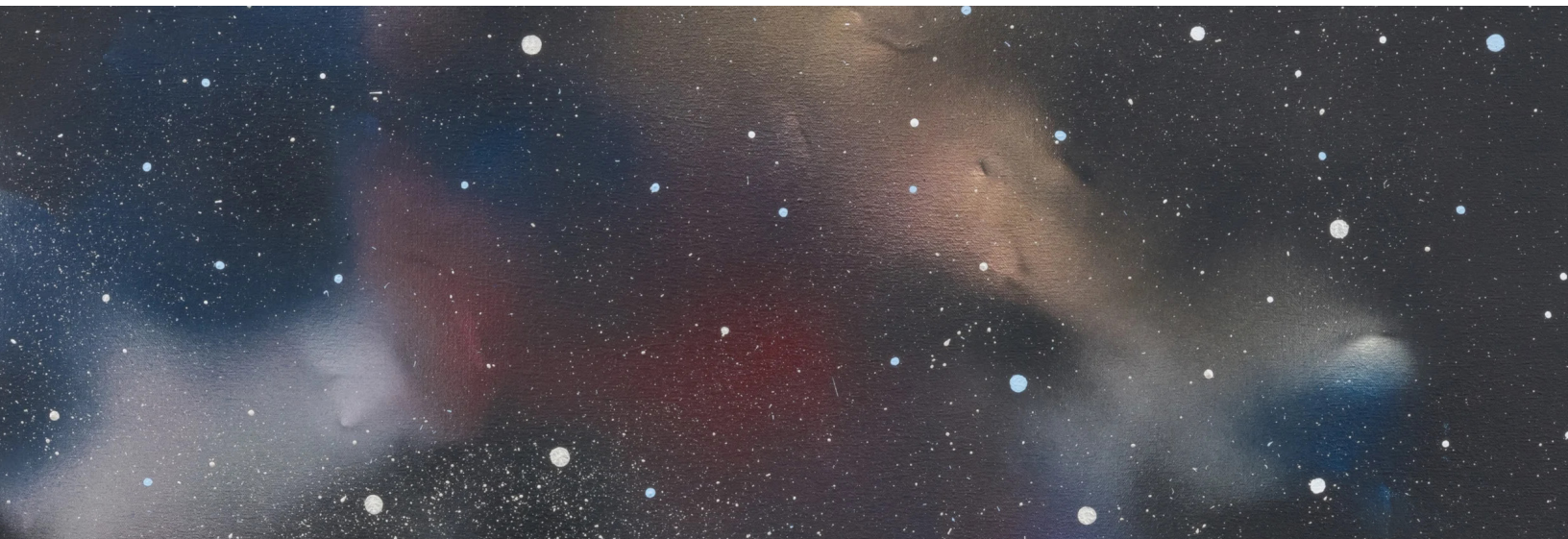


Into the Cosmos of Joe Ray

by John Chiaverina
August 2



Joe Ray has forever had one eye at street level and another aimed towards the cosmos.

When the artist returned to Los Angeles in the late 1960s following a stint as an army paratrooper in Vietnam, he was thrust into the nexus of multiple art scenes whose influence continues to reverberate today. There was the Light and Space movement, a Southern California take on Minimalism within which Ray was one of the only Black practitioners, as well as the conceptual art community germinating around CalArts, where he was a member of the first graduating class. Later he joined Studio Z, a performance collective that included a young David Hammons, whose studio on Slauson Avenue served as a gathering point for the group.

In between all of these worlds is where you find the work of Ray. “I’ve always tried to be free in my approach to making art,” says the 78-year-old Ray. “I’ve never wanted to get locked in, I’ve never wanted to produce the same thing over and over.” For the debut edition of Independent 20th Century, Diane Rosenstein Gallery will present a selection of works spanning various decades, media, and approaches in the artist’s practice.

Ray was born in Beaumont, Texas in 1944 and moved to the town of Alexandria, Louisiana, as an infant, where he was raised. He started making art around the age of ten. He went on to study fine art at the University of Southwestern Louisiana; at the time, he was one of only a handful of Black students attending that historically segregated school. He left for Los Angeles in 1963 and was drafted by 1965.

When he came back to California he got a job at the legendary frame shop Art Services, next door to the esteemed printmaking workshop Gemini G.E.L., which produced editions with everyone from Robert Rauschenberg to Claes Oldenburg to Jasper Johns. “Having access to that kind of activity was strongly encouraging me in what I was doing,” Ray recalls. Through Gemini and the frame shop he was introduced to the proprietors of the influential Ferus Gallery. Then he met the artists Terry O’Shea and Larry Bell (whom Ray assisted) and started to make sculptures using cast resin.

“Plastics were new then. Hastings Plastics was a company that provided the chemical plastic, liquid plastic,” Ray explains. “You could call them up and tell them you were interested in experimenting with plastic, you were an artist, and they would deliver you a 55 gallon drum. [The material] was so new, they were also interested in what it could do.”

The result of this experimentation was a series of tabletop cast resin works, three of which will be on view at Independent 20th Century. “These are major works,” Diane Rosenstein says, describing the artist’s “connection to the planets, celestial consciousness” as expressed in the sculptures. Two Arcs and Half Sphere (1969), for instance, rests tricolor forms on a mirror which completes the orb-like feeling of the objects. “LA was blowing up in the late 1960s, everybody was, obviously,” Rosenstein adds. “His thinking was about getting off the planet.” It should come as no surprise that Ray cites the massive influence the cosmic jazz musician Sun Ra had on him and his peers.

Concurrent with the cast resin works, Ray was returning to Alexandria and taking stark photographs of people and places in his hometown. He won the 1970 Young Talent Award at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which acquired an assemblage of 31 prints from this series.

Then there was Ray’s early 1970s performance work, often in collaboration with artists including Tony Ramos and Lowell Darling, stills and pigment prints from which will be on view in Rosenstein’s presentation. Ray launches into the story of a performance that saw the artist and his friends seal themselves off in the attic of a dancehall and then descend into the crowd from the rafters before escaping through the bathroom. “And then we went home and drank mint juleps,” he laughs.

This playfulness extends to Ray’s Hand Jive paintings, which deploy acrylic to commit shapes and hand gestures to paper, calling to mind Hammons’ Body Prints from the same period. The series “was done without a specific idea in mind, without a specific subject,” Ray says. “It was about motion and a playful moment with a pigment.”

Also present at Independent 20th Century are selections from two bodies of work that Ray produced primarily in the 1990s. First are the Nebula Paintings, large cosmic abstractions whose origins can be traced back to the artist’s resin sculptures of the 1970s. The artist locates these works within his multivalent exploration of space: “Inner space and outer space. Mental space and physical space.” They are the only paintings that Ray has produced over multiple decades; Rosenstein will show examples from 1993. The series is ongoing today. “They’re getting bigger,” Ray says of his more recent Nebula works. “They’re getting ready to get real big.

The presentation will also include two paintings that Ray completed in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles riots sparked by the acquittal of police officers involved in the brutal beating of Rodney King. The artist was working as an art handler for Eli Broad at the time, and used discarded packing crates as the jumping off point for assemblage paintings reflecting the urgency of the moment. One of those, Super Continent (1993), juxtaposes a painting of the map of Africa—which Rosenstein notes could also suggest the chalk outline of a body—with a vitrine containing a bullwhip, white sheets, ropes, and chains. “I just stretched some canvases over [the crates] and started to work,” Ray says. “There was a crisis in Los Angeles at the time, and it just came out.”

What connects these two bodies of work, and everything Ray does, is a sense of duty and exploration in equal measure. The artist grapples with the realities of life in America while also attempting to look beyond those contours. In an age where young artists can be pressured to quickly pick a lane and establish a brand, Ray is a shining example of someone who has always been guided by his own intuition. “I’m not one dimensional,” he says. “I’m thinking about a lot of things and I want to be free to do whatever I want to do.”

John Chiaverina is a writer based in New York City. He has contributed to publications including *ARTnews* and *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*.