

eric firestone gallery

Paul Waters (b. Philadelphia, PA, 1936) is an African-American artist whose work combines a thoughtful symbolic language with a highly intuitive and playful process. Waters exclusively uses his hands and fingers to apply paint, and a pair of scissors as his “drawing” tool. His canvases are filled with repeated silhouettes made from cut canvas shapes, which reflect his interest in teaching and children's books, as well as both indigenous traditions and Western painting.

Growing up, Waters attended Saturday classes at Philadelphia's Fleisher Memorial Art School. It was there that he recalls, “They let me use my fingers instead of brushes.” His creative expression also blossomed out of his fascination with his parents' collection of original African art and artifacts; from tribes including the Bariba, Ndebele, and the Toma People. His admiration of African art—as well as rock and cave paintings—is reflected throughout his oeuvre.

Waters graduated from Goddard College in Plainfield, VT, and received his Master's degree from the Bank Street College of Education in New York, NY. He traveled to Europe, Africa, Asia, the South Pacific, and South America before making his home and studio on the Bowery in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the '60s and becoming involved in the art community there. He studied closely with Romare Bearden and Hungarian Abstract Expressionist Joseph Fulop.

Between 1965 and 1972, Paul Waters made large-scale paintings in which painted and cut canvas shapes are collaged onto primed canvases. The silhouetted forms suggest dancers, birds, female warriors, and nature, as well as purely geometric, abstract shapes. They are lyrical works often stained with rich color that suggests naturally occurring hues and pigments. These works celebrate the mythical, aboriginal painting, as well as the work of Matisse.

Waters has also been an influential arts educator and cultural programmer throughout his career. He served as Director of the Department of Community Affairs, Newark Museum, Newark, NJ from 1972–75; and Director of the Jamaica Arts Center, Queens, NY from 1975–79. Waters curated a major exhibition for the Newark Museum in 1971: *Black Artists: Two Generations*.

Waters was the subject of a solo exhibition in 1968 at the Brooklyn Children's Museum. He was included in several historic shows of African-American artists in the 1970s, including *Afro American Artists: New York and Boston*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA (1970); and *Contemporary Black Art: A Selected Sampling*, Florida International University, Miami, FL (1977). He was most recently featured in the exhibition *Edges of Ailey* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, closing in February of 2025. He is represented by Eric Firestone Gallery where he was the subject of a major solo presentation in 2022, *Paul Waters: In the Beginning, Paintings from the 1960s and 70s*. Paul Waters still lives and works on the Bowery today.

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