

ARTSLANT

INTERVIEW WITH JOE RAY
BY ED SCHAD, Oct 23, 2011



Los Angeles, Oct. 2011 - In the Hammer's recently released *Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles* catalogue, there is a reprinted photo from 1971 showing twenty-four young Los Angeles artists arranged casually on the steps of LACMA. There are two African Americans in the picture. The man in the middle, Fred Eversley, is well represented in the Hammer's galleries by a grouping of a very fine resin sculptures, but the other man in the picture, Joe Ray, you might not know. He has wild hair, a thick beard, and a broad collar.

Ray's story is an interesting one, a story that opens up a particular time in the Los Angeles art scene when it was still a squealing newborn. Ray is a man of many circles and many mediums and is a perfect interview for *Pacific Standard Time*. He is one of many artists in the city who played a vital role and are in need of reappraisal and consideration, who

should be looked at now that the archives are thrown open and the dialogue is flowing.

The artists of *Now Dig This* were one circle and friends of Ray, the artists of *Ferus and Light and Space* another. Ray's is a story of developing resin techniques with Doug Edge and Terry O'Shea, a story of early video and Nam June Paik, a story of the sixties and buses west from Louisiana. He received the young talent award from LACMA in 1970 and was one of fifteen members of the original MOCA Artists Advisory Council from 1978 to 1980 where he, alongside other members including Vija Celmins, DeWain Valentine, Peter Alexander, Robert Irwin, and Alexis Smith, made recommendations on all issues dealing with the building of the new museum. His most recent show was in Leimert Park last January at The Leimert Park Project.

Ed Schad: How'd you come to Los Angeles?

Joe Ray: I came here when I was nineteen in 1963 and I came by bus. At that time in Louisiana, we were leaving cities and going north or west. We all left home when we were seventeen and nineteen. I went for a year to the University of Southwest Louisiana and my major was art. My family couldn't afford to send me there so I came west, and I'm glad I did. Growing up in Alexandria, it became uncomfortable socially just living there. As a teenager, you leave home when you graduate from high school. That was my generation. I didn't think I could manage the cold of the north so I went west.

ES: Did you have the intention of being an artist in Los Angeles?

JR: I made paintings when I was young, and my parents recognized me as an artist. When in Louisiana, I was on the edge of the Black, Jewish, and Italian community, and I went in store owned by a guy named Simmons. I remember laughing at a painting I saw there, and Simmons asked me, "Can you do better?" I thought I could and I came in with the painting. He gave me a frame for it and then he showed me how to make a frame. And I had a job making frames. Simmons also taught me how to restore old frames. He

talked to art department at Southwest Louisiana and they said if you want to come, come on down. It was one of the first integrated schools in Louisiana, but I couldn't live on campus. So when I came to L.A., there was no doubt that I had to be an artist, that I needed to make that happen.

ES: What was the first thing that happened to you in L.A.?



JR: I got a job at a Theodore Handbag Company and became the supervisor. People there encouraged me to register for Otis, but then U.S. Army came along and I went kicking and screaming in 1965. I was thinking about Otis. Otis had the name. It was the academy for fine art in L.A. Chouinard's renegade status was not as encouraging. All I wanted to do was get there and learn how to be an artist.

ES: How long were you in the army?

JR: I started out at Fort Polk in Louisiana, then paratrooper school at Fort Benning Georgia, then Vietnam for one year. Finally, I ended at Fort Hood in Texas.

ES: Really? That must have been horrible. You just got to L.A., and then you were sent right back to Louisiana?

JR: Many times when I thought about just walking down the highway and just going away. I made my twenty-first birthday in the army. I realized what early school had been about for me and many like me. School put you in a better position to be a soldier, keep your shoes shined, shirt tails in, stay in line, hair cuts, follow orders, not be allowed to ask too many questions. This may be why I wanted to be into all sorts of things as an artist. I grew up in segregated Louisiana. I wanted to be an artist that would not be confined to making things that I repeated over and over. I had to be free to do whatever I thought I needed to do without repercussions. I've been told that things I'd made had a lot of interest and that I should continue down that path, but I always wanted to move to something new.

ES: How did you go from the army back to L.A.?

JR: After I discharged from military, back in L.A. I looked in the newspaper for work and I thought I'd look in the frame shop department. I found this job at Art Services. It was a special place for artists. All of Ferus people came here for framing and Gemini was in the same building. Man Ray would come in, Rauschenberg would come in, Oldenburg would come. We'd talk a little bit in reference to the work, but no real sessions with them. John Altoon lived across the street. He was very encouraging. He told me that there was "nothing better than being an artist." He was living an attractive lifestyle. He was doing his work, diligent about it. Having access to those personalities and resources gave me a broad spectrum of possibilities. I met Doug Edge, an extraordinary artist, who did personal performances but also cast resin. He lived near Temple and Beaudry. Lots of young artists lived in that area. Terry O'Shea lived in the back of Doug Edge's place (big house, Victorian) in the garage. He was a trust fund kid that looked like a bum, but a great personality, extraordinary resin caster. Everybody that had something to do with resin got it from Terry. This is 68-69.

ES: Why resin?

JR: It was a new technology, a new material. California light was an encouraging element to go along with the medium. You could see things that you had no idea what was coming. Nobody was putting lights in their works. It was all about available light. Hastings plastic was the provider. You could call them up and tell them you were doing research in plastics and you could get a fifty-five gallon drum

delivered for free -- that's how new it is. It was a promotional thing. The more they got out in the community, the more exposure. If you knew about it, you could do it. Terry O'Shea would do that. I got a lot of resin from him.

ES: Did artists using resin have much interaction with other artists in the medium or did everyone work in isolation?

JR: You knew about everybody. DeWain Valentine was on Market Street, who I got to know through my good friend Larry Bell. Peter Alexander was at USC. I knew all these people. Ron Cooper was on the Boardwalk. It was so new that anytime any development was made, you wanted to show other artists. We didn't have any verbal jousting, we had a natural impulse to encourage and push ourselves to do new things. "How did he do this? How as it done?" It was not a secret. We appreciated making things where we couldn't exactly tell how it was done. I was drawing, doing photos, but resin was taking over. I became less interested in the other things.

ES: I've always been fascinated with how Larry Bell's glass works get those hues in their surface. Could you tell me a little about that photo of you in Bell's studio?

JR: If you want glass to have that hue or tone, you need a vacuum chamber. I worked for Larry before Cal-Arts as his assistant and we would put large pieces of polished glass into that huge chamber. The glass had to be clean, really clean, and you would polish and polish until not a speck of any substance remained on the surface. You then slide the glass on a track into the chamber. Once you add the right minerals to the device, the electric charge of the machine turns the minerals into gas and the gas adheres its particles to the glass. That's how all of Larry's work got those colors.

ES: What were some of the driving forces behind your work with resin, both yours and others?

JR: DeWain Valentine was the master caster, big scale man. It was a feat. Light and Space was the reference, but the earth was the focus, Valentine made large photographs of the sea, and then sought illusions, how an object could be made where you wouldn't know what you were looking at. They used light for this. I helped Larry Bell do a piece at MoMA where he attempted to catch all light that entered the room by painting it black, laying down black tiles, and then tweaking the corners with glossy paint. The whole community was into the mystical aspects of making art, the alchemy. Hallucinogenic eye dazzling patterns were rooted in time, it was the 60s and 70s. I was into outer space and inner space. I didn't want tricks, I wanted to just use the natural sources of light. The piece I showed at LACMA in 1981 had seven spheres and seven rings, and I wanted the inner space of a human individual and the largeness of the cosmos. I was thinking of the circulatory system as equally vast as the celestial. I was looking to latch into something other than earthly things. At the beginning I only used black and white and when I did start using colors, I felt it came out of the turbulence of black and white.

ES: How'd you end up at Cal Arts?

JR: I started my application at Chouinard. In the process of applying, it became Cal Arts. The first year was in an old school in Burbank. I went there to get the accreditation that I needed to have so I wouldn't be denied space in any room without the academic credentials. It was hard to stand in a lot of rooms from a cultural standpoint at that time, things still felt very segregated. It was hard to cross west of 405, but the degree made it easier as an artist or at least, I think it did.

ES: I always wonder how the 60s were, whether television and movies accounts are accurate. Was it really that wild?

JR: Artists were burning their paintings, paintings were leaving the canvas, paint was going from the canvas to the body. The 60s were very 60s. Nudity and drugs and not for everybody. That old school in Burbank was an all-girls Catholic School called Mother Cabrini and then suddenly it was totally nude for a whole year, full of artists. Once I got to Cal Arts, it was a different world. The more video and performances I did, the less interested in casting resin. People wanted to get away from resin because we questioned the repercussions of the chemicals. It felt dangerous. You were in gloves, smoking

cigarettes and drinking, this was a lot of chemicals together in one place to not be dangerous. I met Allan Kaprow, Nam June Paik. I learned a lot from Mike Kanimitsu

ES: What were some of your impressions of Nam June Paik and Allan Kaprow?

JR: Nam June couldn't speak English but he could communicate. He was my favorite. He was a successful artist by the time he got there. He introduced his video work as kinetic sculpture. His monitors were set in their environment, you could walk in at any time. It was on. You didn't have to sit and wait for it to start and stop. I thought that was a great idea. He was a mad scientist looking guy, shabby, always call us geniuses. When he saw us in the technology lab, using synthesizers (extremely new), he say, "You genius." Always, "You genius." If he spoke English, no one knew about it. Kaprow was equally cool, made it easy for you to participate.

ES: So you got your taste for switching mediums and going across genres?

JR: I was growing into new venues. Video was new, we could check out video equipment. Being close to Kaprow, I expanded my territory. Plastics, film, I had a Minolta camera that allowed time lapse photographs. We started doing performance, incognito performances. We went to a costumes shop and got cosmonaut costumes. One night, under the cover of darkness, Tony Ramos, Lowell Darling, and I made a film called How to Move a Large Painting on a Small Car. We took a large painting from Tony's house, cut it up into pieces and put it on my VW.

ES: This was around the time of your performance in Pasadena that was documented in your Leimert Park Show?

JR: In Pasadena, Rich Shelton promoted bands and we created a performance. It had a relationship to death and rebirth. A day or two before the music performance, we tied ropes in holes in the ceiling, all three of us were to descend on ropes. I had a clear hose, Darling had an escape rope and bags with shaving cream. Tony Ramos descended at the intermission of the music show with one large plastic bag. I was in the audience with a hose and put the tube in his mouth for air. Me and Darling then covered Ramos with shaving cream. He looked like a big white snowman. People were heckling, intensely, unbelievable things. This was not an art crowd. We picked him up and carried him off. We went into ladies restroom, changed into street clothes and lowered the stuff out the window. We walked out and collected the things in the street. Drank mint juleps back at the studio.

ES: Was there any theoretical concept behind it?

JR: Concept was that we wanted to get away with it. How to move a painting on a small car was that the painting was not a sacred object that we couldn't play with, that we couldn't have fun with. The shaving cream piece was about the death of traditional art world, about leaving a tradition, to challenge, to try something new, break down some old barriers. We were always finding new ways to investigate new possibilities. We would do things and the concept would come after. Other times, the concept regulated what came next.

ES: How'd you meet David Hammons?

JR: I don't recall. He made a great effort. David tried to know all artists. If you were open to swing with him from time to time, he was inclusive. He is a renegade, his personality is rebellious, always trying to stir it up. He was as outrageous as any of us. In the most profound way, he was true to himself. He is today what he was when I met him. He was always like that, always pushing. He was very open and ready. He became more aggressive towards his truth each year.

He was nobody just like the rest of us. Time Magazine promoted Black artists at the time. Danny Johnson, Joe Overstreet, Al Lovin, and Melvin Edwards were in there. Everybody who was in that magazine did okay. David was selling his works early. He survived off of his artwork. His living was not an attractive lifestyle, nobody wanted to live off their art the way that he lived off of his. He struggled to do this. He was living hand to mouth.

ES: I am fascinated by the idea of you at this time or at least in the mid-sixties, taking a bus from Leimert

Park up to Art Services north of the 10, with your foot in both worlds. The Getty show in PST is pretty inclusive, but even so, you feel the divisions still in the topics of the PST shows. Could you speak to that a bit?

JR: The scene was divided back then. I couldn't tell if I was forcing my way in or whether I was an opportunist. I tried to make the right moves to gain access. I lived on Leimert Blvd in 67 and 68, but I also worked at Art Services. Western bus to Melrose. Brockman Gallery was the center of art south of the 10. I took work there, but someone suggested that I put a light in one of my sculptures, and I didn't go back with an interest in showing. Brockman was thriving. The Watts writer's workshop was going on. Black cultural institutions were growing at that time. Brockman was the center of visual arts in the black community, but I was interested in the whole art scene. I grew up like that, in different worlds. I was always been in that type of space. I've always been in between worlds, but I didn't feel apprehensive. I've never had an identity crisis about it.



ES: Did you feel the scene changing in terms of its inclusion of outsiders?

JR: Ferus was really serious. They did something that had to be done. L.A. was a Sunday-painter type of place before they came along. They brought a lot of attention to the arts by way of the film and movie industry. When I showed at LACMA in 1971, Ed Kienholz made a point to meet me. He sought me out. He congratulated me. The benefit I got was that he had the curiosity to meet me. It wasn't a big deal, but it was inspiring. He appeared to be fearless in his pursuit of expression. I appreciated that he didn't have fear of me or people like me.

Most artists had reservations, serious reservations. Kienholz didn't. He was one who stayed around long enough to influence. He wanted to tap his own drum, for sure, but he and other artists from Ferus were inclusive in a way that people weren't before or after. The scene that came after Ferus was much different, much less inclusive.

This was after many of the originals had left. Turrell went to Arizona, Bell went to Mexico, these were incredible figures in the art scene. They were inclusive. They had parameters in philosophy and ideology. The next wave was not into any of that and it was a shame.

ES: What was it all about in 60s, being an artist in L.A.?

JR: L.A. did not have an intellect when it came to art, there was no cohesive scene. The intellect was simply bringing cohesion to the idea of being an artist, making work, having a community, ideas related to making art that left the object and became more of an attitude. Not that it was all that sophisticated, it was in its infancy, but it was more personal than a movement. It was Flower Children and hippies and Lenny Bruce. More importantly, it was Dr. King, Malcolm X, Ali, H Rap Brown, Melvin Van Peebles, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka. We took trips up to San Francisco to see music. It was Miles Davis and John Coltrane. It was an innovative period. It had a relationship with everything else that was going on.