The Menil Collection *News Release*

The Menil Collection Opens *Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight* January 24

Houston museum highlights three defining series in the artist's career

HOUSTON—*December 4, 2024*—The Menil Collection opens *Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight* on January 24, 2025, an exhibition focused on the vibrant, politically charged abstract paintings created by pioneering artist Joe Overstreet (1933–2019). On view through July 13, 2025, this presentation is organized chronologically and features Overstreet's landmark Flight Pattern series of radially suspended paintings from the early 1970s, alongside crucial bodies of work that preceded and followed them. *Taking Flight* is the first major museum exhibition in nearly thirty years devoted to the work of this avant-garde artist.

Renowned for his innovative approach to nonrepresentational painting, Overstreet stood at the forefront of artists who sought to intertwine abstraction and social politics. He 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.

"The Menil is proud to present *Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight*," said Rebecca Rabinow, Director, The Menil Collection. "John and Dominique de Menil's support of the artist began in the early

1970s when a painting was commissioned by him for an exhibition about the African American experience that the couple sponsored in Houston, Texas. Soon after, they purchased two of Overstreet's Flight Pattern works and invited him back to Houston for a solo show. Now, some fifty years later, the Menil Collection looks forward to sharing his work with a new generation of visitors, both through this beautiful, thought-provoking exhibition, and the illustrated scholarly catalogue that provides fascinating insight and context for the appreciation of this artist's work."

In 1967, the artist began to build intricate, shaped canvas constructions, departing from the more representational style he had pursued in the early 1960s. In these works, Overstreet combined new shapes and often matched the form of the underlying structure with geometric painted compositions. *Justice, Faith, Hope, and Peace*, 1968, is emblematic of this breakthrough, summoning references to current political events in a resolutely abstract language.

Overstreet's best-known paintings, the Flight Patterns from 1970–1972, are central to the exhibition. To create these works, which the artist called "tent-like" and "nomadic," he boldly applied brightly colored paint to unstretched canvases, which he suspended with taut ropes from the gallery's floor, wall, and ceiling. The ropes were intended to evoke the brutal history of lynching in the United States, yet he also 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." In works like *Free Direction*, 1972, Overstreet pushed the limits of the traditional medium of painting so that the piece appeared to leap off the wall, thus inaugurating a dynamic relationship between object, viewer, and architecture. This inventiveness was characteristic of his entire career.

In the 1990s, following an inspiring trip to Senegal and the House of Slaves memorial on Gorée Island, Overstreet created a series of monumental abstractions that address the African diaspora and explore questions of inheritance and memory. He described the Senegal paintings as "personal, emotional examinations of my past, present and future." Works such as *Gorée*, 1993, display the artist's material experimentation, which gave the paintings a weathered, luminous translucency, evoking the country's "drifting opaque dust" and "searing white sunlight."

"We have been honored to work closely with the estate of Joe Overstreet to create this significant presentation of his work," said Natalie Dupêcher, Associate Curator of Modern Art, The Menil Collection. "Overstreet's formally adventurous, culturally engaged, and politically responsive abstract work brilliantly expands the canon of 20th century art."

Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight includes key loans from United States museums and private collections, as well as major paintings from the estate that have rarely been on view. 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 and installation images from the exhibition, available in late spring.

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 nonrepresentational abstraction. In the late 1960s, Overstreet began working with shaped canvases. By 1970, with the Flight Pattern works, he had let his painting leap 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, an arts organization and gallery, in 1974 with his wife, curator and historian Corrine Jennings, and writer Samuel Floyd. Working until his last years, Overstreet died in New York City in 2019.

Related Programs

Lecture by Richard Hylton: 'To Go Past Slavery:' Rupture and Rapture in Joe Overstreet's 'Senegal Paintings'
Thursday, February 6, 7 p.m.

DACAMERA Stop, Look, and Listen!
In response to *Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight*
Copresented with DACAMERA
Saturday, February 15, 3 p.m.

Curator Talk: Natalie Dupêcher on *Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight*
Sunday, March 23, 3 p.m.

Salon with Guest Artist Cécile McLorin Salvant
Copresented with DACAMERA
Thursday, April 17, 7:30 p.m.

Panel Discussion: *Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight*
Wednesday, June 11, 7 p.m.

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

Funding

Major funding for this exhibition is provided by the Henry Luce Foundation. Additional support comes from Clare Casademont and Michael Metz; Barbara and Michael Gamson; Janet and Paul Hobby; Linda and George Kelly; the National Endowment for the Arts; The Oshman Foundation; and the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

Images

1. Joe Overstreet, *HooDoo Mandala*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas with metal grommets and cotton rope, 90 × 89 1/2 in. (228.6 × 227.3 cm). Neil Lane Collection. © Estate of Joe Overstreet/Artist Rights Society (ARS), courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery, New York. Photo: Jenny Gorman
2. Joe Overstreet, *Gorée*, 1993. Oil on canvas, 120 × 144 in. (304.8 × 365.8 cm). © Estate of Joe Overstreet/Artist Rights Society (ARS), courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery, New York. Photo: Samuel Glass

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