

# eric firestone gallery

**Ellsworth Ausby** (b. Portsmouth, VA, 1942; d. New York, NY, 2011) was an artist dedicated to reflecting a deeply rooted African aesthetic and cultural heritage. For one of his earliest exhibitions, he wrote “Blackness is the source of the colors, which is the Light.”

Early in his career, Ausby was included in several significant museum exhibitions of African-American art: *New Black Artists* (1969), Brooklyn Museum of Art; *Afro-American Artists, New York and Boston* (1970), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; *Some American History* (1970), commissioned by the Menil Foundation and organized by Larry Rivers for the Rice University Institute of the Arts; and *Contemporary Black Artists in America* (1971), Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Ausby’s paintings of the late 1960s combine stylized biomorphic and figurative elements with geometric shapes and patterning.

Ausby’s first solo exhibition, of totemic paintings with vividly colored planes, was held in 1970 at the Cinque Gallery. Cinque was founded in 1969 by Romare Bearden, Ernest Crichlow, and Norman Lewis to exhibit the work of both new and established African-American artists. The gallery was named after Joseph Cinqué, the leader of the Amistad slave ship mutiny of the 1830s. In 1972, the Peale House Galleries of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts staged a two-person exhibition with Ausby and James Phillips. By this time, Ausby was making unstretched canvases that were attached directly to the wall. These works utilize high keyed color and suggest sonic patterns and rhythms; the titles are based on 1970s Black colloquial vernacular.

In 1977, Ausby traveled to Nigeria where he participated in the African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC). In an interview with La Verne Cody Gittens, Ausby stated, “My generation is reidentifying with this African ancestry and African past. My travels there, and what I realized I was interested in doing, has been very much connected with traditional (African) art approaches like clothing design, use of color, polyrhythms in music, as well as patterns in textiles... When I was in Nigeria exhibiting the art scholars and Professors at the Universities felt at home with my images.”

Ausby was employed in the late 1970s by the Cultural Council Foundation as an artist under the CETA program to bring arts programming and projects to underserved communities. From 1978-79 Ausby received CETA artist grants that allowed him to create major public works. One of these was *InnerSpace/OuterSpace*, a multimedia performance piece conceived and directed by Ausby that included dance, poetry, music, and drama, accompanied by lights and slides of Ausby’s paintings and sculpture. It was performed at the Museum of Natural History, New York. A sculptural work from this period was recently included in the 2024 exhibition *Edges of Ailey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

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Ausby married artist Jamillah Jennings in 1974. The two artists were included in the major survey *Afro-American Abstraction*, curated by April Kingsley at P.S.1 in 1980. In 2005 Ausby was commissioned by the MTA to design the stained-glass mural *Space Odyssey* at the Marcy Avenue subway station in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Ausby taught painting at the School of Visual Arts from 1979 until his death in 2011. His work is represented in the Menil Collection, Houston, TX; and The Saint Louis Art Museum, MO.

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