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For Immediate Release:

Joe Overstreet To the North Star

**40 Great Jones Street, New York
November 5, 2025 – January 10, 2026**

Book Signing + Reading: Wednesday, November 5, 2025 | 5PM

Opening Reception: Wednesday, November 5, 2025 | 6–8PM

Eric Firestone Gallery is pleased to announce *To the North Star*, a survey exhibition of the work of Joe Overstreet (1933–2019). Overstreet was an artist and activist who pushed the boundaries of painting through decades of experimentation, reflecting on the Black experience within his abstractions. He is the subject of a recent survey exhibition organized by the Menil Collection, Houston, and curated by Natalie Dupêcher, which is traveling to the Mississippi Museum of Art and opening November 1.

The gallery exhibition will include work from across the artist's career and technical approaches. These include the shaped canvas paintings

of the 1960s that reflect the Civil Rights Movement, and the *Flight Patterns* of the early 1970s – unstretched canvases tethered with ropes to the wall, ceiling, and floor. Finally, paintings of the 1990s will be on view: stretched canvases with ropes adorning their surfaces. Works on paper from throughout the artist's career will accompany the canvases.



Joe Overstreet with *Indian Sun*, 1969, published in "Object: Diversity," *Time Magazine*, April 6, 1970, p. 86. Photograph by Frank Lerner.

This survey exhibition reflects significant new scholarship, allowing for a fuller understanding of the artist's

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Joe Overstreet, *Ungawa - Black Power*, 1968
oil on canvas
72 x 48 in.

career, his own statements, and the socio-political milieu that informed his aesthetics and community activism. Through this continued re-evaluation we recognize how deeply Overstreet's abstractions were embedded with personal and political content. This scholarship is compiled in the recent publication *Joe Overstreet, Taking Flight* by Natalie Dupêcher, with contributions by Darby English, Richard Hylton, Corrine Jennings, Rebecca Rabinow, Ishmael Reed, Abbe Schriber and Jacqueline Siegel, published by the Menil Collection, Houston and distributed by Yale University Press, 2025. It will be celebrated with a book event at the gallery on November 5 at 5 PM, with readings by Dupêcher and Reed.

Notably, the gallery's exhibition will include *Flight Pattern* paintings recently re-discovered in the artist's studio. These paintings, known from historic photographs, were previously assumed to be lost and will be on view for the first time in over five decades.

A desire to "open up space," in all senses, infuses Overstreet's work. In 1967, Overstreet began to create shaped canvas

constructions, building by hand intricate, angular stretchers. For the first time since a 1969 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, the major shaped painting *Ungawa - Black Power* (1968), from this body of work, will be on view. "I felt abstract expressionism had pushed painting all the way to the boundaries," he later recalled, "and there was no place to go except outside the framework." With the shapes, patterns, and titles, he looked to non-Western sources, like Aztec, Benin, and Egyptian art. Overstreet placed this work in the context of a search for freedom from oppression, stigma, and political and economic repression.

With his *Flight Pattern* paintings, which turn two-dimensional canvases into three-dimensional activations of the environment, Overstreet was concerned with a spatial transformation. As he wrote in 1970, an unstretched canvas could be rolled up and easily transported, but upon unrolling, it became a "scroll canvas" suspended on ropes that could "expand forever." These ropes could metaphorically "run to the farthest points of the universe." The canvas became sculpture and space. Considering the idea of the North Star as a beacon towards freedom for enslaved people inspired the artist to look upward, to point his paintings towards the ceiling, and to use ropes.

The desire to open up space continued outside of the artist's studio; Overstreet was committed to his community

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of Black artists. Overstreet, and his wife Corrine Jennings, recognized that many Black artists faced a lack of space to work, experiment, and present their art. They often needed both resources and institutional support. To that end, Jennings and Overstreet created Kenkeleba House, which began as an interdisciplinary project space in a Bowery loft, and grew into a six-story East Village building. In one of the many “sweat-equity” projects realized in 1970s New York, Overstreet, Jennings, and their associates transformed a deteriorating building on East Second Street into an exhibition and artist studio complex – which has since presented thousands of artists of color, and remains active today.



Joe Overstreet, *Untitled*, 1970
acrylic on canvas
116 x 117 in.

About the Artist

Born in rural Conehatta, Mississippi, Joe Overstreet began his career in the California Bay Area in the early 1950s, taking classes at several arts colleges, exhibiting in local galleries and jazz clubs, and participating in the Beat scene. In 1958, he moved to New York, where he joined a vibrant community of young artists exploring the possibilities of non-representational abstraction. In the late 1960s, Overstreet began working with shaped canvases. By 1970, with the *Flight Pattern* works, he had taken painting completely off the wall. After this series, he continued to experiment with new approaches to painting, investigating its spatial and textural possibilities. Committed to the intersection of social activism and artistic practice, Overstreet cofounded Kenkeleba House, a studio building and gallery, in 1978 with his wife, curator and historian Corrine Jennings, and writer Samuel C. Floyd. Working until his last years, Overstreet died in New York City in 2019.

Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight, originated at the Menil Collection, Houston, and will be on view at the Mississippi Museum of Art through January 26, 2026. Overstreet was featured in the 2021-22 traveling exhibition *The Dirty South*, curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver for the Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond, VA. The work on view was recently acquired for the permanent collection of the VMFA. Overstreet was also featured in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (2017) at Tate Britain, London, England, which travelled to the Brooklyn

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Joe Overstreet, *Untitled*, 1990
oil and mixed media on canvas
84 x 108 in.

Museum, NY and other U.S. venues. Most recently Overstreet was included in the 2024 exhibition *Edges of Ailey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Overstreet's work can also be found in the collections of the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA; The Brooklyn Museum, NY; Art Bridges, Crystal Bridges, Bentonville, AR; the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, MA; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY; the Joyner/Giuffrida Collection; Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MS; Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, Waltham, MA; the Rennie Collection, Vancouver, Canada; and the Menil Collection, Houston, TX.

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For further information, contact: press@ericfirestonegallery.com