

JOE Taking
OVERSTREET
Flight

November 1, 2025 - January 25, 2026



MISSISSIPPI
MUSEUM OF
ART

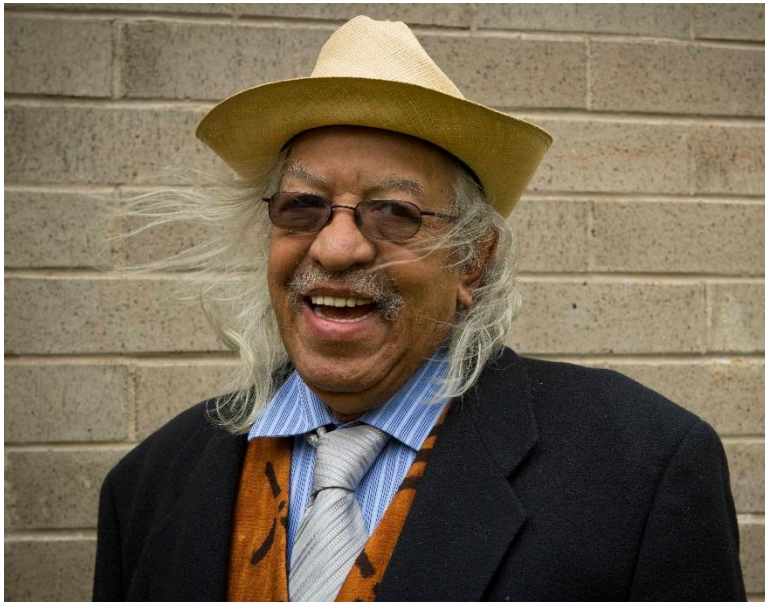


Photo credit: Nell's Dish

ABOUT JOE OVERSTREET

Joe Overstreet (1933-2019) loved to push the limits of painting, often stretching his work beyond the frame. He believed that art should be bold, alive, and connected to the people who experience it. Taking his works past the confines of flat, rectangular canvases, he sometimes cut them into shapes or suspended them with ropes and cords, so they floated in space. This construction, along with his later, monumentally sized works, made his artwork feel like an adventure you could step into rather than something you only looked at on a wall.

Overstreet was born in Conehatta, a small town in Mississippi. His art often explored themes such as freedom, history, and identity. He drew inspiration from African American culture, jazz music, and social movements, believing that art could speak for justice and build community.

When he later moved to New York, Overstreet became a part of the Black Arts Movement—a group of writers, musicians, and artists who believed art could help build pride, share history, fight for justice, and create change. In addition to making his own art, Overstreet supported the work of others. He co-founded Kenkeleba House in New York City, a gallery that gave opportunities to African American, Native American, Latino, and Asian American artists who were often overlooked by large museums.

The exhibition *Joe Overstreet: Taking Flight* includes works from three key phases of his career: angular, geometric constructions from the 1960s; the sculptural *Flight Pattern* series from the 1970s; and the large-scale, immersive *Door of No Return* series from the 1990s. “Like birds in flight,” as Overstreet once described, his paintings embody a restless tendency “to take off, to lift up, rather than be held down.”

Overstreet’s work reminds us that art can lift us up, spark our imaginations, and bring people together.

"I made a breakthrough in my painting in 1967 when I began to look at shapes and rectangles. I began collaging these and other shapes to break the picture plane of European rectangular painting. I wanted a different source for a new beginning."

- Joe Overstreet



*Justice, Faith, Hope, & Peace, 1968, Acrylic on constructed canvas, 4 panels, 89 7/8 x 191 3/8 x 3 in.,
Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery, New York*

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING

When looking at this work, what do you notice?

What colors stand out to you?

- How would you describe the colors you see?
- What repeating colors do you observe?
- What are you noticing about the placement of the colors?

What shapes do you see?

- How do those shapes interact with one another?
- What do the shapes remind you of?

This work is over 7 feet tall and almost 16 feet wide. What do you think the process for creating such a large and irregularly shaped painting would be like?

- How is this work constructed?

The title of this work is *Justice, Faith, Hope, and Peace*. Take a moment to think about each of those four words.

- Can you think of any phrases or quotes that have any of these words in them?
- Are you familiar with the phrase, "No justice, no peace"? In what context or setting have you heard this phrase used?
- What do you think Joe Overstreet might have been trying to communicate through the title?
- Noticing that this work is made up of four panels, and the title is four words, how do you connect the title to the image?
- How do you see justice in the first panel? Faith in the second panel? Hope in the third? Peace in the fourth?

Joe Overstreet began creating this work on April 5, 1968, the day after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. On this day, Overstreet visited a city park near his studio, home to the Temperance Fountain. (pictured here >>>)

- **In the creation of this work, Overstreet pulled inspiration from the assassination of Dr. King as well as from his lived experience and surroundings.**
- **King famously said, "I don't think there can be justice without peace, and I don't think there can be peace without justice."**
- **The Temperance Fountain has a four-sided stone canopy with the inscribed words: Faith, Hope, Charity and Temperance.**



Photo credit: Chris Wilbourn

Can you think of a time that you were moved to create? Maybe you were inspired by an event or experience. Maybe it was something joyous. Or maybe something troubling or upsetting.

- What did it feel like to channel that feeling into a creative response?

The Black Revolution in Art

"I think that a really great revolution will have a great picture ... we must understand what kind of pictures we must paint."

- Joe Overstreet

In 1965, a profile on Overstreet appeared in *Liberator*, a magazine covering Black radical politics. Headlined "The Black Revolution in Art," it was penned by Larry Neal (1937-1981), a writer and activist who would become a key spokesperson for the Black Arts Movement.

In an influential 1968 essay, Neal defined the Black Arts Movement as "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept." According to Neal, art played an important role in Black liberation struggles by supplying "an arsenal of feelings, images, and myths" that could compete with white cultural norms.

In his "social protest paintings" from the early 1960s, Overstreet depicted political figures like Malcolm X and Jesse Jackson, as well as current events like the 1963 Birmingham church bombing. One work radicalizes Aunt Jemima, a brand character used to market pancake mix: Overstreet's version of the "Mammy" stereotype brandishes a machine gun. (Following decades of criticism, the brand was finally retired in the wake of the George Floyd protests of 2020.) Overstreet later commented that representational art like *The New Jemima* (1964) makes it "easy for people to understand the rage, political consciousness, even the irony of the subject."

Can a picture without a subject have the same impact? What kind of "feelings, images, and myths" could abstract painting offer for "The Black Revolution in Art"? As Overstreet began making shaped canvases in the late 1960s, he and his peers energetically debated the notion of a Black aesthetic—and the place of abstraction within it.

A 1970 article in *Time* magazine begins with this question. It goes on to profile nine Black artists, including Overstreet, as well as several collaborative public murals in Boston, Chicago, and Detroit. Photographs of these wall paintings featuring recognizable Black cultural heroes are juxtaposed with portraits of individual artists including Daniel LaRue Johnson (1938-2017) and Overstreet, who proudly stand with their abstract sculptures and painting in a gallery and studio, respectively.

Whether and how each of these examples fits under the banner of "Black art" was a major topic of discussion in the Black Arts Movement. While some of Overstreet's peers opposed the category of Black art altogether, others questioned the aims, audiences, styles, content, and contexts of circulation that defined it.

Was a universal vision of Black art possible? Should it deliver a clear message and move people to political action? Should it be shown in public spaces, rather than museums and galleries? Should it encourage racial pride? How should an artist's racial identity relate to the content or style of their art?



Shadow and Light, 1971, Acrylic on canvas with grommets, 116 x 80 x 10 in., Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery, New York

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING

When looking at this work, what do you notice?

What do you notice about the colors?

- How do the colors and tones interact with one another?
- What do you notice about how the light affects the different colors?

What types of lines do you see?

- Where are you seeing curved lines?

What shapes do you see?

- How do the shapes interact with one another?

How would you describe the edges of this work?

- How do the shapes interact with the edges of this work?

Consider Overstreet's process for creating this work. Was it painted then cut out or cut into this shape and then painted? What makes you say that?

- Where do you think he began painting? What shape do you think was painted first? Last?

- What makes you say that?
- Do you see any brushstrokes visible? Describe them.

We've discussed shapes. Shapes being two-dimensional or flat. Do you notice anything that looks three-dimensional within the image?

The title of this work is *Shadow and Light*. What is a shadow?

- How does light affect shadow?
- How do you see shadow in this work?

How does this work differ from *Justice, Faith, Hope, and Peace*?

- **This work marks a shift in Overstreet's paintings. They were no longer attached to stretcher bars. We see a canvas tethered to the walls and floor.**

Why do you think Overstreet created this work with only black and gray tones when he has so many colorful works?

The accompanying text asks, "**Can a picture without a subject have the same impact? What kind of "feelings, images, and myths" could abstract paintings offer?"** What do you think?

What are you picking up on in this work? Is that based on what you are physically seeing? Is that based on your perspective and experiences? Explain.

Flight Patterns

"When we see something new, we are necessarily moved to where that thing is. The black artist, with all his different eyes, with all his different ways of seeing, can take us to new places... maybe places where we've never been, but places that we've always known somehow existed."

- Exhibition pamphlet, Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School

In 1970, Overstreet launched a new phase of his practice. In place of rigid, shaped stretchers, he began employing grommets and ropes to suspend painted canvases from the floors, ceilings, and walls. Overstreet named the resulting body of work Flight Patterns, comparing their structure to birds' wings and describing their capacity to "actually move" and "become alive."

Rope's tension and flexibility allow the Flight Patterns to respond dynamically to the architecture around them. Overstreet studied accounts of Egyptian rope stretching—an ancient method using rope and geometric calculations to survey land—and recalled assisting his father with similar techniques for laying concrete. The materials and methods of the Flight Patterns also evoke sail-rigging, which Overstreet had learned as a young man at sea with the Merchant Marine, and theatrical set design, which he had engaged at the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School.

Each of Overstreet's Flight Patterns bears a single, unassuming noose knot near the floor. Over and against this allusion to the brutal history of racial lynching, these vibrant works pitch, twist, shelter, and soar. Resisting a single defined shape, they move us as we look and invite us to see differently.



Great Mother of All, 1970, Acrylic on constructed canvas with metal grommets and cotton rope, 115 x 195 x 65 in., Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery, New York

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING

What colors do you see?

Follow the red and black lines:

- How do they interact with the green sections?
- Where do they start/stop?
- How do the ropes interact with these lines?

What shapes do you see?

- Where do you see repetition in the shapes?
- How do the colors define the shapes?

Looking closer at the work, can you find any seams or places where canvas panels have been stitched together?

- What are reasons why panels of canvas may have been added together?
- What point in the process might these panels have been added together?

This work is 195 inches long. What are you having to do to see this work fully?

What do you notice about the overall shape of the work?

How does the lighting interact with the work?

Think about the process of creating this large work. How do you think Overstreet created this work?

- Do you think this canvas was laid flat on a surface and painted?
- Are there any brushstrokes visible?
 - **You may have noticed faint lines in the texture of the paint. Overstreet would run a wire brush over the surface of the canvas, creating this texture.**
- At what point in the process do you think the grommets were added?

An interesting feature of Overstreet's series of Flight Pattern works like this one is that they have very few specific instructions for how they are to be hung or installed. This means that these works can completely change each time they are installed.

- How is this work similar to other works nearby? What differences can you notice?
- Imagine this work mounted flatly to the wall. How would that change how you experience this work?

Does this work resemble anything to you?

The title of this work is *Great Mother of All*. What does that title make you think of?

- How does this work reflect the title?

Facing the Door of No Return

"[These paintings] are based on the experience of returning where my ancestors left two or three hundred years ago, and on examining why slavery happened, and what happened to my family. They are what came to pass when I reentered the Door of No Return. In them, I am asking for an explanation, and struggling to explain it myself. The paintings are personal, emotional examinations of my past, present and future and arrived after years of blind darkness."

- Joe Overstreet

In 1992, Overstreet's partner Corrine Jennings curated an exhibition of contemporary African American art to represent the United States at *Dak'Art 92*, the first international art biennale in Dakar, Senegal. During their visit there, Overstreet was deeply impacted by a building on nearby Gorée Island known as the House of Slaves.

Infamous for its role as a central port in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the structure once confined dozens of Africans in a ten-by-twelve-foot chamber before they were forced to board ships to the Americas. An opening in the building that frames the sea beyond is known as the "Door of No Return."

The vast dimensions of the paintings in Overstreet's Facing the Door of No Return series allude to the architecture of enslavement he encountered on Gorée Island. However, as Jennings describes, the works are "anything but painful or violent in feeling." To capture the "searing white sunlight" and "drifting opaque dust" that Overstreet experienced in Senegalese marketplaces and baobab forests, he mixed oil paint with beeswax and transferred it to the canvas using pieces of newsprint. The resulting layered and luminous textures counter the weight of historical trauma; instead, they emanate what Jennings calls an aura "of rising, of uplift," enveloping viewers in shimmering color.



Cross Currents, 1993, Oil on canvas, 120 x 144 in., Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery, New York

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING

What are your initial observations about this painting?

Name the colors you're seeing.

- How would you describe the colors used in this work?
- Are the colors reminiscent of anything?

How do you think the paint was applied to this canvas?

- Where do you see differences in the texture or application of the paint?
 - **Overstreet mixed beeswax into his oil paint and applied it to the canvas with newsprint.**

What types of lines do you see in this work?

Is there any part of the painting that stands out to you? Do you recognize that formation in the central rectangle?

- **That is a Fibonacci spiral, a visual representation of a mathematical concept that depicts a consistent increase in a number sequence. Fibonacci spirals are found in nature as well as in art and design. In nature, these spirals represent a consistent pattern of growth and expansion. In art, the ratio represented in these spirals create balanced and harmonious designs.**
- Have you noticed a nod to mathematics or geometry in any of the other works? What did you notice?

What do you think the artist's process was in creating this monumental artwork?

The title of this painting is *Cross Currents*. What is a current?

- What is a cross current?
- What do you think happens when currents cross?
- How does the work reflect the title?
 - **As currents move through the ocean, the waves that bring in the tide into the shore curve into a spiral that can mathematically diagrammed to represent the Fibonacci spiral.**

This work and the others nearby in this gallery are part of a series of works that Overstreet created after he visited the country of Senegal in West Africa. During this trip, Overstreet visited the House of Slaves Memorial on Gorée Island, a significant location on the trans-Atlantic slave trade route.

- Knowing that the inspiration for this work was from a visit to a Senegalese island that was once the center for African captives to be taken to the Americas to be enslaved. Knowing that the title is *Cross Currents*. How does that shift how you see this work?