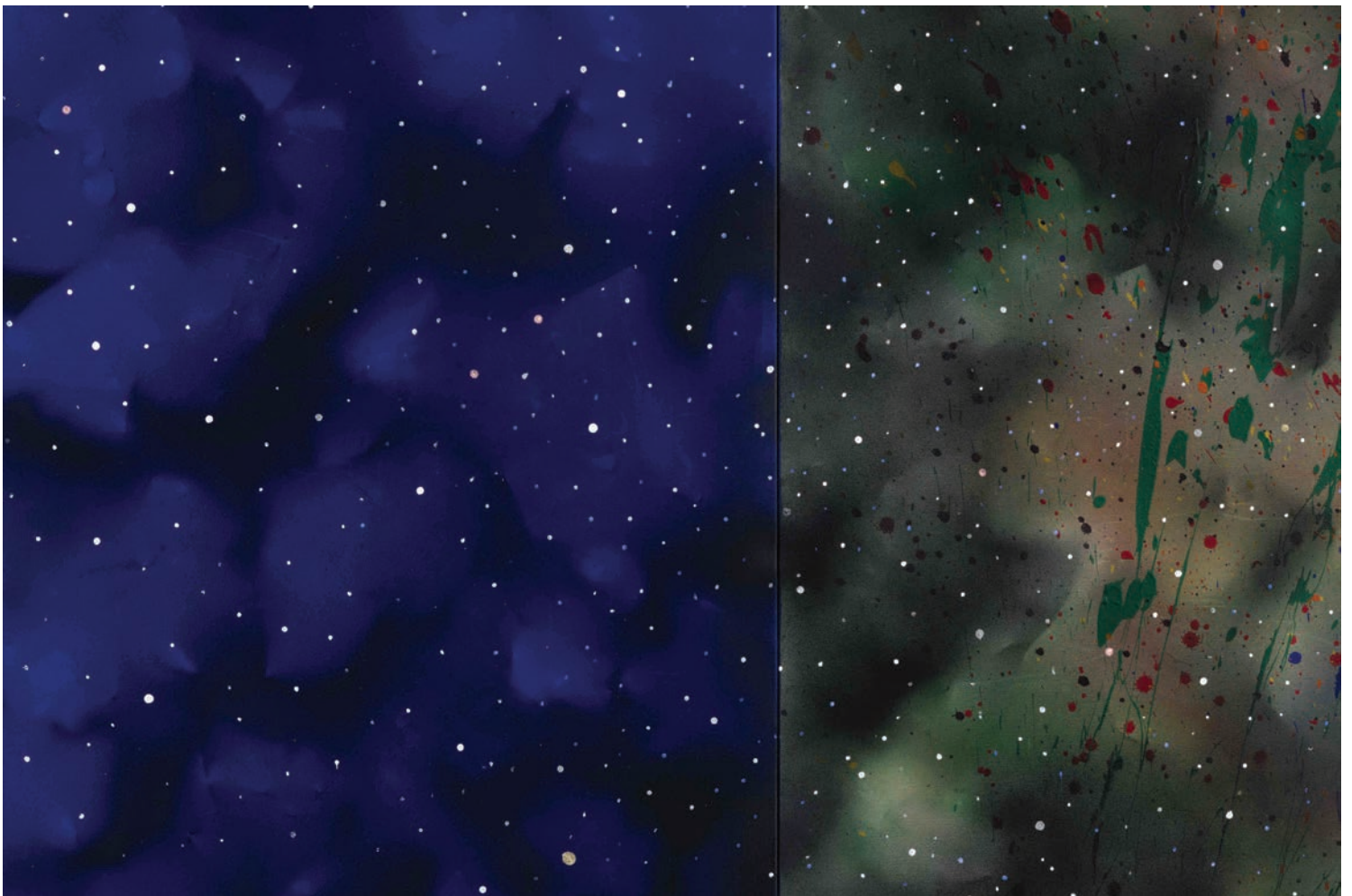


# FLAUNT

## JOE RAY | AS IT TURNS OUT, THAT SYMBIOSIS OF LIGHT IS AS GOOD AS IT SOUNDS

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Joe Ray. "Cupcake" (2023). Acrylic, Spray Paint, And Steel On Canvas (Triptych), Detail View, 120 x 169".  
Courtesy The Artist And Diane Rosenstein Gallery. Photo By Robert Wedemeyer.

JOE RAY, "LUNAR KART" (2023). CAST RESIN, STEEL, GOLD FOIL, BRASS AND ACRYLIC, 86 X 28.5 X 30". COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND DIANE ROSENSTEIN GALLERY. PHOTO BY ROBERT WEDEMEYER.



IT'S HARD TO WRITE A STORY ABOUT ARTIST JOE RAY AND THE Los Angeles Light and Space movement without first mentioning the Light. As if sent from the heavens, the City of Angels' golden beams have smiled down upon its inhabitants since the first people of the Chumash and Tongva tribes. Perhaps it is because the arid air allows for the sunlight to pass through the gauzy atmosphere uninhibited by moisture. Or perhaps it's something to do with the misanthropes and dreamers and creatives of LA that it's shining down upon?

The latter half of the movement in question—that of Space—comes from humanity's innate desire to move beyond its constructed borders to the last great frontier: Outer Space. For in Los Angeles, the stars are gracefully within reach (the ones millions of light years away, and those a million followers away.) Thus, it was both the literal and metaphoric shimmer of space—a beacon for those with ideas to build and youth to spend—that resulted in Joe Ray chasing the light since he first arrived in California in 1963, with nothing but a brown bag, a couple of chicken sandwiches, and a bus ticket.

Ray describes how Los Angeles Light and Space, as it spun out of the hard lines of New York minimalism, found itself developing a new and different organization of feeling, a different metabolism of creative energy. "There would be interest shown in helping you generate whatever you needed," Ray explains of the atmosphere created by this major cultural happening.

"Whereas if I was out back East, I would probably be asked to leave, because it was just too small of a concept. California was still growing, and it was a new frontier."

Ray's journey as an artist had started long before he traversed between the San Gabriel and Sierra Pelona Mountains, in the American heartland of Louisiana where he became inundated by the transformation of raw materials into pieces of utility through his high school's first-generation sheet metal shop. "I was introduced to plastics in the form of Bondo," he recalls, "which wasn't actually called Bondo at the time, but it was a plastic that you can mix with a catalyst. And you could resurface metal with it. My craftsmanship started to develop at that time and I think that's what allowed me to perform the way that I do, and make the things that I did, because of my early introduction."

Alongside plastic, the sheet metal shop was where Ray first encountered materials like extruded steel. This reappears front and center in his latest exhibition at Diane Rosenstein Gallery in Los Angeles in the form of a "Lunar Kart." The odd cart is akin to an Egyptian chariot, carrying the viewer (and whatnot) to Ray's reimagination of the universe. The whatnot in particular is a motif taken from the life of the artist's mother. "I grew up in a house where my mother had whatnots," Ray recalls. "Little things that she would collect when she would travel, things that were close to her. So in the process of fabricating



my sculptures, I would end up with a lot of residue. And I asked myself, 'What am I going to do with this?' and it became what-not."

At the sheet metal shop, in an almost proverbial call-back, Ray's first task was to create a hammer, symbolically equipping him with the first of many tools for his journey to the Golden State. Soon, the work became a conduit between lived experience and the raw physicality of the material that he grew up with. In the 15 quietly looming columns at Diane Rosenstein, Ray describes how the notion of the piece partially emerged from a lack of space within the artist's home. "My wife and I are so eclectic in relation to things that we really like. I mean, we don't have junk around," Ray chuckles. "But I was joking one day that we're gonna have to start using the corners, since we don't have any more space. That prompted my idea of working with the spaces, the corners in the gallery. The shape is the [same] shape that I started to cast in the mid-to-late 60s."

The shapes in question extoll the artist's connection between organic influences and inorganic materials. Despite the pillars' height at around eight feet and their smooth prismatic exterior, to the careful viewer, there lies a macrocosm of organic action. "They have a small degree of refinement in the fact that they come out the same shape, relatively," shares Ray. "It's an organic reaction that takes place, which I think is important for the spirit of things. To create rigid, refined structure limits is

to create another kind of spiritual relationship, but the organic relationship is the one I favor." Ray pauses then continues, "So the application of color, and the surface has some natural, organic aspects to it, which is not controlled. It just comes out that way. My paintings are like that—they're not controlled."

The anchor triptych in the exhibition panning over 14 feet wide is one of Ray's largest works to date. Titled *Cupcake*, it is a continuation of his nebula series, capturing the subject matter that compelled Ray to the West Coast, to the expansiveness that still enchants him. The specks of paint are a study of light conducted through aerosol paint, he explains and, "the nature of the application of some of the elements in the painting are kind of like what you might expect would be in the explosion and outer space in the formation of nebulas—it's a pretty aggressive action." One could almost say they were shaped this way by a metaphoric hammer.

The best of Ray's work comes with the understanding of one's own inner space, and the outer space that we inhabit, going beyond the self. It toes the line between organic and inorganic, thoughts and materials, pushing and pulling between the humanity of the action, and the stoic, oft-stubborn material. And while the landscape of Los Angeles today is a far cry from the one Joe Ray arrived in during the 60s, there will always be a new frontier in the ever-expanding universe of light and space ready to be explored.