

eric firestone gallery

For Immediate Release:

Eric Firestone Gallery at The ADAA Show

Booth D13

Park Avenue Armory | New York, NY

November 2–5, 2023

Eric Firestone Gallery is delighted to participate in the 2023 edition of the ADAA Show. The presentation will include the work of Ellsworth Ausby (1942–2001), Joe Overstreet (1933–2019), Anderson Pigatt (1928–2009), Thomas Sills (1914–2000), and Paul Waters (b. 1936). These artists were included in the following three historic exhibitions: *Afro-American Artists*, New York and Boston (The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, May–June 1970); *New Black Artists* (The Brooklyn Museum and Columbia University, New York, August–December 1969); *Black Artists: Two Generations* (Newark Museum, May–September 1971).



Paul Waters | *Syllables of Survival* | 1969
oil on cut linen collage on canvas
60h x 70w in.

Edmund Gaither, the founding Director of the NCAAA Museum in

Boston, and curator of *Afro-American Artists*, New York, and Boston, wrote that the exhibition “presents a rich, high-quality selection of works representing all of the directions that Afro-American artists are exploring.” He defined three categories: 1) artists belonging to the body of mainstream American art; 2) “Black art,” which is didactic, political work; and 3) Neo Africanism, which is rooted in the study of traditional African art. Among the participating artists were Ellsworth Ausby, Joe Overstreet, Thomas Sills, and Paul Waters.

New Black Artists at the Brooklyn Museum was billed as “the first recent exhibition of Black artists in a major New York museum.” It was conceived by Edward Taylor, Executive Director of the Harlem Cultural Council, and featured “12 predominantly young, relatively unknown artists.” Among them were Ellsworth Ausby, Joe Overstreet, and Anderson Pigatt.

Black Artists: Two Generations revisited a 1944 exhibition of African-American artists, also at the Newark Museum. For the revised show, artist Paul Waters served as a consultant, selecting all of the contemporary artwork. It was intended to “bring the museum and the community together, affording local artists an opportunity to show their works.” Waters’s own work was included, along with that of Joe Overstreet.

If we use the criteria defined by Edmund Gaither, Joe Overstreet’s work moves between all three categories. Overstreet was born in rural Mississippi—an area mostly populated by

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Anderson Pigatt | *In Honor of the Brothers and Sisters of Reclamation Site One* | 1969
painted wood
45h x 27 1/2w x 16d in

African Americans and Choctaw Native Americans. Like many African American families who were part of the Great Migration, Overstreet's early life was nomadic and he was exposed early on to Black and Native American rural culture. This experience would become formative in Overstreet's work. Overstreet's work of the late 1950s to the mid-1960s assimilates his interests in Abstract Expressionism, Jazz, and African-American history. Many of his paintings are direct responses to the Civil Rights movement, racism, and the history of lynchings.

For his shaped paintings, Overstreet used wooden dowels shaped with a jigsaw and hand tools to make intricate stretchers, painting figures in patterns drawn from Aztec, Benin, and Egyptian cultures. Overstreet stated, "African designs in sculpture and wall paintings were never meticulous and timid. The human touch was never obscured. I'm coming from about 5 years of looking at my African roots—the African systems of design, mythology, and philosophy—and now I'm making my statement as a black man in the West."

Ellsworth Ausby was a significant American artist whose works were concerned with exploring the "infinite possibilities of two-dimensional space." He experimented with supports and surfaces, creating multi-part shaped canvas constructions arranged directly

on the wall. His work is connected to Afrofuturism and the music of visionary Sun Ra. Above all, Ausby was dedicated to reflecting a deeply rooted African aesthetic and cultural heritage. He wrote, "It is a fact that the Black image 'is' and has always been established." Ausby's paintings of the late 1960s combine stylized biomorphic and figurative elements with geometric shapes and patterning. His unstretched canvases of the 1970s utilize high-keyed color and suggest sonic patterns and rhythms.

Anderson Pigatt was an African American self-taught sculptor who worked with wood. Based in Baltimore, MD, he worked as an antique furniture restorer, and launched his art career in the 1960s. His sculptural work is direct and political, exploring themes of race and belonging, colonization, and memorialization. Pigatt believed that wood had a spirit, an ethos that is exemplified by his 1969 transformation of a Harlem oak tree stump into a sculpture mirroring

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a Black power salute. The sculpture was designed as a symbol protesting governmental development in the neighborhood.

Paul Waters, who still lives and works on the Bowery in Lower Manhattan, made canvas collages in which painted silhouettes suggesting primordial forms and imaginary animals were arranged and collaged onto canvas supports in rhythmic patterns. His work is concerned with both direct communication and an intuitive process. Waters exclusively uses his hands and fingers to apply paint, rather than brushes. The paintings reflect his interest in indigenous traditions, teaching, and children's books, as well as Western painting. His use of scissors as a "drawing" tool connects his work to that of Matisse.



Installation view of *New Black Artists*, Brooklyn Museum, NY, 1969
Pictured: Works by Ellsworth Ausby and Anderson Pigatt

The abstract paintings of Thomas Sills respond to natural phenomena and forces. They have a delicate and unusual palette and synthesize the figure/ground relationship with optical equivalencies between colors, and free-flowing outwardly-radiating patterns. Like Waters, Sills did not use brushes; instead, he applied paint with rags and cloths. This gives his work a unique softness. Colors meld into one another at the edges, lending the paintings tactility, space, and an inner light. Sills, who grew up in Castalia, North Carolina in a large family, was not exposed to art or art-making in his youth or young adulthood. He began to paint—almost clandestinely—in his late 30s and went on to be the subject of four well-received solo shows at Betty Parsons between 1955 and 1961.

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