

Joe Overstreet, Painter and Activist, Is Dead at 85

Like many of his fellow African-American artists, he infused his work with burning political issues of the 1960s and '70s.



By **Holland Cotter**

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Joe Overstreet, an artist and activist who in the 1960s took abstract painting into the sculptural dimension and later created a home in New York for artists who had been ignored by the mainstream, died on June 4 in Manhattan. He was 85.

His Manhattan gallery, Eric Firestone, said the cause was heart failure.

Mr. Overstreet belonged to a generation of contemporary African-American visual artists who came of age in the civil rights era and addressed the burning political issues of the day in a wide variety of forms and styles, from overt protest work to the subtlest geometric abstraction.

He was particularly notable for removing canvases from the wall and suspending them in space, giving painting a sculptural dimension. He saw such pieces as, among other things, experiments in how to situate art and viewers in physical space.

Mr. Overstreet's work in the 1960s and '70s coincided with debates about the direction African-American art should take. One side insisted that it should be direct in its political content; the other argued that cultural progress demanded that artists be free to choose their modes of expression.



Untitled (1967), oil on linen construction with shaped support.
Joe Overstreet/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via Eric
Firestone Gallery, New York.

Mr. Overstreet, who was deeply involved in the Black Arts Movement, negotiated the divide inventively. Even his most abstract-looking work had implicit political dimensions. His cultural references were often to non-Western sources, ancient and modern: Islamic design, African patterning, South Asian mandalas.

His subtle merging of formal experiment with politically loaded content anticipated the work of many young artists today, including some represented in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, the showcase for contemporary art that opened in May at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

On a trip to Senegal in 1992 to participate in the Dakar biennial, Mr. Overstreet visited Gorée Island, once the final departure point for African slaves being shipped to the Americas. After returning to New York he produced a group of large geometric paintings titled “The Door of No Return,” in which the small final door through which slaves passed to the waiting ships appears as a dark shadow behind flurries of flower-colored oil paint.

Mr. Overstreet was born on June 20, 1933, in Conehatta, a small central Mississippi town populated largely by Native Americans in what is known as the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. His father was a mason, whose work, by Mr. Overstreet’s account, instilled in him his interest in constructed forms and shapes. The family moved to California in the 1940s, settling in Berkeley.

After attending high school in Oakland, Calif., Mr. Overstreet served part time in the merchant marine while enrolled in local art schools — first Contra Costa College in Richmond, then the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco (now the San Francisco Art Institute). Among his mentors was the painter Sargent Johnson, who mixed abstraction with racial and personal themes and used media associated more with craft than with fine art.

“Rhythm Change” (1970), acrylic on canvas.

Joe Overstreet/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via Eric Firestone Gallery, New York.

Mr. Overstreet was active in the Bay Area’s Beat scene in the early 1950s, exhibiting paintings in clubs and cafes and publishing a journal called *Beatitudes* out of his San Francisco studio. He was later part of a vital community of black artists in Los Angeles, where from 1955 to 1957 he worked as an animator for Walt Disney Studios.

With a close friend, the poet and jazz musician Bob Kaufman, he moved to New York City in 1958. There he met Romare Bearden, the influential African-American artist, whom Mr. Overstreet considered an inspiration; studied painting with Hale Woodruff; and struck up friendships with an older generation of Abstract Expressionists, among them Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning.

Mr. Overstreet experimented with a variety of painting styles in the early 1960s. In his Pop-like 1964 painting “The New Jemima,” he placed the familiar “mammy” figure seen on boxes of pancake mix against planes of bright color and armed her with a machine gun.

“The New Jemima” (1964), acrylic on fabric over plywood construction.

Joe Overstreet/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via Eric Firestone Gallery, New York.

“Strange Fruit” (1965), oil on linen.
Joe Overstreet/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via Eric
Firestone Gallery, New York.

His painting “Strange Fruit,” from about a year later, took its cue from several sources: the 1964 murder, not far from where Mr. Overstreet was born in Mississippi, of three civil rights workers, James Cheney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner; an anguished song about the lynching of a black man recorded by Billie Holiday, to which Mr. Overstreet, a jazz fan, listened repeatedly; and a photograph of a lynching. What resulted was a semiabstract tangle of expressionist images: fires burning, hooded figures converging, a pair of lifeless legs hanging.

The 1970s brought forth the series of shaped paintings that are Mr. Overstreet’s best-known work. He painted sheets of unstretched canvas with geometric patterns, some inspired by Buddhist tantric art; fitted the sheets with grommets; and suspended them in midair through an elaborate system of ropes attached to gallery walls, floors and ceilings.

“Innovation of Flight: Paintings 1967-1972,” at Eric Firestone Gallery in 2018.
Joe Overstreet/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via Eric Firestone Gallery, New York.

The titles of some of these three-dimensional series — “Flight Patterns,” for example — evoke references to sails, kites or aircraft, but the initial impetus came from images of lynched figures, and from the idea of tents carried for shelter by escaped slaves and immigrants on the run.

Speaking of these paintings in a 2003 interview with the artist Graham Lock, Mr. Overstreet said: “I was trying to create a reflection of what in my past I had felt had run parallel: Native Americans, African nomadic people, black people here who had no homes — there was a lot of homelessness in those years. We had survived with our art by rolling it up and moving it all over. So I made this art you could hang anyplace. I felt like a nomad myself, with all the insensitivity in America.”

Untitled (1972), acrylic on canvas.
Joe Overstreet/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via Eric Firestone Gallery, New York.

He returned to the Bay Area in 1970 to teach at California State College at Hayward, but four years later he moved back to New York permanently. There he met and married the artist and teacher Corrine Jennings.

Working with her and the writer Samuel C. Floyd, he rehabilitated a tenement building on East Second Street in the East Village, where in 1974 he opened Kenkeleba House, a nonprofit interdisciplinary residential center for artists — including many of African, Asian, Latin or Native

American descent — to whom the New York art world was inhospitable.

“Saint Expedite I” (1971), acrylic on constructed canvas with metal grommets and cotton rope. Joe Overstreet/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via Eric Firestone Gallery, New York.

Kenkeleba House, named for a West African plant said to have medicinal and spiritual properties, included an exhibition space, the Wilmer Jennings Gallery. (The painter Wilmer Jennings was Ms. Jennings’s father.) Still active, the gallery has specialized in presenting historical exhibitions of overlooked figures, like the 20th-century abstract painter Norman Lewis and the 19th-century landscape painter Edward Mitchell Bannister, as well as shows of artists who would gain renown, many of them women.

Mr. Overstreet is survived by Ms. Jennings; his children Veronica Chavis and Dominik, Jahn and Jamahl Overstreet; a sister, La Verda Allen; and a brother, Harry.

Mr. Overstreet in March 2018. “We had survived with our art by rolling it up and moving it all over,” he said. “So I made this art you could hang anyplace.” Paul Bruinooge/Patrick McMullan

In the 2000s, Mr. Overstreet increasingly mixed media — spray paint, fabric, shaped supports — as if to break down Modernist hierarchies. Busy overseeing Kenkeleba House, he kept a distance from the mainstream art world. He had only one retrospective, “Joe Overstreet: Works From 1957 to 1993,” at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton in 1996.

More recently, however, he gained attention as part of two major survey exhibitions: “Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980” at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2011, which traveled to MoMA PS1 in New York, and “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” which originated at the Tate Modern in London in 2017 and traveled to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas and the Brooklyn Museum.

“For me,” Mr. Overstreet said in the 2004 interview, “painting is not intellectual, it’s emotional; I have to feel empathetic, akin to situations. I paint things that I think about and feel.”

Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic. He writes on a wide range of art, old and new, and he has made extended trips to Africa and China. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2009.

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