gloriously ragged, sumptuously chromatic results from a single horizontal bar.

One could certainly pore over the work of Gilliam, Loving, and Overstreet (and countless others) for clues to the nature of their struggle as black people in these United States, and I mean no disrespect by not doing so. But the lens of race can induce tunnel vision, a disproportionate emphasis on motivation over accomplishment, which would be a far greater critical lapse. Overstreet (like Gilliam and Loving, and of course the late, great Jack Whitten) is a necessary inclusion to the story of post-Pop abstraction, which would attain greater depth and fluidity through his elegantly raucous, deeply affecting work.

Joe Overstreet: Innovation of Flight continues at Eric Firestone Loft (4 Great Jones Street, #4, Noho, Manhattan) through May 5.



Joe Overstreet, “North Star” (1968), acrylic on canvas construction, 93 x 85 x 3 inches (© Joe Overstreet, photo by Jenny Gorman)