FLYING HIGH: THE ACHIEVEMENT OF JOE OVERSTREET by Barbara Rose

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-Mark Rothko, Joint statement with Adolph Gottlieb, 1943

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Born in the rural Southern hamlet of Conehatta, Mississippi, Overstreet, like his contemporaries Sam Gilliam and Elvis Presley — both coincidentally born in nearby Tupelo, Mississippi — grew up in a rigidly segregated racist society. In 1946, the Overstreet family moved to the Bay Area, settling in the college town of Berkeley, California. Because his father was a stone mason, young Joe was exposed early to architectural construction, which is reflected in his tightly constructed paintings of the 1960s. He had not yet decided to pursue art as a career when he attended Oakland Technical High School, so he joined the Merchant Marines. He quit in 1953 to become an art student at the California School of Fine Arts, pursuing an art career the next year at the California School of Arts and Crafts.

Overstreet soon became a central fixture in the Beat Generation scene of the North Beach section of San Francisco, with its coffee houses, jazz clubs, and galleries. He was a lively and curious young man; in addition to art, his many interests included poetry, religion, literature, and playwriting. Eager to spread the message of a new art that disdained academic convention, he published a journal titled *Beatitudes Magazine* from his studio.

Part of the progressive Bay Area art scene that included artists like Nathan Oliveira and Richard Diebenkorn, Overstreet had a studio on Grant Street near that of Sargent Johnson. Johnson advocated that African-American artists look to their ancestral legacy for aesthetic sources and inspiration. This message resonated with the young Overstreet searching for an authentic identity.

From 1955 to 1957, Overstreet, like so many gifted California artists including Craig Kauffman, worked as an animator for Walt Disney Studios in Los Angeles. In 1958, he moved to New York City with his friend, Beat poet Bob Kaufman. Like Warhol, Johns, and Rauschenberg, he designed displays for store windows to earn a living. Quickly becoming a part of the New York art scene, Overstreet met many of the Abstract Expressionist painters like Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Larry Rivers, with whom he shared a passion for jazz. "I got more out of the Cedar Street Bar than anywhere," he remarked

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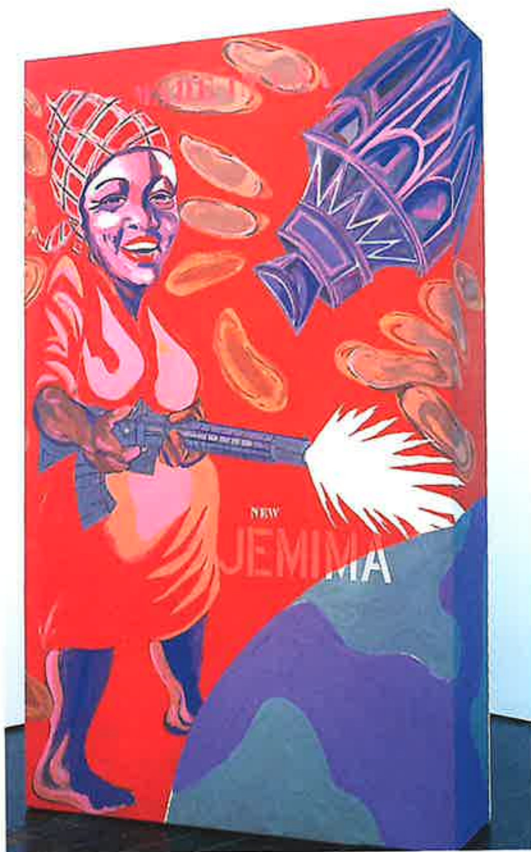
of his move to New York, where the galleries and museums showed the best of the contemporary avant-garde. But it was an attitude rather than a style that influenced him. "Looking at Hofmann reminded me of how I saw things naturally," he commented, "And looking at Pollock reminded me of how I could do things naturally." De Kooning was among the first to recognize his talent and commitment and gave Overstreet some of his works to sell as he settled in to the New York art scene.

In 1962, Overstreet moved downtown to Manhattan's Lower East Side. During that period, the Lower East Side was a hotbed of creativity and experimentation in all the arts. Overstreet became familiar with the mostly white avant-garde art scene although he kept his connections to the African-American community in terms of theater, literature and jazz, the lingua franca of the downtown art world. The only authentically American art form, jazz in its many forms was invented by the descendants of African slaves brought to the United States in chains, gradually becoming the basis for indigenous American music not based on European sources. It remains to this day the principle root of American popular music.

In 1964, he made a large painting titled "The New Jemima." Larry Rivers saw it, and said that if Overstreet enlarged it, he would include it in the "Some American History" exhibition at Rice University. This exhibition of Rivers' work, along with others he selected, was commissioned by the Menil Foundation to animate aspects of race within American history and support the desegregation of the university, begun in the 1960s. Overstreet made a three-dimensional wooden armature so that the painting would resemble a pancake box in this revised version of the work. He felt the new world of space travel deserved a New Jemima, who wields a machine gun shooting pancakes rather than flipping them.



Joe Overstreet, *The New Jemima*, 1964/1970

His invention of a new image for women recalls the "Future Eve" invented by a fictionalized Thomas Edison in Villiers de L'Isle Adam's novel; this android-woman also does not take orders and threatens

the hegemony of the ruling patriarchy. Clearly Overstreet was searching for a way to give painting content and meaning at a time when only formalism was considered significant art by the academy and museums. He found an answer in his signal 1965 painting *Strange Fruit*, which includes the image of a rope diagonally across the canvas.

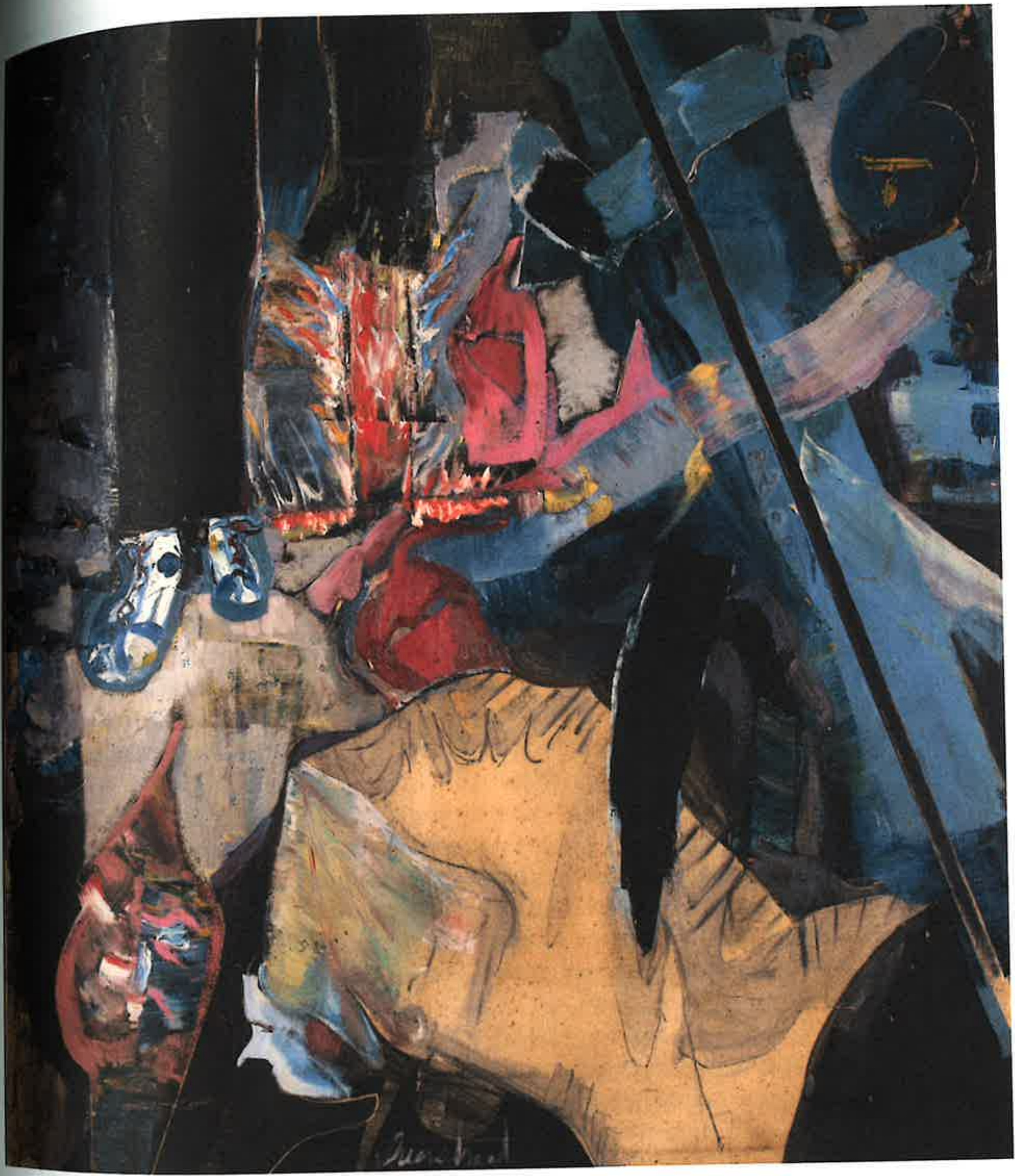
The title "Strange Fruit" is taken from Billie Holiday's 1940 recording of Lewis Allan's song about the lynchings of black men in the South. The daring image of dangling legs may also refer to the three civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner – killed in 1964 in Philadelphia, Mississippi, not far from Overstreet's home town. The presence of the image of rope was intentionally political. At the same time, as Ann Gibson suggests, this painted cord unifies the composition by crossing diagonally from edge to edge, recalling a compositional device that art theorist Jay Hambidge suggested to unify paintings.[1] Hambidge's system of diagramming paintings was widely taught and influenced both Thomas Hart Benton and his student Jackson Pollock.

Overstreet has said that *The Elements of Dynamic Symmetry* was a major influence on him as well. He was specifically interested in Hambidge's discussion of the Harpedonaptae, the rope-stretchers of Egypt who discovered the principles of dynamic symmetry and used them to lay out temple plans. He recalls that his father was interested in the Egyptian rope stretchers, and how masons used rope lines to determine the perspective, pitch and level of the earth.

During this period, Overstreet worked with playwright and poet Amiri Baraka, who preached the gospel of the Black Power movement, as set designer and Art Director of Harlem's Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School in Harlem. Overstreet had met Ishmael Reed, the poet, writer, and political activist, who was formulating his Hoodoo (Haitian voodoo) aesthetic as a literary method in 1963. Suddenly, previously discredited or described as "primitive," tribal art became a source for fresh new ways to invigorate modernism, whose roots, ironically, were often stylized tribal forms.

The avant-garde dialogue about creating a radical new art and his own experiences as a widely traveled African American provided the dual sources of Overstreet's work: high art modernist painting on the one hand, and the intense, dramatic, emotional content of the growing Civil Rights Movement. His refusal to abandon either elegant, logical abstract form or painful social content gives his work both authenticity and impact and is a hallmark of his unique style.

Overstreet was among the first to make shaped canvases in the late 1960s, but again the inspiration was dual. On the one hand, popular abstractionist Frank Stella was inspiring a generation of American artists like Neil Williams and Larry Zox to quit the rectangle for more radical formats. The history of the shaped canvas is complex and also involves a new interest in Native American rugs, hangings and designs. Artist Tony Berlant collected these artifacts and sold them to other artists, inspiring some



Joe Overstreet, *Strange Fruit*, 1964

like Ed Moses and Alan Shields to remove the canvas from the stretcher and let the cloth hang freely on the wall. The bold and striking jagged zigzag geometry of these rugs and hangings influenced many artists, especially Williams, who was in fact a full blood Navajo.

It is within this doubly revolutionary context—of a need to reconfigure formalism and the fundamental tenets of painting together with a rising consciousness of African art and its connection to African-American identity—that Overstreet matured. Class consciousness, formerly a forbidden subject, was coming to a head in the unsettled atmosphere of the Sixties in both the United States and Europe. This political crisis corresponded with a crisis in abstraction that called for new solutions to the problems of painting, redefining its relationship to its bourgeois architectural setting. Overstreet responded to both crises with his own individual solutions.

Part of his solution was to change media and technique as well as format. Like many American artists fascinated with new media, he stopped working with oil in 1964 and began painting in acrylic, a new water-based plastic pigment which dries faster and is cheaper than oil. The problem was that Western art was rectangular in format to fit the frame. To change that rigid structure was in itself a radical gesture, meant to challenge the past history of the medium as an ornament for first royal and then bourgeois interiors, and ultimately the white cube of International Style architecture.

Overstreet's shaped canvases referenced the volatile political climate of the Vietnam war with titles such as "Agent Orange." He began to look to the world at large instead of only Europe as a source of inspiration and began studying not just the forms, but also the iconography of Native Americans and East Indians, of Oceania and Africa. Using wooden dowels shaped with a jigsaw and hand tools to make intricately cut out stretchers that were eccentric and not rectangular, he painted stylized jagged flat figures.

His unstretched "Flight Pattern" paintings of 1970 assumed the condensed flat imagery of the circular mandala, considered sacred in many religions. Overstreet was interested in Tantric yoga, as well as in the Navajo rituals of sand painting that inspired Pollock. He wished to combine features taken from a variety of cultures, defining art as a "coming together of expression, cultures crossing." There is no aggressive bitterness in Overstreet's worldview; on the contrary, he wishes to use his art to bring people together.

The mandala was the perfect form for his objectives. We owe the re-introduction of mandalas into modern Western thought to Carl Jung, the Swiss analytical psychologist. Buddhism was of interest generally in New York beginning in the early Fifties, but the publication of a full color book on Tantric mandalas in the early Sixties changed the direction from Zen to Tantric Buddhism. Among its adherents were Kenneth Noland, Richard Serra and Phillip Glass.

For Jung, the urge to make mandalas emerges during moments of intense personal growth. Apparently this was their function in Overstreet's life as well. Around 1970 he was able to synthesize his various preoccupations, and use abstraction to communicate empathy and symbolic meaning, in addition to a purely aesthetic statement. Mandalas are commonly used by Tantric Buddhists as an aid to meditation. The mandala is regarded as a place separated and protected from the ever-changing and impure outer world. By contemplating its hypnotic form, one finds nirvana and peace. The form has parallels in Eastern and Mesoamerican cultures, as well as Mayan calendars. Overstreet painted his geometric mandalas, which were not centralized, but instead stretched like hides and attached to the wall with grommets, in brilliant, often tropical colors.

Joe Overstreet, Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1972

As we have observed, by 1970, Overstreet was done with the idea that paintings had to be flat rectangles on the wall. The fact that he was the set designer for the Amiri Baraka's Black Repertory Theater may well have played a role in giving up the conventional rectangular format for painting, which, in its frontality, was like the proscenium stage. Baraka's *Slave Ship*, a radical in-the-round presentation first produced in Harlem in 1967, rejected the separation of audience and actors imposed by the proscenium stage and placed the actors directly in the space of the audience. In the same way that the audience filled the space, Overstreet allowed his expanding constructions to come off the wall to be tethered to the ceiling and floor, as if floating freely in space as opposed to caged in a frame.

One of the innovative elements of Baraka's play is the encouragement of audience participation. During the final sequence, actors step down from the stage and invite audience members to participate in a celebratory dance. As Baraka had animated the entire space of the theater, Overstreet began to take over the entire gallery space filling it with swooping canvases attached to the ceiling and floor in free flight.

It was a revolutionary period in both art and politics and understandably art reflected that atmosphere. Overstreet began to make paintings that were tentlike at first for a practical reason:

he could roll them up to transport them from place to place. Then he began to enjoy the idea of painting as a nomadic art that could assume different configurations. Suddenly nothing, not even the stable unchanging rigid rectangle, was sacred. The installation of the "Flight Pattern" series, with its freedom from past restraints, may stand as a powerful metaphor for the liberation and freedom that minorities and women were fighting for in the revolutionary atmosphere of the late Sixties and early Seventies. The canvases of the "Flight Pattern" series, which float in space, free of the conventional rigid rectangular canvas attached to the fixed flat wall may be interpreted as a metaphor for liberation in general. The point is that though they are abstract, they do not lack expressive content, thus answering Rothko's demand.

Earlier, Rauschenberg had used cardboard to make painting constructions that came off the wall into the room. However, filling the entire space projected that innovation still further, invading the viewer's space with more intimate confrontations. That the paintings had variable and not fixed forms related them not to previous installations but rather to the latest preoccupations of New York postminimalism, the Paris-based Support-Surface group and Italian Arte Povera in their investigation of unstable, mutable unfixed forms. The idea that the support was soft cloth and not rigidly attached to stretchers was of interest in general to the younger avant-garde such as Robert Morris, Claes Oldenburg and Alan Shields; Overstreet was very much part of this dialogue.

Overstreet identified with the homeless nomads to be seen everywhere, saying he was interested in maintaining the most appealing feature of nomadic structures: "their tendency, like birds in flight, to take off, to be lifted up, rather than be held down by the ropes that suspended them." Overstreet has noted that he felt like a nomad himself. It is important to note that the conditions of nomadism are those of poverty, and poverty was the glue that held the authentic art community of the Lower East Side together. The art community of that time was too marginal to be racist. The audience for art was other artists. They were all very poor, meaning they had more in common with each other than with the uptight bourgeois world.

In the early 1970s, Overstreet taught in California but he returned in 1973 to New York where he met his wife Corrine Jennings, who was born into a family of artists. Her mother was a Yale graduate and painter, and her personal art collection contains her parents work, as well as that of other African-American artists. Her father, the artist Wilmer Jennings, studied with Hale Woodruff and Nancy Elizabeth Prophet at Atlanta University. Together with Samuel C. Floyd, the Overstreets established Kenkeleba House, a gallery with lofts for artist studios at 214 East Second Street, bringing attention to both under-recognized and emerging artists.

Years later, when asked if he saw any conflict between his belief in the universality of art and his socially-themed paintings of the 1960s, Overstreet responded, "...I think when you look at Catholic Christian art, that's universal, isn't it? When you look at Michelangelo, sixteenth-century art, is that not universal? Isn't that social?..."[2] Overstreet's aim was to strive for universality by uniting features from many traditions.

Overstreet said, "My paintings don't let the onlooker glance over them, but rather take them deeply into them and let them out – many times by different routes. These trips are taken sometimes subtly and sometimes suddenly. I want my paintings to have an eye-catching 'melody' to them – where the viewer can see patterns with changes in color, design and space. When the viewer is away from the paintings, they will get flashes of the paintings that linger in the mind like that of a tune or melody of a song that catches up on people's ear and mind."

In 1970, I wrote the first cover story in a major art magazine on black art, in which I illustrated Overstreet's work along with that of Sam Gilliam, Mel Edwards, Al Loving, William T. Williams, John Dowell and Bob Thompson.[3] I did not distinguish between abstraction and figuration because I did not think it was necessary for artists to illustrate the black experience for African Americans to make important art.

However, it is true that figurative artists like Romare Bearden were included, usually as tokens, in museum shows, while abstractionists like Norman Lewis, who participated in the landmark symposium organized in 1950 by his friend Ad Reinhardt and Robert Motherwell at Studio 35 in New York, went unnoticed until recently. Although it is not the case today, among African-American artists in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a decided division between figurative and abstract painters. Overstreet's achievement was to give to abstraction powerful content based on his own emotions and complex experiences.

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1 Ann Gibson, "Strange Fruit: Texture and Text in the Work of Joe Overstreet." In *Joe Overstreet: Works from 1957 to 1993*, New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, 1996. Exh. cat., 27.

2 Joe Overstreet, in "Joe Overstreet: Light in Darkness," Interview by Graham Lock. In *The Hearing Eye: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*. Eds. Graham Lock and David Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.).

3 Barbara Rose, "Black Art in America," *Art in America*, September-October 1970, cover, 54-67.