

The Menil Collection Announces *Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight*

Opening in Houston in January 2025, the presentation will highlight three monumental series in the artist's career



HOUSTON—May 15, 2024—The Menil Collection announces *Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight*, the first major museum exhibition in nearly thirty years devoted to the work of this pioneering abstract painter. Renowned for his innovative approach to nonrepresentational painting, American artist Joe Overstreet (1933–2019) consistently sought to intertwine abstraction and social politics. This presentation will include his landmark Flight Pattern series of radially suspended paintings from the early 1970s and bodies of work from the 1960s and 1990s. Overstreet made a significant contribution to postwar art, positioning abstraction as an expansive tool for exploring the idea of freedom and the Black experience in the United States. ***Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight* will be on view at the Menil January 24–July 13, 2025.**

“The Menil is proud to present this monographic exhibition of Joe Overstreet’s most crucial work,” said Rebecca Rabinow, Director, The Menil Collection. “In 2018, the Menil installed two of the artist’s Flight Pattern works that John and Dominique de Menil acquired in the early 1970s. A conversation with the artist about his paintings and how they should be installed became the catalyst for this exhibition.”

Overstreet's best-known series, the Flight Patterns from 1970–1972, will be central to the exhibition. To create these works, Overstreet applied fields of bright, bold color to unstretched canvases that he suspended with taut ropes from floor, wall, and ceiling. The artist used the ropes to evoke the brutal history of lynching in the United States, yet he perceived these dynamic works as hopeful and redemptive. He described them as “birds in flight,” able to “take off, to lift up, rather than be held down.” The Flight Patterns pushed the limits of the traditional medium of painting, liberating it from the wall and inaugurating a dynamic relationship between object, viewer, and architecture. This inventiveness was characteristic of his entire career.

The exhibition will situate the Flight Patterns alongside the pivotal bodies of work that preceded and followed them. In the 1960s, the artist gave innovative form to his civil rights era work, building intricate, shaped stretchers by hand, often matching the form of the underlying structure with geometric painted compositions. In the 1990s, following an important trip to Senegal and the House of Slaves memorial on Gorée Island, he created a series of monumental abstract canvases that address the African diaspora and explore questions of inheritance and memory.

“We have been honored to work closely with the estate of Joe Overstreet for more than five years to create this important presentation of his work,” said Natalie Dupêcher, Associate Curator of Modern Art, The Menil Collection. “The three bodies of work highlighted in this exhibition reveal the artist’s understanding of abstraction as not just as an aesthetic movement, but as a tool for exploring larger questions of identity, history, and social justice.”

Organized in collaboration with the artist’s estate, the exhibition will include key loans from United States museums, as well as extensive work from the estate that has never been exhibited. Curated by Natalie Dupêcher, Associate Curator of Modern Art, The Menil Collection, the exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with new scholarly texts.

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.

About the Menil Collection

Philanthropists and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil established the Menil Foundation in 1954 to foster greater public understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, culture, religion, and philosophy. In 1987, the Menil Collection’s main building opened to the public. Today, the Menil Collection consists of a group of art buildings and green spaces located within a residential neighborhood in central Houston. The Menil remains committed to its founders’ belief that art is essential to human experience and welcomes all visitors free of charge to its buildings and surrounding green spaces. menil.org

Image

Joe Overstreet, *Free Direction*, 1971. Acrylic on canvas with metal grommets and cotton rope, 89 x 131 x 22 ½ in. (226.1 x 332.7 x 57.1 cm) (canvas size). The Menil Collection, Houston. © Estate of Joe Overstreet/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Paul Hester

Press Contacts

The Menil Collection

Jennifer Greene, Communications Manager

(713) 525-9477 / jgreene@menil.org

Polskin Arts

Tommy Napier, Vice President

(212) 715-1694 / tommy.napier@finnpartners.com