

Joe Overstreet
TAKING FLIGHT



In space-defying and boundary-pushing paintings, Joe Overstreet (1933–2019) intertwined abstraction and social politics. He spent over sixty years investigating the possibilities of paint, innovating novel approaches to the medium. In his work, abstraction took flight in new ways, becoming an expansive tool for exploring national history and ideas of racial belonging as a Black artist in the United States.

This exhibition focuses on three of his most significant series: the shaped canvas constructions from the 1960s; the unstretched paintings from the 1970s, known as Flight Patterns; and the monumental abstractions from the 1990s. Through these works, he crafted formally adventurous and culturally responsive work that eschews representation and challenges twentieth-century art history.

THE SHAPED CANVASES

In 1967, Overstreet began to create shaped canvas constructions, hand-building stretchers with triangular protrusions and notched cutouts. In so doing, he was among a cohort of young artists, including Ed Clark and Frank Stella, intrigued by the possibilities of a non-rectangular picture format. For Overstreet, though, this move was not just an aesthetic choice. The late 1960s witnessed intense debates around the role that visual art and abstraction could play in the struggle for Black liberation. Overstreet participated in those discussions and drew inspiration from, in his words, “African systems of design, mythology and philosophy.”

The artist embedded references to the Civil Rights movement in the titles of these paintings. *Untitled (Sun Ra series)*, 1967, is named for Sun Ra, the jazz composer, Afrofuturist, and the artist’s friend. Overstreet began *Justice, Faith, Hope, and Peace* on April 5, 1968, the day after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated and, through its title, summoned King’s pacifist rhetoric. With *North Star*, 1968 (right), he suggested the star’s pivotal role in African American history, as a beacon that led enslaved people toward freedom.

Joe Overstreet with his painting *North Star* in 1968. © Estate of Joe Overstreet/Artist Rights Society (ARS), courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery, New York



THE FLIGHT PATTERNS

In 1970, Overstreet embarked upon a new series: unstretched, abstract paintings suspended in space. To create them, he spliced, stained, and stitched together canvases, then tethered them to the wall, floor, and ceiling with ropes. He remarked that his intention was to animate painting: “They actually move, they’re organic, they become alive.”

First in the series were works like *Evolution* and *HooDoo Mandala*, both 1970: unstretched canvases hung several inches from, but parallel to, the wall. From there, Overstreet began to orchestrate three-dimensional arrangements of fabric and rope, as in *We Came from There to Get Here*, 1970, and *Free Direction*, 1971. The resultant forms bend around empty space, transgressing the traditional boundaries of two-dimensional paintings and inaugurating a dynamic relationship between object, viewer, and architecture. Overstreet infused these works with his longstanding interest in geometry, using rope to pull the cloth into flat planes.

A crucial tension animates the Flight Patterns: the kinetic dynamism of the loose, unstretched canvases, held in check by the tight rigging of the cotton ropes. For the artist, this physical tension was also metaphoric. Whereas the buoyant, colorful cloths seem to soar like “birds in flight,” in his words, the cords hold them down, with noose-style knots that intentionally reference violence. Overstreet described these works’ relevance to ongoing national events, including the Vietnam War, saying, “The world seems to be tugging with this stretch-pull system.... I feel that this pressure point that comes out in all Black art is in my art.”

In 1971, Overstreet presented the Flight Patterns in a solo show in New York. John and Dominique de Menil purchased two and made plans to bring the group to Houston. That exhibition opened in 1972, displayed first at the Institute for the Arts at Rice University (right), then the De Luxe Theater, a former cinema in the city’s historically Black Fifth Ward that had been recently converted into a gallery space. The artist traveled to Houston for both presentations, and the show earned effusive reviews.



Installation view of Joe Overstreet at the Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1972. Courtesy of the Menil Archives

THE SENEGAL PAINTINGS

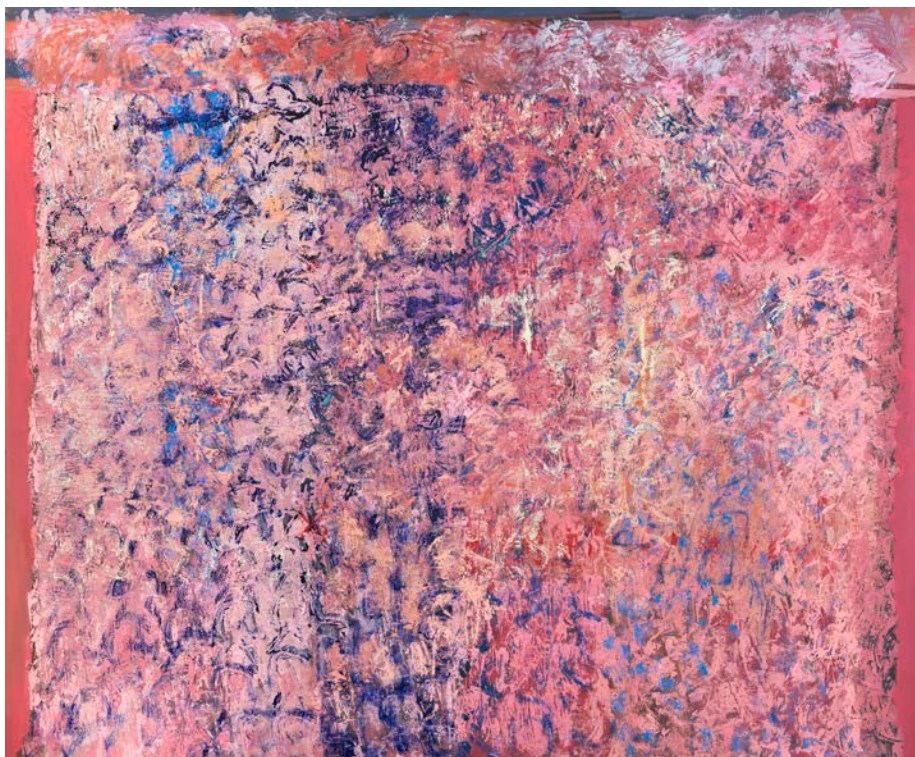
In December 1992, at age 59, Overstreet spent two weeks in Dakar, Senegal. While there, he visited Gorée Island, which had functioned as a major slave-trading depot on the African coast for three centuries, until its closure in 1848. On the island, he walked through the House of Slaves, where a warren of cells culminated in the infamous “Door of No Return”—a narrow portal to the sea from which captured Africans, sold into slavery, were shipped across the Atlantic Ocean.

Deeply moved by the experience, on his return to New York, Overstreet began a group of monumental abstract paintings, collectively titled *Facing the Door of No Return*. Several titles reference the slave trade, like *Cross Currents*, 1993, with its allusion to the treacherous transatlantic journey; and *Exit Dust*, 1993, which suggests enslaved Africans’ forced departure from the continent. In *Gorée*, a vertical band of blue paint recalls the strip of ocean visible through the Door of No Return. The artist also invoked Senegal through the paintings’ materiality. By mixing oil paint with beeswax, he gave the surfaces a luminosity that evokes the country’s hot, dusty sunlight.

The artist described the Senegal paintings as “emotional examinations of my past, present and future,” memorializing his own ancestral story and the centuries of history that passed through the Door of No Return. They encapsulate the hallmarks of his oeuvre: the technical experimentation, the engagement with abstract form, the commitment to exploring the Black experience, and the entwinement of national history with personal narrative. And like all paintings in this show, they demonstrate the political power of abstraction.

Born in the rural town of Conehatta, Mississippi, Overstreet began his career in the California Bay Area in the 1950s. In 1958, he relocated to New York, where he joined a vibrant community of Black artists, musicians, and writers on the Lower East Side. In these years, he incorporated events from the Civil Rights movement into what he called “social protest paintings,” such as The New Jemima (right). In the late 1960s, however, he began to embrace abstraction, which would inform his work through the end of his career. Committed to the intersection of social activism and artistic practice, in 1974 Overstreet cofounded Kenkeleba House, a pioneering arts organization and gallery, with his wife, curator and art historian Corrine Jennings, and the writer Samuel Floyd. Today, Kenkeleba is an established nonprofit with exhibition and studio spaces, housed in two buildings in downtown Manhattan.

Text adapted from the essay “Taking Flight” in the accompanying exhibition catalogue, available at the Menil Bookstore beginning in late spring.



Above *Gorée*, 1993. Oil and beeswax 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

Right *The New Jemima*, 1964, 1970. Acrylic on canvas over plywood construction, 102 ³/₈ × 60 ³/₄ × 17 ¹/₄ in. (260 × 154.3 × 43.8 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. © Estate of Joe Overstreet/Artist Rights Society (ARS)



Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight is curated by Natalie Dupêcher, Associate Curator of Modern Art, The Menil Collection.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

All events take place in the main building unless otherwise noted.

LECTURE

Richard Hylton: 'To Go Past Slavery': Rupture and Rapture in Joe Overstreet's Senegal Paintings

Thursday, February 6, 7–8 p.m.

MUSIC

Stop, Look, and Listen! Copresented with DACAMERA

Saturday, February 15, 3–4 p.m.

CURATOR TALK

Natalie Dupêcher

Sunday, March 23, 3–3:30 p.m.

MUSIC

Salon with Cécile McLorin Salvant. Copresented with DACAMERA

Thursday, April 17, 7:30–8:30 p.m.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight

Wednesday, June 11, 7–8 p.m.

The De Luxe Theatre (3303 Lyons Avenue) will present a response to the works of Joe Overstreet in their exhibition space from February 1–15, 2025.

All public programs are free and open to everyone.

Additional programming information can be found at menil.org/events.

Menil members enjoy additional events.

To learn more and join, please visit menil.org/support.

Exhibition Dates

January 24–July 13, 2025

Cover *Mr. and Mrs. Percy*, 1970. Acrylic on constructed canvas, 58 × 48 × 84 in. (147.3 × 121.9 × 213.4 cm) (installed canvas dimensions). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Ives Contemporary Purchase Fund.

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