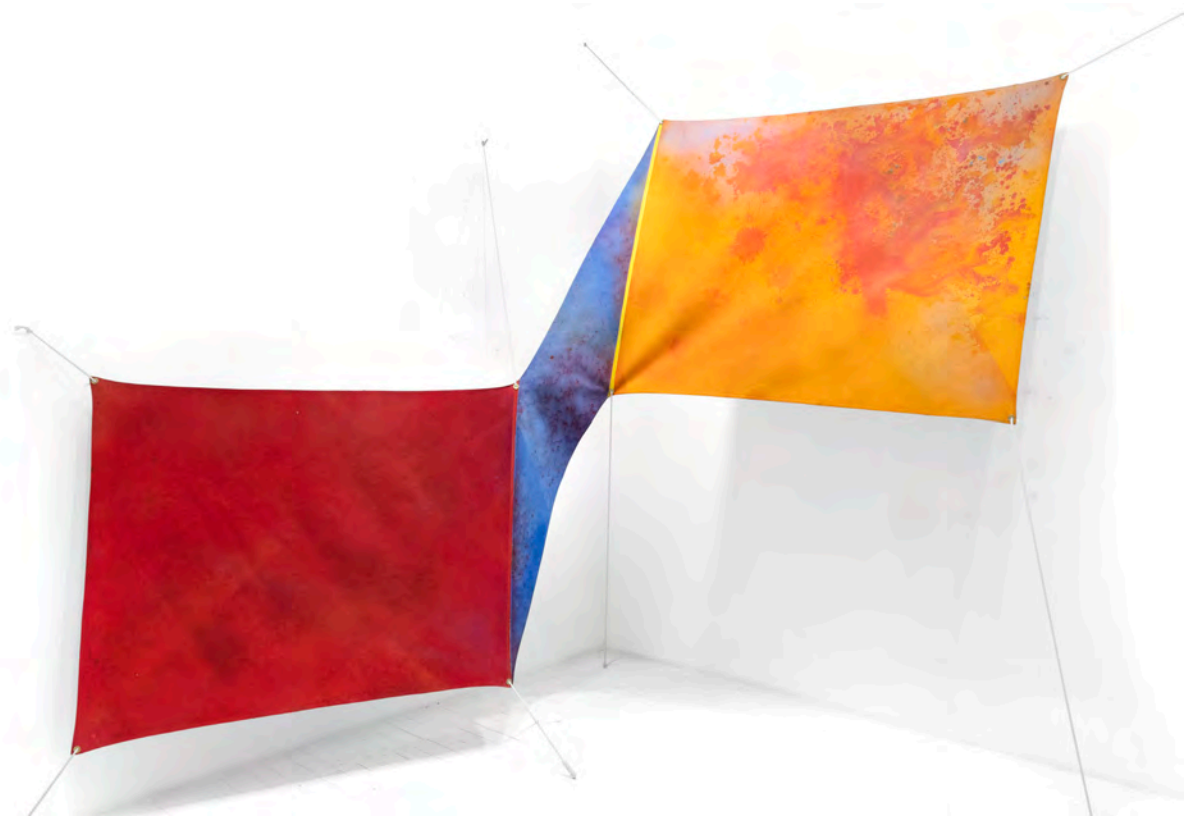
eric firestone gallery

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ARTSEEN | DECEMBER/JANUARY 2025–26

Joe Overstreet: *To the North Star*

By Saul Ostrow



Joe Overstreet, The Beginning of Love, 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 97 × 144 ¼ inches. Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery. © 2025 Joe Overstreet / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Upon entering the exhibition *To the North Star*, featuring works by Joe Overstreet (b. 1933, d. 2019) at Eric Firestone Gallery, one might initially assume that his career was defined by adapting to trends and approaches that dominated abstract painting from the mid-to-late twentieth century. His use of marks, traces, and fragments as compositional elements keeps interpretation fluid, rendering the works purposefully unresolved. Yet, it soon becomes apparent that something deeper is at play. The show presents iconic, hard-edged, shaped canvases from the 1960s, the audacious "Flight Patterns"

series—unstretched canvases tethered with ropes to walls, ceiling, and floor—from the 1970s, and expressive stretched canvases adorned with rope configurations from the 1990s. These works, for want of a better term, are all eccentric: they share no singular "signature style," and their chronology offers no conventional linear progression—if anything, it deepens the sense of ambiguity. Nor do the works overtly announce Overstreet's identity as a Black artist. Without this context, his pieces risk being read solely as exercises in formalism; only by recognizing his identity does their deeper significance emerge—revealing them, by analogy, as sites of resistance and struggle.

Installation view: Joe Overstreet: To the North Star, Eric Firestone Gallery, New York, 2025–26. Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery, New York. Photo: Sam Glass.

Born in the Deep South, Overstreet moved with his family to northern California during the Great Migration. He began making art in San Francisco, where he was part of the Beat scene of the fifties, but his most influential work was produced from the mid-sixties through the mid-eighties. After arriving in New York in 1958, he associated with the leading figures of postwar abstraction and the nonobjective arts—including Romare Bearden, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Larry Rivers, Hale Woodruff, and Hans Hofmann, many of whom he met at the Cedar Bar. In the 1960s, as a Civil Rights

activist, he took part in the Black Arts Movement and served as Art Director for Amiri Baraka's Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School in Harlem.

Deciding to work abstractly in the early 1960s was in many ways a bold move for a Black artist. It not only signaled a refusal to confine artistic expression to overt social or political content but also asserted that abstraction could serve as a vital tool for the creative exploration of Black identity and its struggles. Throughout the twentieth century, Black artists confronted both external pressures from a white-dominated art world and internal expectations shaped by figures like W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" described the psychological strain of Black artists constantly seeing themselves through the lens of dominant white culture, while Washington championed conformity and the belief that art should serve the advancement of the race. As a result, Black abstract art was doubly marginalized: dismissed by mainstream critics as peripheral and by some contemporaries as disengaged—or even as pandering to white tastes. This skeptical view persisted into the Civil Rights era, when direct political messaging in art was again privileged over formal experimentation or non-mimetic practices.

Pioneering Black abstract artists such as Norman Lewis, Richard Mayhew, and Charles Alston, among others, navigated intense pressures in the 1940s and 1950s. For Overstreet and his generation, embracing abstraction in the 1960s—while still a courageous step—was buoyed by a sense of growing optimism and possibility. This emerging cohort—including Ed Clark, Sam Gilliam, Alma Thomas, Al Loving, Howardena Pindell, Jack Whitten, Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Frank Bowling, and William T. Williams—challenged aesthetic and racial boundaries, forging innovative approaches to materials, form, and content. Despite the fact that many of these artists eventually had solo exhibitions in the Whitney Museum's lobby gallery in the 1970s, their work continued to receive limited critical or historical attention until recent years.

In this context, Overstreet's resistance to a single style, which was once regarded as a deficit, now reveals itself as an assertion that Black identity (like art itself) cannot be forced into a fixed model. His unusual formats and motifs are now understood as never just being about stylistic novelty; they anticipated debates about intersectionality, hybridity, and the impossibility of a "pure" or singular identity in a pluralistic society. Early on, Overstreet recognized that the real challenge he faced was not merely one of depicting his race and its struggle against subjugation but rather to address the struggle for self-definition within the weighted context of the histories and narratives imposed upon him. To this end, he enlisted the Post-Minimalist pursuit of material presence and bodily experience.

Installation view: Joe Overstreet: To the North Star, Eric Firestone Gallery, New York, 2025–26. Courtesy Eric Firestone Gallery, New York. Photo: Sam Glass.

His rope installations, shaped canvases, and the unstretched, rope-suspended "Flight Patterns" series reimagine painting as spatial and nomadic, never fixed. The canvases are tethered with ropes threaded through grommets and attached to ceilings, walls, and floors, becoming architectural forms that shift with each installation. Drawing from African, Native American, Tantric, and modernist vocabularies, Overstreet's paintings create open, mobile, polyvocal spaces that resist containment or limiting interpretation. Rather than relying on imagery or symbolic narrative, he embedded allusions to African American history: for example, ropes in his work recall both lynching and survival, while titles like *North Star* (painted in 1968 at the height of the Civil Rights Movement) evoke the Underground Railroad and the journey toward freedom. For Overstreet, engaging with these layered histories as a Black artist required an active resistance to stereotypes, and a commitment to keeping his work multifaceted, fluid, and evolving.

While critically interrogating essentialism, Overstreet's practice rejects the idea that identity or art can be neatly fixed or circumscribed. By emphasizing ambiguity and open-ended form, Overstreet's work raises fundamental questions about representing

Blackness, migration, and difference. In this sense, abstraction becomes a powerful expression of agency and self-definition within shifting historical and cultural contexts. Through his eclectic approach, he insists that identity is an ongoing negotiation rather than a simple correspondence.

Their persistent uncertainty is precisely what makes Overstreet's works both confounding and compelling: through material, form, and process, these works enact the dilemma of identity as unresolved, pluralistic, and irreducible. Rather than evading the complexities of Black identity (or identity in general), he seeks to engage with and even overcome its historical and cultural overdetermination. The indeterminacy in his art is not a flaw but a testament to the resistive nature of (Black) identity itself, while also opening new opportunities for (Black) artists and understanding late modernism.