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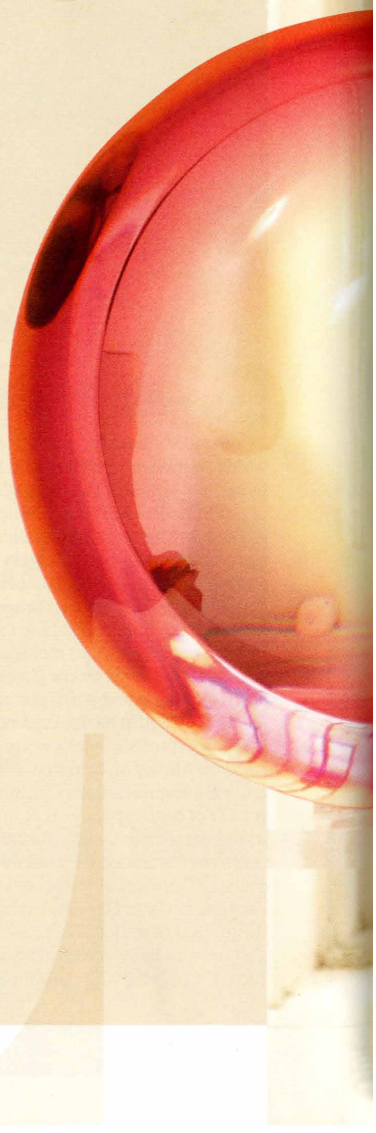
Full Circle

In the ’60s, **Fred Eversley** left his NASA job to become an artist. Now, he’s finally realizing ideas 50 years in the making.

by Emily Watlington

portrait by Christopher Garcia Valle



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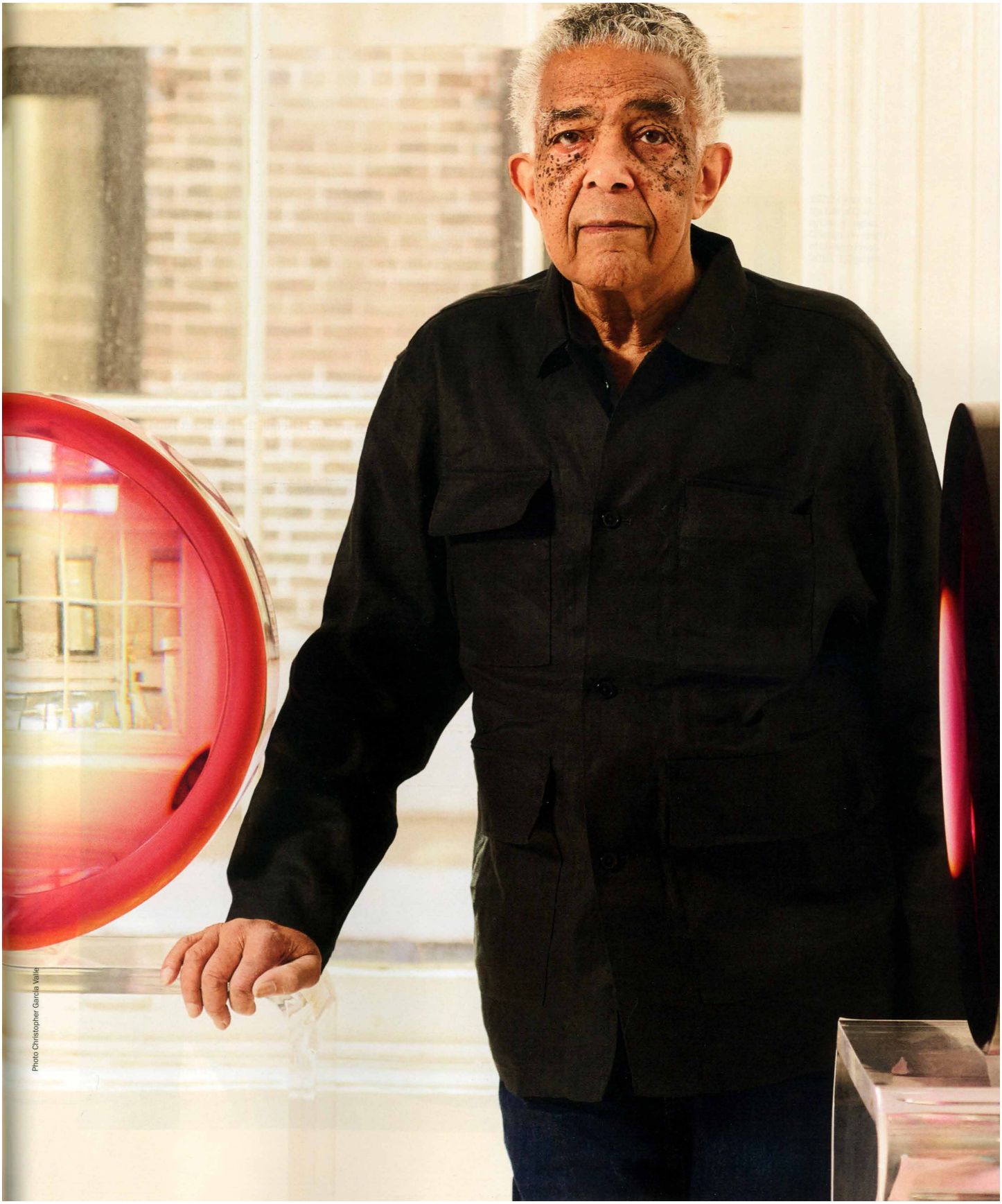

Photo Christopher Garcia Valle

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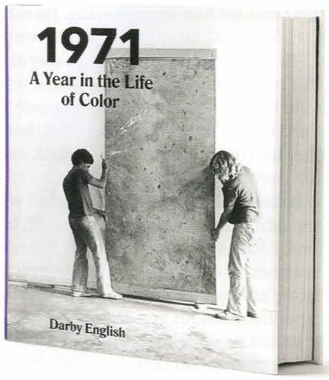
Fred Eversley has dedicated his life to making artworks based on the parabola, a shape so ubiquitous that its magic is taken for granted. The ideal physical contour for both concentrating and reflecting many forms of energy—light, sound, radio waves—a parabola is a U-shaped, mirror-symmetrical plane curve. Your eye is a parabola that focuses light, funneling it to your brain. On car headlights, a parabolic surface reflects light back out toward the road. Parabola-shaped TV satellites funnel digital signals to a central point—and eventually, to a television set. Parabolic legs help the Eiffel Tower stand up.

Eversley's versions, which he started making in 1970, are highly technical, yet have a simple elegance to them. An icon of the California Light & Space movement in its heyday, around the '70s, the artist is finally receiving overdue support to realize his grandest visions. He secured gallery representation with David Kordansky in 2018, after working without it for nearly 30 years. And last fall, the Public Art Fund in New York helped create a 12-foot-tall version of a piece that he first mocked

Fred Eversley with an early untitled sculpture, 1971.

Photo Frank J. Thomas/Courtesy Frank J. Thomas Archives

Untitled, 1970.



1971: A Year in the Life of Color, by Darby English, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016, 312 pages.

up more than 50 years ago. This renewed interest in Eversley's work comes at a moment brimming with art and science crossovers. An early adopter of this interdisciplinary approach, Eversley has never taken an art class in his life; he was trained as an engineer. This fall, the Getty-funded PST initiative will present exhibitions all over Los Angeles under the theme “Art & Science Collide,” and Eversley's work figures in a few of them, alongside that of younger artists who have taken up his kind of interdisciplinary approach.

When I visited the 83-year-old artist recently in the five-story cast-iron SoHo building where he lives and works, his parabolic lenses littered the living room. They refracted the winter light coming through the window, casting rainbows on the midcentury furniture. Eversley demonstrated how several of his round pieces are meant to rock side-to-side: he carefully distributes the weight so they sway gently, but never roll off their pedestals. Most museums nevertheless add grooves to the pedestals to stabilize the sculptures, distrustful of visitors and their backpacks, “and I get that,” said Eversley, ever practical.

This rocking is as calculated as the colors: he cast his earliest works in concentric circles of three hues – amber, violet, and blue – recombining them into countless configurations, with strikingly different effects. He'd have to wait until the resin was at just the right state, a gel somewhere between liquid and solid, before he added a new layer. To get it just so, he drafted equations that now fill numerous binders, or “recipe books,” as he calls them. In one of these, on a yellowed piece of paper, are the notes he made in September 1970, when he created his very first lens, detailing things like the number of droplets of pigment he added to each concentric layer, and how many minutes it took the gel to harden.

Eversley calls his technique for making sculptures “centripetal casting”: much like a potter, he spins polyester resin on a turntable, but instead of shaping the edges with his hands, he uses a mold. The mass splashes out toward the periphery, forming something concave – a parabola. His studio has elements of an engineering lab, some of them menacing reminders of the military-industrial complex. I saw one such reminder in a corner: a dark wooden apparatus with a foot-powered wheel, something Eversley picked up at a scrap metal auction in 1971, for $50. It's the very turntable that was used to spin the castings for the nuclear bombs that the United States dropped on Japan in 1945.

During the visit, an assistant in full PPE was working on the ground floor, polishing a bright-orange lens in a makeshift booth surrounded by maquettes and lenses arranged on pedestals in an even grid. Plastic, of course, is toxic, but Eversley loves that it will never decay. Polishing, he says, “is 99 percent of the work.” This phase is labor-intensive, since the slope of the parabola changes as you go around, meaning you can't use a machine. It's all done by hand. The process is the same for the parabolic mirrors found in telescopes, which is what makes them so costly. A skilled worker often spends years hand-polishing such mirrors, per the design Sir Isaac Newton proposed in 1668.

Eversley first learned of parabolas when he was a kid in the East New York neighborhood of New York City, reading a magazine article about Newton's experiments. Intrigued, he started spinning parabolas of his own in his family's basement, using Jell-O, a record player, and a pie pan. He explained his curiosity about the physical world by explaining his banishment from the virtual one: “I wasn't allowed to watch TV.”

A certain flair for engineering was in Eversley's blood. His father was a Barbados-born aerospace engineer who founded a multimillion-dollar construction company, his mother a teacher and head of the PTA. Eversley attended Brooklyn Technical High School, then went to college at Carnegie Mellon; he majored in electrical engineering, and never studied art. He described being the first Black man to live on campus, and recalled that one of his two white would-be roommates moved out the minute he learned Eversley was Black. Nevertheless, Eversley joined a fraternity, and

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after graduating in 1963, got a job at NASA through the father of one of his fraternity brothers.

At NASA, he was the youngest engineer working on the Apollo Mission. He was based in Los Angeles, and wound up in Venice Beach after struggling to find a landlord who'd rent something waterfront to a Black man. In the '60s, Venice was a rare integrated neighborhood, a hippie enclave that was also full of artists.

It was a car accident in 1967 that led him to art-making. He was driving home from work at 11:30pm, and his car, as he put it, went "down a hill and over a cliff." He crashed, but "managed to stay alive, blah blah blah" – he's told this story a million times, because it was formative. It wasn't that his life flashed before his eyes and made him want to search for meaning and beauty by becoming an artist, but rather that a broken femur left him on crutches for 13 months, and he had to take a medical leave from work.

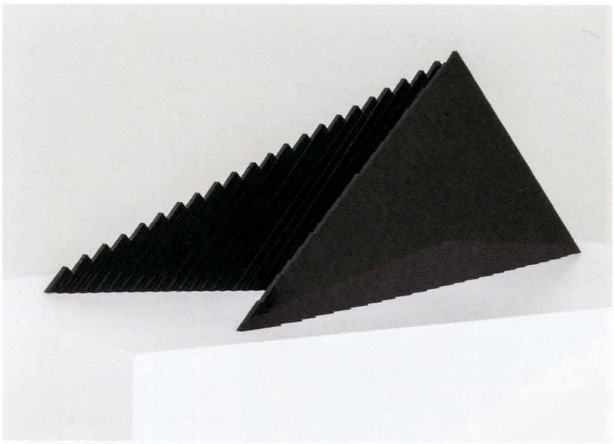
Needing a way to occupy himself, he started playing around with polyester resin. At first, he thought of his concoctions not as art, but "experiments." An artist friend, Charles Mattox, was letting Eversley crash in his loft while he was on crutches, in exchange for engineering advice. Mattox was working on intricate kinetic sculptures, and had witnessed the exciting output of the Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) group, spearheaded by artist Robert Rauschenberg and engineer Billy Klüver; he wanted to cultivate more collaborations between artists and scientists. Eventually, Eversley started to think of himself as an artist too, realizing he disliked going to the office, especially the commute. "It was a long ride," he said. (And one that had nearly killed him.)

In 1969, after his friend, the painter John Altoon, died, Eversley took over his studio that Frank Gehry had transformed for him from a laundromat. At first, Eversley tried inserting photographs into polyester resin before he explored dyeing them with pigments Mattox had lying around – amber, violet, and blue. He found that light passed through the translucent resin, mixing the colors to striking effect. Soon, he borrowed a potter's wheel from his downstairs neighbor – Kiana, the wife of artist De Wain Valentine – and started throwing the resin. He's been experimenting ever since: shape and materials remained his constants; size, color, and opacity would become his variables.

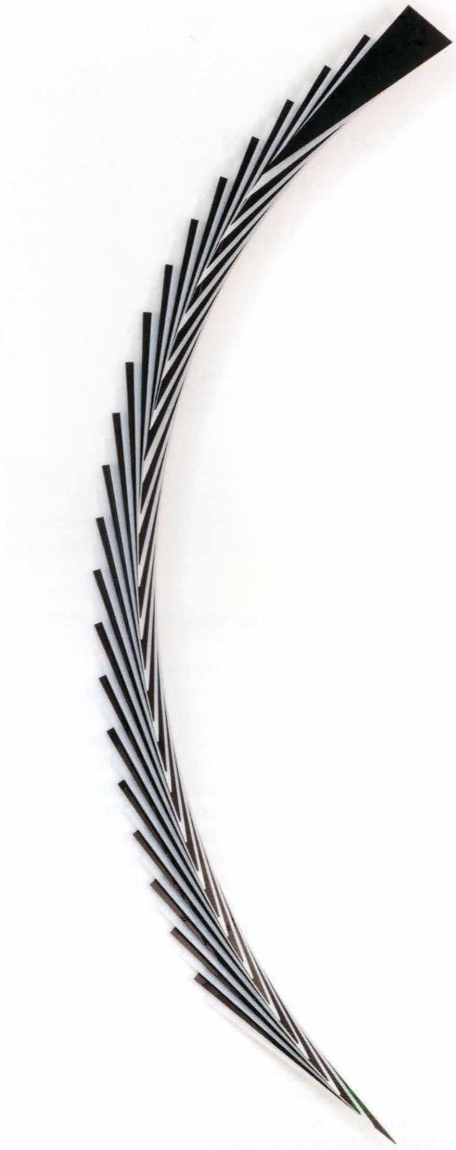
In 1970 he devised a maquette of a cylinder truncated so that it formed a vertical, rather than a lenticular, parabola. At the encouragement of his friend Rauschenberg, Eversley came to New York, bringing his maquette, cast in polyester resin, with him. He showed it to Marcia Tucker, a childhood friend – the two had met as teenagers, working in the West Village guitar shop Izzy Young's Folklore Center – who'd become a daring young curator working at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Tucker was impressed by Eversley's colorful resin forms, and gave him his very first solo show, before he'd ever even shown in a gallery. She also acquired the maquette for the Whitney's collection. But it would take more than five decades before Eversley saw his maquette blossom into the full-scale sculpture he envisioned.

The maquette for Eversley's public sculpture *Parabolic Flight*, 1977.

Parabolic Flight, 1977–80, at Miami International Airport.



Untitled (Midnight Valley), 1979.



Untitled (Unity II), 1980.

Back in LA, Eversley wound up giving lots of engineering advice to the artists he encountered in Venice. “I was the only one with a technical background,” he explained. He consulted Larry Bell while the artist designed his vacuum chambers, and even aided Judy Chicago before she left the Finish Fetish school, discovering it was unwelcoming toward women. Clearly, the Venice artist community was formative, and the atmosphere was equally influential. “There are very few fights on the beach,” he said. “People are too busy absorbing the energy—the wind, the waves.”

In LA, Eversley worked alongside artists like Robert Irwin and James Turrell in the heyday of Light & Space, California’s colorful and experiential (which for some meant “unserious”) version of the Minimalist movement taking place in New York. Although Eversley is often lumped in with the other Light & Space artists, he took little interest in their lofty ideas about phenomenology, and maintained ambitions fundamentally different from theirs: instead of sculpting pure abstractions, he was making representational homages to the parabola, a practical form beloved by engineers of many stripes. He often leaves his works untitled, or titles them literally, letting viewers find whatever meaning they want.

I asked Eversley about the numerous critics who have described having spiritual, transcendent encounters with his sculptures. He shrugged, and said, “*spiritual* is a funny word. I don’t really talk that way.” But he acknowledged that his works’ mesmerizing effect might have some value: one of his collectors, a psychiatrist, displays Eversley’s round parabolic lenses in his office, asking patients to stare into them while they speak. When Eversley found out about this, he said, “At first, I was pissed. Then I thought about it. And I said, ‘sure, that makes sense.’”

In addition to Eversley’s practicality, his race too sets him apart from other Light & Space artists. He descends directly from a woman enslaved at Mount Vernon, who was raped and impregnated by Martha Washington’s son by her first marriage (i.e., the first president’s stepson). One of Eversley’s grandmothers is a German Jew, the other, of the Shinnecock tribe. This led the late critic Barbara Rose—one of Eversley’s former girlfriends, as it happens—to write, in 2003, that “the complexity of Eversley’s heritage perhaps explains why he has sought to base his art on universal forms, which are found in all cultures.” Reading this quote in his living room two decades after it was written, Eversley scrunched his face skeptically. But he does have “universal” aspirations, he allowed: he has said “I don’t like art that you have to know art history to appreciate.”

And unlike most of his Light & Space cohort, Eversley got pushback too, for making geometric work instead of work engaged overtly with politics and race. One day in 1972, he had a Black artist group visit his studio after a symposium, and they “didn’t have many positive things to say about my work,” he told writer Allie Biswas. He was frustrated by their feedback, and complained to his Finish-Fetish artist-neighbor John McCracken. McCracken responded by handing him a can of black pigment as a joke, as if to say, “well, make some Black art then.” The can sat around for a year before Eversley took up McCracken’s dare. The results surprised him: the parabola was no longer a lens, but at full opacity, a mirror. Then, a white studio assistant joked he should make one for white folks too—soon, he made a milky disc. Then a gray one,

Photos Joshua White/JW Pictures/©Fred Eversley (2)

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> **"There are very few fights on the beach. People are too busy absorbing the energy—the wind, the waves."**

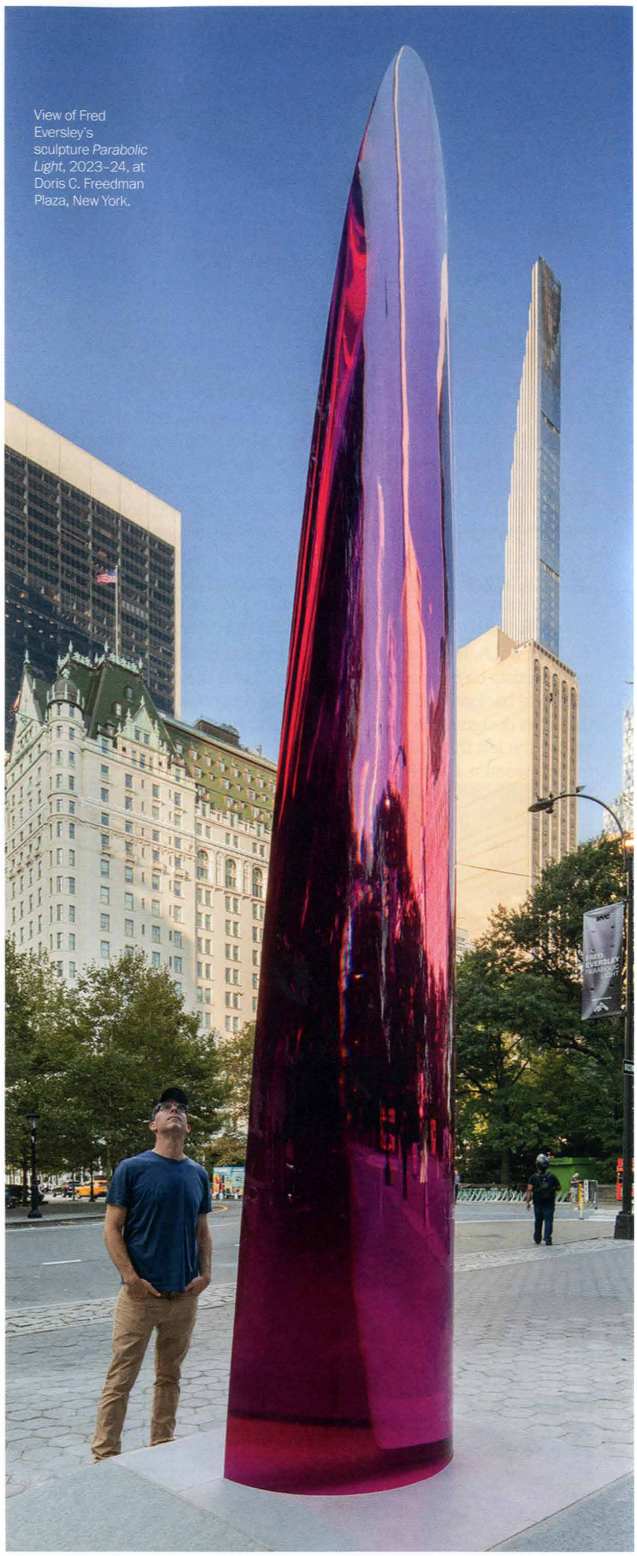
because, as he told Boston public radio station WBUR, "I'm half black and half white."

More recently, some important people have applauded his geometric forms as indifference to the pigeonholing that artists of color too often experience. In his 2016 book, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, art historian Darby English praised Eversley for resisting – alongside Black contemporaries like Alma Thomas and Alvin "Al" Loving – the demand to represent or be represented. These artists, English argues, importantly destabilized pressure to form some cohesive "Black aesthetic." In 2017 the acclaimed painter Kerry James Marshall invited Eversley to speak at a "Creative Convening" accompanying his major retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and told the *Wall Street Journal* he did so because "Fred was the only Black artist I knew of who was doing the same things they were doing."

Eversley was part of that influential first wave of artists who, on the heels of E.A.T., began taking up residencies in science and engineering institutions, like the famous Bell Labs residency, or the one at NASA Ames. In 1977 he snagged a three-year artist residency at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. "The museum had just opened, and Carter was president," Eversley said. "I was very good friends with him." Working in a studio in the museum's basement, he couldn't cast resin; that requires fumigation. So he started crafting abstractions from thin slats of cut acrylic for two series called "Geometries" and "Prisms." And he started dating Smithsonian curator Peggy Loar.

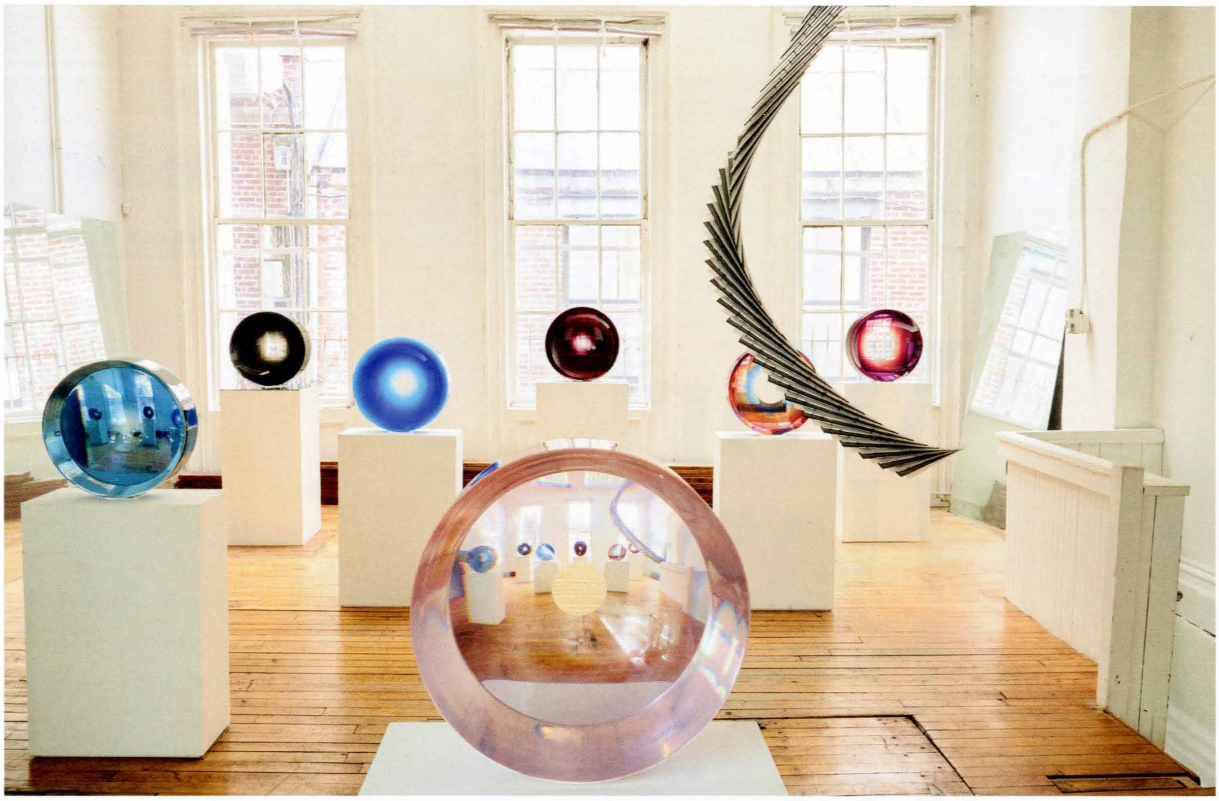
By 1980 he was bicoastal: mostly back in LA, but he also bought the New York building that I visited for $350,000, hoping to "cut a 3,000 mile relationship [with Peggy] down to a 200 mile relationship." He didn't want to stay in New York, where "most young artists spend a larger proportion of their time trying to keep body and soul together." He wanted to be on the beach, with the happy people absorbing the energy of the wind and the waves. A public art commission for the Miami Dade Airport, *Parabolic Flight* (1980), helped pay for this new real estate.

In the '80s and '90s, Eversley supported himself largely through residencies and some major public art commissions. At the Hyatt Hotel in Dallas, he constructed a transparent spherical fountain filled with and covered in clear mineral oil. For a shopping center in Atlanta, he made an 8-foot piece that, regrettably, has gone missing.



View of Fred Eversley's sculpture *Parabolic Light*, 2023–24, at Doris C. Freedman Plaza, New York.

Photo Nicholas Knight/Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery and Public Art Fund, New York/©Fred Eversley



A gallery in Eversley's SoHo, New York, studio highlights the artist's "Parabolic Lens" sculptures (1970–76) and a suspended laminated spiral.

Photo Christopher Garcia Valle

He also sold some works straight from his studio to collectors, including the Lewinsky family ("I've known Monica forever,"), and Michael Dell (Eversley had given Dell a ride to a computer conference before he became a founder and CEO). "With my connections from when I was an engineer – and even when I was a kid – somehow, I made it work," he said. The year he finally signed with a major gallery, David Kordansky in 2018, was also the year that marked his departure from Los Angeles: rising rents pushed him out of his Venice Beach studio, so he moved into the New York building full-time.

Reception and support for Eversley's work has come in "crests and waves," as curator Allison Glenn put it recently when we were discussing his new public sculpture, an installation that Glenn oversaw, working with Public Art Fund. Eversley himself, in an interview last year with critic Linda Yablonsky, explained those fluctuations, especially his struggle to find consistent gallery representation, in a single word: discrimination. For decades, he did it all without a regular dealer. He'd had close brushes with legendary ones: Leo Castelli had saved him from drowning after Rauschenberg threw him and his crutches into a Pasadena swimming pool, and Betty Parsons bought an early sculpture, but neither took him on.

This past summer, Eversley opened his first solo New York gallery show since 1975. "Cylindrical Lenses," at David Kordansky, comprised several full-scale, freestanding versions of that truncated cylinder he first modeled in 1970; they were cast in jewel tones and in the same polyester resin he's been using since 1967. In the white-cube gallery, the works' reflections were still and sparse, their effect contemplative, the mood austere. Also this fall, he finally installed the monumental outdoor version of his dreams: *Parabolic Light* will greet visitors to Central Park at the southeast entrance, in the Doris Freedman Plaza, until August. When I visited on a brisk afternoon in February, tourists in puffer coats appeared transfixed by how the tall purple tower – at once futuristic and timeless, recalling ancient obelisks – reflected and distorted the bustling cityscape.

Eversley's studio, meanwhile, is brimming with prototypes for new works made of metal: "My future is stainless steel," he declared with a grin. That's the material he's using to make his next big commission, a fountain in West Palm Beach titled *Portals*. In Florida, polyester resin would surely melt. So this new commission features eight shiny, reflective 17-foot-tall truncated cylinders – vertically fluted parabolic arcs. This time around, he's working with a fabricator. The fountain's eight vertical forms echo the eight columns on a building nearby, built in 1929 and designed by the influential African American architect Julian Abele, who also designed the Philadelphia Museum of Art and much of Duke University. The neoclassical building appears decidedly historical, whereas Eversley's forms feel futuristic. Together, they testify to an enduring human desire for ascendency, literally or otherwise.

Eversley has plenty of other unrealized ideas kicking around too, like solar-powered fountains that make practical use of his favorite form: parabolas that concentrate rays from the sun to generate power. Tinkering for decades now, time and again, he is chasing magic the way scientists do: figuring out how something works, then conveying the idea the way artists do: turning it into a transfixing object. ●