Raymond Saunders: Flowers from a Black Garden

At the age of 18, when Raymond Saunders (born 1934) graduated with honors from Schenley High School, just four blocks from Carnegie Museum of Art, he was already preparing for his first solo exhibition. "Let's say I found out I might be an artist," he told a reporter, reflecting on his younger self. "I didn't know it, but the teacher said it." That teacher was Joseph Fitzpatrick, art supervisor at Pittsburgh Public Schools and an instructor of a progressive Saturday program for young artists here at this museum.

Carrying forward what he learned—in his mother's home, in the classroom, in this city, and in the museum—Saunders grew into a consummate student of painting and a lifelong educator himself. Raised in Pittsburgh's Hill District, he received a scholarship to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, graduated from Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh, and earned an advanced degree from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, where he remains professor emeritus today.

It can be challenging to convey the power of abstract art through language. "If we could speak it, we would not paint it," he said about the role of the artist. But we can start by describing what we see. Saunders often begins his large-scale works with a black background—a nod to the teacher's chalkboard—rather than the painter's usual white canvas. Through improvisation, he accumulates gestural flashes of paint, notational markings in chalk, children's games and drawings, comics and signage, torn photos and found objects, frames within frames, color charts and palettes, and various tools of the painter's trade. Frequently, he abandons the traditional support of painting altogether and creates his compositions on discarded doors.

And there are flowers—so many flowers—drawn with precision, gestured with pigment, printed and pasted. Amid such complexity, urgency, even noise, what beauty may take root, right here and now?

Of the innumerable artworks Saunders created over nine decades, this exhibition presents just 35. It may seem like a modest number, but these paintings offer worlds upon worlds of thinking, feeling, and being. Alongside many of the artworks, you will read the artist's voice and learn from him the driving concerns of his life spent teaching and painting.

Raymond Saunders: Flowers from a Black Garden is co-organized by Carnegie Museum of Art and Orange County Museum of Art. Carnegie Museum of Art's presentation is curated by Eric Crosby, Henry J. Heinz II Director, Carnegie Museum of Art, and Vice President, Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh, with Alyssa Velazquez, assistant curator.

Generous support for Carnegie Museum of Art's presentation is provided by The Fine Foundation. Additional support is provided by Carnegie Mellon University. Carnegie Museum of Art's exhibition program is supported by the Carnegie Museum of Art Exhibition Fund and The Fellows of Carnegie Museum of Art.



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Carnegie Museum of Art is supported by The Heinz Endowments and Allegheny Regional Asset District. Carnegie Museum of Art also receives state arts funding support through a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.