

Collier, DaeQuan Alexander, "Jell-O, Atomic Bombs, and the Curve: Fred Eversley's *Parabolic Lens*," *MoMA.org*,  
March 17, 2026

**MoMA**



# **Jell-O, Atomic Bombs, and the Curve: Fred Eversley's *Parabolic Lens***

**Is the iridescent sculpture in Arthur Jafa's  
*Artist's Choice* exhibition really a machine?**

DaeQuan Alexander Collier  
Mar 17, 2026

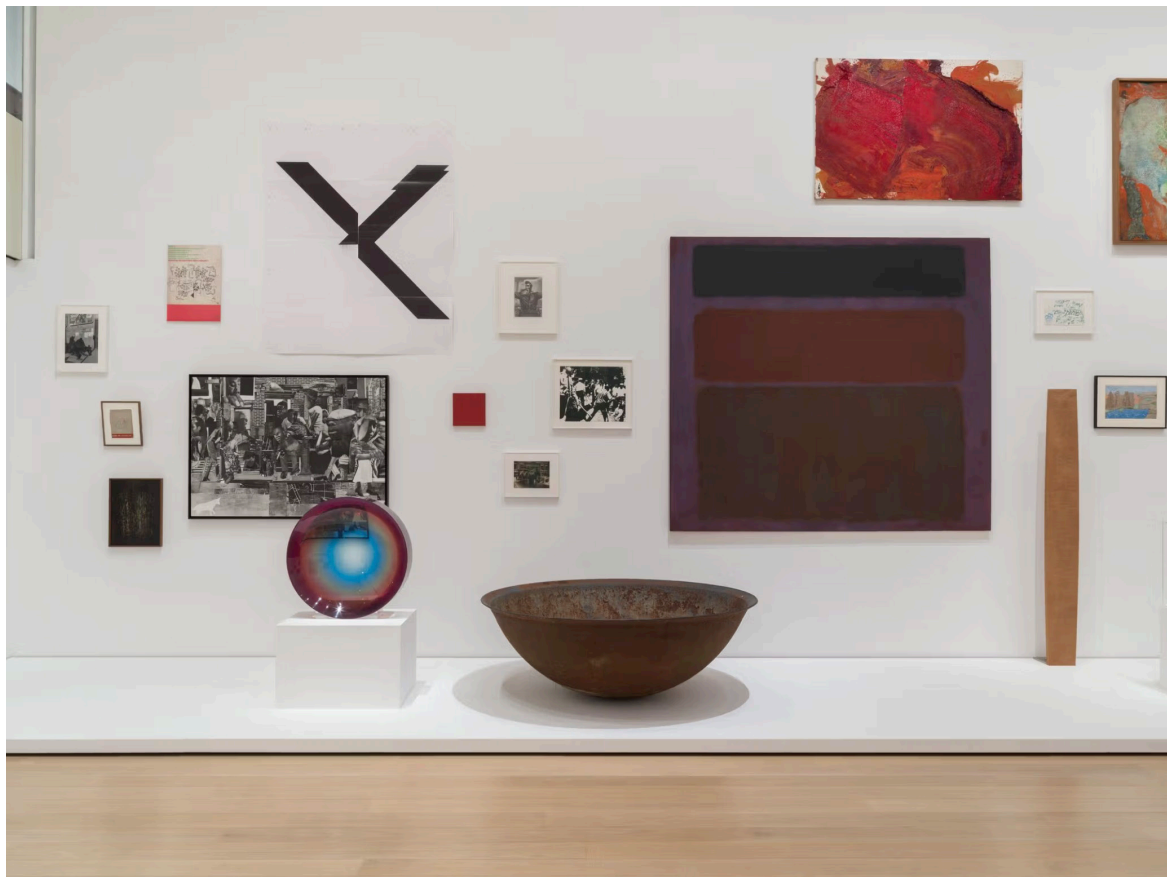
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Positioned in the entryway of Arthur Jafa's jam-packed exhibition, *Less Is Morbid*, you will find Fred Eversley's alluring *Untitled (Parabolic Lens)*. The cast 20" disc rests on a pedestal at eye level, saturated in an electric blue that seeps into green, amber, and red. Its resin surface is polished to such clarity that it feels closer to a spiritual instrument than a sculpture. It hovers there, catching gleams of the overhead light, nearly slipping into abstraction. It's easy to write off your encounter with Eversley's lens as a pleasurable experience and continue on your way through the gallery. It is undeniably seductive—it looks like a gemstone mined from the earth—but to file it away as a decorative object is to drastically underestimate it. The work operates using a different logic. It is designed, as the artist has said, to "suck people in."<sup>1</sup> Look through it, and the walls bend.

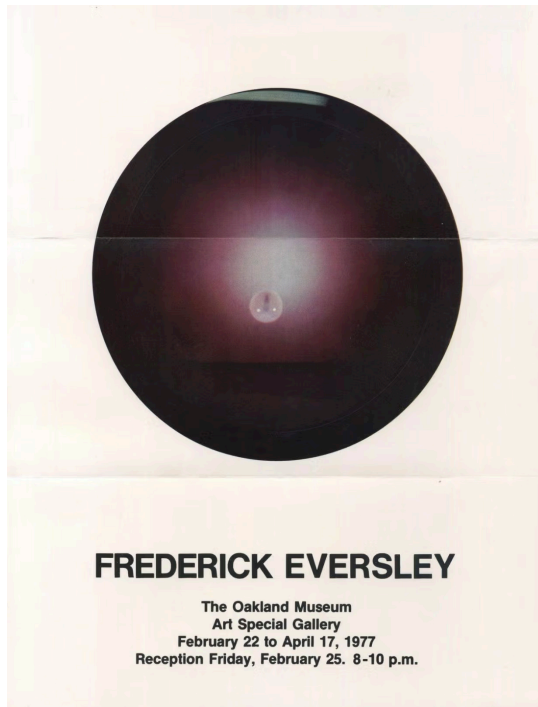


Frederick Eversley. *Untitled (Parabolic Lens)*. 1971. Side view. Three-color, three-layer cast polyester

The concave lens curves inward along a mathematically precise arc, compressing the gallery into its surface. Along the west wall, Romare Bearden's *The Dove* bends inside it. Crouch down—without alarming the guards—and Wade Guyton's black *X* bulges outward. The disc's color gradations intensify this effect. Helio Oiticica's *Red Monochrome* turns fuchsia. Step back and it sinks into deep red. Lean to the right and Mark Rothko's *No. 16 (Red, Brown, and Black)* becomes nearly illegible. Seen through Eversley's lens, Andy Warhol's *Race Riot* fractures through blue and red, its brutality intact. Your own reflection appears somewhere in there, too, floating between Mies van der Rohe's chrome column and Martin Puryear's *Trophy*. The eye searches for a stable arrangement and finds only refraction. With each adjustment of your body the parabola recalibrates the relationships between objects.



Installation view of the exhibition *Artist's Choice: Arthur Jafa—Less Is Morbid*



The Oakland Museum solo exhibition poster, 1977

Eversley, who passed away in 2025, spent his life chasing this effect. He explained that his objects and their “internal space and colors constantly change in relationship to ambient light, viewing angle, environment, and the spectator’s frame of mind.”<sup>2</sup> The search began in a Brooklyn basement, when the artist was in his early teens. After reading an article on Newton’s bucket experiment in his father’s copy of *Popular Mechanics*, Eversley recreated it using an old turntable, a pie pan, and Jell-O.<sup>3</sup> This was his first encounter with centripetal force—the law of motion Newton spent years rotating pails of water to describe. That law holds that, when subjected to the force of a centripetal pull, motion bends inward, forming a parabola: the ancient U-shaped curve that funnels all energy to a single point. It governs planetary orbits, telescopes probing deep space, radar systems, and solar fields concentrating light into energy. Throughout his career, Eversley was dedicated to energy in all of its guises, which he thought of as both a “physical and metaphysical concern.”<sup>4</sup>

Eversley trained as an engineer and relocated to Los Angeles in the mid-1960s to work in Southern California’s aerospace industry, leading projects for NASA during the Gemini and Apollo programs at the height of the Space Race. He employed parabolic forms as tools to develop acoustical chambers engineered to generate sound loud enough to simulate the violence of space.<sup>5</sup> California was thick with new materials: Industrial and scientific- grade glass, coatings,

and plastics flooded in from postwar contracts, and for a brief period these materials were revitalized in the hands of American artists. Polyester resin, a liquid plastic that could be cast, colored, and polished to optical clarity, became a primary material for many of them. A 1968 editorial in *Modern Plastics* predicted that artists would write the material’s next chapter, “blasting through the limitations of shape and form.”<sup>6</sup> The substance became so embedded in studios during this period that, as Peter Plagens observed, “its chemical smell and the sight of a hardened drip on a 55-gallon drum were as familiar as Beaux-Arts studio decor as splattered floors and turpentine.”<sup>7</sup>

riod. For all that one might feasibly be intrigued by the glitter of the nickel plating, the ingenuity of the hinged anatomies and the witticism of the aluminum shadows that stream like iced-up ectoplasm from the feet of some of these glossy gentlemen, they obviously, in the end, stand as representatives of that genre so well characterized by that devastating title, "Novelty Art." What makes it worse, however, is that these shiny bourgeois toys should pretend to be containers of significant moral dilemmas, like the relationship of man and machine and the depersonaliza-

tion of 20th-century life. They simply act as reminders of how technological society is so adept at incorporating genuine and serious dissent into its structure, and capitalizing on it. Whatever he might think, Trova is just making comfortable placebos. In this respect, the worst piece in the show was a hybrid gun-man image—one of Trova's boring figures fashioned into a weird hand weapon. I've always felt that an art which attempts to be concerned with exposing social evils (though I'm not sure this is really Trova's genuinely felt concern) simply weakens itself

insofar as it is art, and that people like Huelsenbeck had the right idea in simply abolishing the artistic pretense. For emotional impact, the salon gun image just doesn't hold up when compared to the really grizzly things you can see in gun museums.

Like Trova, Graham insists he can make art through the medium of social imagery. His argument, of course (as quoted in the *New York Times*), is that his sexy female mannikins "work on a lot of levels—I suppose because they're recognizable images, they have more levels than most." While I've always wished to believe that to prescribe any kind of limit to what should be considered a proper field for art is merely to prohibit the possible creation of the good where only the indifferent might previously have existed, the problem with Graham (and with Trova) is that their cherished extra levels can never compensate for the visual banality of what they are doing. Graham claims his interest is in light and space more than in sexy fetishism, but this is so hard to believe, for the "more levels than most" at best obfuscate the latent pictorialism. The figuration itself is a too-easy prop and if the eroticism is a side issue, why is it cluttering everything up? But it isn't really, and Graham obviously wants to win on both counts. This kind of vapid, mini-Playboy business doesn't contribute much beyond making us wonder whether we would in fact bother looking at all if it wasn't there. The pictorial presentation is really rather slack: some interesting spacings and balancings, but nothing to hold one very long. Neither am I suggesting that figuration itself is an improper concern (though I do believe it to be very difficult to make significant art through figuration nowadays), nor that realistic sculpture doesn't similarly have its place. Rather, that when three-dimensional figuration operates at a scale of less than six inches in height, it becomes so obviously more relevant to transmission media than to art ones. They happen to be good subjects for photography and look a lot better in magazines than in the flesh (or, rather, the wax). Perhaps this is what they are really about.

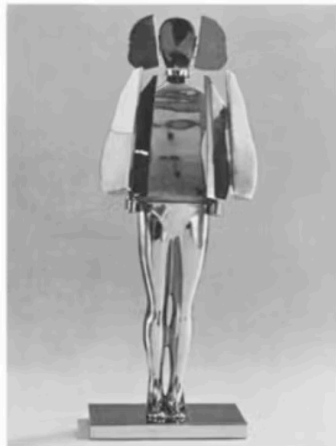
—JOHN ELDERFIELD

## LOS ANGELES

**TRANSPARENCY, REFLECTION, LIGHT, SPACE: FOUR ARTISTS, UCLA Art Galleries; TOM WESSELMANN, Newport Harbor Art Museum; THIRTIES STYLE, Irving Blum Gallery; CHARLIE NOTHING, Eugenia Butler Gallery; KEN PRICE, Mizuno Gallery; THREE ARTISTS, Esther Robles Gallery:**

UCLA's exhibition, *TRANSPARENCY, REFLECTION, LIGHT, SPACE: FOUR ARTISTS*, reveals, sometimes inadvertently, almost all that is at once strong and frail about Los Angeles art. The show is fittingly (for a university facility) a kind of crash course in the thrust of recent art-thinking: a super problem-solving process (problems of consciousness, not one color or shape against another) whose products run the gamut from Larry Bell's still-fantastic object, to Robert Irwin's stairwell ("activated . . . perceptually with as little event or object as possible"). All of it deals with the title categories and all of it is quite distant, cerebral, laboratoried and expressionless (in the sense that the artist seeks out not personal, but sensory-philosophical questions; looking at the show one might believe people live forever, without bowel movements). Pastel, selfless, vaguely optimistic, up-to-date, deft, and depending on one's "set," extremely trivial or magnificently profound. However, there are the usual things to take up with the management. First, nowhere (in the tight little hard-bound catalog) is the exact origin of the show indicated; it is billed as "arranged by" the four artists, implying their takeover of curatorial functions. I mean, it makes at least a small difference whether the artists are so close that they came to Dr. Wight and said, "This is what we're about and we want to do a group number," or UCLA said, "This is what it's about, so we'll pick the best and do a show." Second, the catalog essays are interviews, with the thought that "self-criticism is more interesting than criticism";

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Ernest Trova, untitled, nickel-plated bronze, 12" h., 1970. Pace Gallery.



Robert Graham, untitled, figures in plexiglass box, ca. 1' x 2', 1970. Sonnabend Gallery.

Peter Plagens reviews early Light and Space exhibition for *Artforum*, 1971

**From these cylinders [Eversley] cut countless configurations of forms, each animated "by natural movement of people and light as opposed to physically moving itself."**

Eversley settled in Venice Beach, the only integrated neighborhood where someone would rent to him. It was home to a loose network of artists experimenting with perception and industrial materials. Eversley's neighbors included Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, James Turrell, John McCracken, De Wain Valentine, Ed Moses, John Altoon, and Charles Mattox. Bell was developing glass cubes that used aerospace vacuum technology. Alton was casting monochrome planks of resin. Turrell was sketching experiments with light. Eversley offered technical aid and quickly became indispensable. In 1967, after a car accident broke Eversley's leg and left him on crutches, Mattox invited Eversley to move into an unused loft in his studio in exchange for help, inspired by collaborations between artists and engineers developed by Experiments in Art and Technology. Mattox named him the group's first "technologist." The effort never panned out, but Eversley left engineering and committed fully to art.



Portrait of Frederick Eversley by Frank J. Thomas, 1971

Using Mattox's lathe, Eversley began casting forms, pouring liquid resin into cylinders that rotated along a horizontal axis and were driven outward by centripetal force. He began with small sculptures consisting of shapes cut from transparent, three-color cast cylinders, dyeing them with pigments Mattox had on hand—violet, amber, and blue—then sanding and rigorously polishing each surface to optical clarity. By varying the thickness and saturation of these layers, Eversley observed that light passing through the translucent band refracted, creating jewel-like optical effects. From these cylinders he cut countless configurations of forms, each animated "by natural movement of people and light as opposed to physically moving itself."<sup>8</sup>



Fred Eversley in front of his Venice Beach studio, c. 1970



County Commissioners Barbara Carey and Ruth Shack with Fred Eversley at the dedication of *Parabolic Flight*, Miami International Airport, 1980

After Altoon's sudden death in 1969, Eversley took over his studio—a converted laundromat near the beach designed by [Frank Gehry](#). There he scaled up, salvaging a turntable once used to manufacture casings for the first atomic bombs and a variable-speed motor, and rigging them to allow him to spin resin vertically and create larger forms.<sup>9</sup> From this apparatus emerged his signature parabolic discs, a form he would continue to refine for more than 50 years. What began as modest motion experiments evolved into a wide array of works—discs, vertical cylinders, monochrome and black-hole lenses—spanning the color spectrum and ranging in scale from gallery works to monumental public commissions.

Shaped by the Los Angeles art scene of the 1960s and '70s, Eversley emerged alongside a group of artists who were later labeled "Light and Space," a term derived from the 1971 exhibition *Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space* at UCLA Art Galleries. It was a label that many of them resisted. Critics and institutions on the East Coast, where [Minimalism](#) was shaping the critical discourse, met the work with skepticism. One critic dismissed Light and Space as "nothing... just atmosphere," attributing it to "too much sun, too many drugs."<sup>10</sup> The phrase "finish fetish" followed the work—sometimes descriptively, sometimes dismissively—suggesting indulgence and a preoccupation with polish. Eversley called it "a bullshit term."<sup>11</sup> The lenses could easily be folded into this dismissive reading— self-contained and ornamental, they were likened by early critics to "Fabergé eggs" or "crystal flowers."<sup>12</sup>



Footage from *Young American Artist*, a traveling exhibition by the United States Information Agency (USIA), featuring a film and artworks by 50 American artists; Fred Eversley filmed in Venice Beach, 1969–70

## Eversley believed the work's aim was "seeing the world through the pieces, not looking at an object."

That dismissal was miscalculated. Eversley's parabolic forms are carefully calibrated perceptual devices. What set him apart from the Light and Space artists was his insistence on the scientific underpinnings of the work. As critic Peter Frank has observed, Eversley is "concerned less with the apparent presence or absence of his sculptures than with the conditions of our encounter with them."<sup>13</sup> The clarity of *Untitled (Parabolic Lens)* is not an embellishment; without it, the work would not function. It only begins to bend and gather in the world because of its precision. Eversley believed the work's aim was "seeing the world through the pieces, not looking at an object."<sup>14</sup>

More than a half century after it was cast, *Untitled (Parabolic Lens)* finds itself in Arthur Jafa's *Less Is Morbid*, in charged proximity to more than 80 works. Jafa calls his strategy "besidedness"—the forced structural relationship of things swept together whether they asked for it or not.<sup>15</sup> As Jafa's exhibition seeks to reject the modernist fantasy that clarity comes from reduction, the lens does something no other object in the room can do. Because it quietly concentrates everything into a single point, the eye cannot isolate a single work without absorbing its neighbors. The work insists on relation. Each shift of your body unsettles the disparate hierarchies, chronologies, and supposed boundaries between them. Eversley's lens does not sit passively. It refracts, compresses, bends. It implicates us.



Eversley viewing *Untitled (Parabolic Lens)* at MoMA, 2017

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Fred Eversley's *Untitled (Parabolic Lens)* is on view at MoMA in *Artists's Choice: Arthur Jafa—Less Is Morbid* through July 5, 2026.

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