

Art in America

FRED EVERSLEY

 WALTHAM, at the Rose Art Museum

Kirsten Swenson | December 14, 2017



When I visited this exhibition of thirteen works by Fred Eversley, the black, white, and gray polyester resin and acrylic sculptures that serve as the show's focus reflected the New England winter sun with scintillating brilliance. Made between 1974 and 1980 by the Los Angeles-based artist, the objects here feel like transplants, born of the Southern California sun and perhaps having captured a bit of that radiance within.

The high shine of the works is attuned to the concept of energy—the properties of light, the mechanics of solar energy, and the transcendental quality of energy as life itself. The parabolic lens, with its capacity to reflect light toward its focus, is the leitmotif of the show, and indeed of Eversley's career. A few of the sculptures on view are milky white or translucent black concave lenses that are densely pigmented at their thick perimeter walls and thin to a transparent, glassy central oculus, and a few are open rings of opaque gray or pinkish white. These various pieces lure the spectator to gaze through them while also taking in the inverted reflections they produce along their curving surfaces.

The phenomenal effects are familiar—think of Dan Graham's pavilions or Robert Irwin's acrylic columns. "Seeing yourself seeing," in the words of Eversley's Light and Space comrade James Turrell. But unlike the encompassing, environmentally scaled works that Eversley's contemporaries made, his objects are intimate. They concentrate

Space Age optimism in shiny, perfect forms suggestive of Brancusi sculptures. Three works in the exhibition consist of halves of cylinders that have been sliced at an acute angle, the wedges (mostly shown individually, though in one instance displayed as a pair) standing upright so that the edges of the cut surfaces form parabolas that shoot upward and then back down.

As an aerospace engineer during the Cold War, Eversley was cognizant of the implications of energy stored and deployed. He made the lenses using the centrifugal force of a repurposed turntable that had produced the casings for the first atomic bombs. Drawn to the bohemianism of Venice Beach, he redirected his technological and material investigations toward art; his meticulously polished forms were in dialogue with those by "finish fetish" figures with whom he worked and exhibited, such as Larry Bell and John McCracken, though his concerns are more deeply rooted in the physics and metaphysics of light. He made four of the show's sculptures during a residency at the National Air and Space Museum in the late 1970s. Lacking the proper ventilation to work with liquid polyester, Eversley constructed these sculptures using precast pieces of acrylic. Two consist of triangular pieces layered and hinged to produce wall-bound arcs that evoke spinal columns of large beasts; a third—the only non-parabolic work on view—is a pyramid made from slabs of black acrylic. Despite Eversley's technologically advanced material, these sculptures suggest ancient remains.

Eversley was the only African American participant in the Light and Space movement. The exhibition was curated by Kim Conaty of the Rose in partnership with Art + Practice, Mark Bradford's art and education center in Los Angeles, where the show debuted last fall. At the Rose, which is located on the campus of Brandeis University, the show is the latest in a series of exhibitions of African American abstractionists of Eversley's generation, including Jack Whitten and Melvin Edwards. These are major artists who, like Eversley, have not been viewed as central figures in their respective milieus, a misrepresentation that the Rose seeks to correct without introducing the polemics of race. Exquisitely installed in the Rose's 1960s-era Brutalist jewel-box gallery, flooded with natural light from plate glass windows, Eversley's exhibition is exemplary: meditative, harmonious with the historical architecture, and stridently contemporary.