

eric firestone gallery

Joe Overstreet (b. Conehatta, MS, 1933, d. New York, NY, 2019) was an artist and activist who pushed the boundaries of painting through decades of experiments in abstraction. He began his career in the Bay Area as a fixture of the Beat scene, living in the North Beach section of San Francisco. After moving to New York, he and his partner Corrine Jennings established Kenkeleba House, a gallery that has presented innumerable exhibitions of work by artists of color and women. As part of a generation of Black artists who fought for their visibility in an exclusionary art world, Overstreet was committed to creating paintings that stand alone on formal merit – independent of his identity – and taking an organizer's role in providing exhibition opportunities to his peers. 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 lynching.

By 1967, Overstreet started working with shaped canvases. He 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 said, "I was beginning to look at my art in a different light, not as protest, but as a statement about people...By 1970 I had broken free from notions that paintings had to be on the wall in rectangular shapes." Overstreet was a major innovator in terms of taking the canvas off the wall. In his "Flight Pattern" series of the early 1970s, painted, unstretched canvases are tethered with ropes to the ceiling, walls, and floor. Many assume mandala-like imagery. Overstreet states, "I began to make paintings that were tent-like. I was making nomadic art, and I could roll it up and travel...We had survived with our art by rolling it up and moving it all over... I felt like a nomad myself, with all the insensitivity in America."

For decades, Overstreet was a relentless experimenter, investigating the spatial and textural possibilities of painting as well as complex cultural histories. Overstreet's work can be found in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum, NY; Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MS; Rennie Collection, Vancouver, Canada; and the Menil Collection, Houston, TX. Since the 1960s, Overstreet has been part of watershed, historical museum exhibitions including *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (2017) at Tate Britain, London, England, which travelled to the Brooklyn Museum, NY and other U.S. venues.

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