

FOR THE PEOPLE

Robert O'Neal was an artist who was not only community-centered, but people-centered. As he once stated, "I work with the arts, and I work in the community. And art is, after all, the feelings and emotions of the community." His inherent love for his family members, collaborators, and friends is reflected in his large body of portraits. From his beginnings as an artist in the 1960s to his later developments in the 1990s, O'Neal sought to represent the diversity of his human subjects. His paintings often used bright colors and loose brushwork to allow elements of abstraction to enter his representational works. He also experimented with the possibilities of photography to document an array of faces. For one series, he arranged unconventional materials—like wire, beads, and even a hair clip—onto photographic paper and exposed them to light. Through this photographic process, these images (called photograms) resulted in abstract assemblages that allude to the human visage.

COMMEMORATING BLACK HISTORY AND CULTURE

Robert O'Neal used his work to reflect on and commemorate the rich histories of Black culture. Many of his paintings memorialize Black abolitionists and civil rights leaders, like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. He places these historical figures alongside nameless members of the global Black diaspora, forming ancestral connections across time and space. The ship is a recurring theme throughout many of his works. While this image serves as a reminder to the painful histories of enslavement, O'Neal recontextualizes it as the ship of Zion, a reference to a Christian hymn that spoke of a ship that would provide a means of liberation to enslaved people. Therefore, while many of his paintings capture a sense of stoic resiliency, he also depicts the spirit of hope that is rooted in Black arts and culture. The painting *All Jazz*, which includes four musicians playing their instruments in front of a large sign that reads "JAZZ," also represents how music serves as a source of joy within Black communities. The figures are situated within large swaths of blue paint that have dabs of yellow and red highlights interspersed throughout the canvas. O'Neal's stylistic depiction of this scene captures the lyrical, improvisational, and dynamic energy of this musical genre.

THE FACES HE'S SEEN

Up until the last few years of his life, Robert O'Neal always kept himself busy as an actively engaged member of the local arts community. He continued to teach free art courses into his sixties at youth centers, churches, and senior centers. He also became an avid face painter, volunteering at community events to bring joy to people of all ages. However, his overlapping identities as an artist and an activist at times limited his ability to work in the studio. "I hope to take more time and do more painting of my own," he said, "Because I need more art in my life." Quick drawings and sketches became a means for him to continue to build upon his body of work outside of the traditional studio space. Using whatever materials were immediately available to him—a scrap piece of paper or even an old envelope or shopping bag—he allowed his hand to float across the surface of his makeshift canvas, creating an intricate assemblage of line work that morphed into abstract faces. Through his series of portrait drawings, O'Neal continued to explore his fascination with the human face, developing a signature style that spanned across his artistic career.

EMBRACING PURE ABSTRACTION

In the early 2000s, Robert O'Neal strayed from representational painting, one of the predominant threads that existed throughout his body of work up until that point in time. Using a vibrant palette of reds, yellows, greens, and blues, he played with line and shape to create dynamic compositions. Triangles, rectangles, and circles overlap and entangle with one another, documenting O'Neal's playful and intuitive process as a painter. Many of the geometric lines throughout the paintings are further emphasized with puffy paint, adding a sense of dimensionality to the flat surfaces of the canvases. This abstract series of works demonstrates O'Neal's desire to continually evolve as a painter. He experimented with the possibilities of painting even as a mature, prodigious artist, refusing to remain stagnant in his forms, materials, and interests.

THE OVER-THE-RHINE MAYOR

“The only way to build a community is to stabilize a community. The only way is to have people live here who love it here.”

—Robert O’Neal

Throughout his lifetime, Robert O’Neal was dedicated to serving his community as an artist and an activist. “Giving is a part of my art,” said O’Neal. “There’s art in communicating with people. To be able to get people together, that’s art to me.” He was particularly passionate about serving the city’s most vulnerable and marginalized populations, and his ongoing work earned him the honorary title of “The Over-the-Rhine Mayor.” This exhibition includes a timeline of his biography, highlighting his many achievements as a socially-engaged artist and community member.