

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Collection Highlight

Joe Overstreet. *Power Flight*, 1971





Joe Overstreet
(American, born 1934)
Power Flight, 1971

Acrylic on canvas with metal grommets and white rope
Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John de Menil, 72.165

Description of the Artwork

A flat sheet of canvas pulled taut by white ropes anchored in the ceiling, wall, and floor forms a three-dimensional shape. The vibrant red and black areas are separated from each other by strips of painted green canvas sewn along their stained edges. From a distance, each area looks like a unified field of color. Close up, subtle surface markings appear.

Background Information

This work was created by Joe Overstreet in 1971—a time when artists were pushing the boundaries of painting by exploring new formats, techniques, and materials. Although this artwork uses the formal language of abstraction, the color choices, form, and title—*Power Flight*—refer to the Black Power movement and the nomadic peoples of Africa and North America. Overstreet's mother was African and Cherokee, and his father was Cherokee and Shoshone. Overstreet describes the structure of artworks in this series as “tent-like,” which means they could be rolled up for travel and set up for presentation in response to the environment.

Questions for Viewing

Stand at a distance from the artwork or the photograph of the artwork. What do you notice? Move closer. What more can you find?

What does this artwork remind you of? What do you see that supports your idea? What similarities does this artwork share with others you have seen? What differences can you find?

Describe the materials the artist used to create this work of art. What would change if the artist chose a heavier or lighter fabric? Why do you think he selected this weight of canvas?

Look closely at the ropes used to anchor the canvas to the wall, floor, and ceiling. Which ropes seem to have the most tension? What do you see that supports your observation? What would change if one or more of the ropes had more slack or was removed?

Imagine you were to visit this artist's studio. What kind of tools might you find?

What steps do you think the artist took to assemble this artwork? What would need to be done first? What step would be last? Why?

What challenges might the flexibility of the materials used in this piece present to the artist? To a museum? What are the benefits to both?

Activity

Identify a group of two or three people to work with. Sketch the artwork from a different vantage point, or, if you're looking at a photograph, sketch a different section of the artwork. Compare and contrast the finished sketches in your group. Imagine unlacing the canvas and laying it flat on the ground. Use the information from all of the sketches to collaborate on a rendering of the shape.

Cut out the shape featured in your rendering. Trace the shape and create a copy of it for each group member. Bend and fold the paper to explore different ways to transform your shape. Select one of the arrangements. Attach fabric and string to the inside of a box to create a model of how the new configuration might appear in a gallery installation. Compare and contrast your model with the artist's. Give your artwork a title.

Resources

www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/onview/

The Brooklyn Museum's online collection database, featuring a search function that indicates artworks currently on view and their locations.

www.brooklynmuseum.org/education/educators/teacher_resources.php

This webpage offers links to free web interactives and Teaching Resources (PDFs) supporting K–12 instruction.

This text was written by Claire Moore, with assistance from School Programs Manager Alexa Fairchild and John and Barbara Vogelstein Curator of Contemporary Art Eugenie Tsai.

