

Joe Light / Institute 193, Lexington

by Ashton Cooper



Joe Light, *Joe Light*, 1980s, house paint on plywood, 22 x 13.25 inches

Joe Light's painting *Kiera*, 1989, is an undulating, almost corporeal landscape anchored by three red hills set against a light-blue sky. In the pink foreground are a trio of pronged forms that resemble the branches of denuded trees—or perhaps even desert wanderers with their arms outstretched to heaven. The composition calls to mind Georgia O'Keeffe's early abstractions based on New York's Lake George, in which sloping ovoid forms become mountains and clouds. But zooming out to take in *Kiera*, alongside the seven other house-paint-on-plywood works at Institute 193, the viewer might have apprehended it as just one more episode within the larger visual narrative of Light's self-made cosmology. The artist's mythos centers around two oft-painted figures: Hobo and Birdman, after whom this exhibition was titled. Hobo is a multiracial everyman who carries a bindle and stick while wandering through nature, and symbolizes man on the journey of life. Birdman, however, represents enlightenment and salvation, and is depicted as a head in profile topped by an avian companion. Light's icons of personal

transformation resonate with various Native American creation myths and seem to take formal cues from the figures in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics.

"Hobo # Birdman" marked the first known solo show by the artist, who died in 2005. Light's art has come to recognition through the late William S. Arnett, founder of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, an organization that promotes the work of self-taught black artists from the American South. Over the past decade, Arnett donated and/or sold Light's paintings to several major institutions, including New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. (All of the pieces in this exhibition were lent by the Arnett Collection.) Consequently, Light's work has been primarily contextualized by Arnett, whose account of the artist centers around his biography, in particular an origin story in which

the artist, while in jail, heard the voice of the Old Testament God, and converted to Judaism. Although Light's rejection of his Baptist upbringing—and Christianity in general—was interpreted by many as a result of mental illness, a lot of his ruminations on race and religion are all too lucid. Take, for instance, Light's argument that "Indians and colored people was forced to live by the New Testament in slavery. . . . They made them believe in the white man's religion to gain control."

Light made many of his paintings in situ, on the exterior and interior of his house in Memphis, which was covered with images. He would also post signs in his yard with messages—one read I MAY NOT BE ABLE TO WALK ON WATER LIKE THIS SO CALL JESUS CHRIST . . . BUT I AM ABLE TO NOT BE PREJUDICE OR A RACIST. While the works here were not originally part of Light's home, the impulse to merge art and life seems clear enough in his use of domestic materials such as drawers or a cabinet door, as supports. Observing Light's paintings piece by piece is perhaps less productive than considering them as part of an elaborate polyptych, for together they become part of an animated visual parable. This liveliness is also embedded in Light's self-portrait: an epiphanic icon of himself. Nearly twice as tall as it is wide, *Joe Light*, 1986, includes a swath of blank red space above the titular figure's head, perhaps left empty for the arrival of an enlightening bird. One wonders if the artist envisioned this painting as a talisman of change not just for himself, but for anyone else who encountered it.