

For Saunders, black is a powerful and open-ended concept that has driven his creative process and evolving artistic beliefs. The color figures prominently in his early 1960s works nearby; at that time, it was a means for him to discover the rich potential of abstraction. In 1967, Saunders explored the color's social dimensions in his essay "Black Is a Color," an excerpt of which is available here in a printed brochure. In the essay, he considered the role and identity of the Black artist in cultural life. While some of his contemporaries were passionate about arts function as a tool for social justice, Saunders sought artistic agency in questions of the human condition and imagination.

**"I'm not here to play to the gallery. I am not responsible for anyone's entertainment. I am responsible for being as fully myself, as man and artist, as I possibly can be, while allowing myself to hope that in the effort some light, some love, some beauty may be shed upon the world, and perhaps some inequities put right."
—Raymond Saunders, 1967**

Across his career, Saunders uses chalk to make marks on the black ground of his paintings as a teacher might on a blackboard or kids on a sidewalk. These include numbers and figures written and scratched out, names and places of personal and historical significance, drawings as if from childhood, and words and phrases with double meanings. The specific material of chalk nods to the underlying importance of education to Saunders, who studied at various schools before teaching in the Bay Area for over two decades. Setting aside his full-time studio practice and accepting a position as an art professor at the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1987 was never an occupational need but a life sustaining want.

“My intention in teaching at the university was not to teach artists. I didn’t want to make artists; I wanted to sort of contribute to well-being; I wanted to contribute to freedom, and the choice of being an artist.”

—Raymond Saunders, 1987

With titles that evoke narrative, poetry, history, and culturally specific references, Saunders's works bring together disparate bits and pieces of the world taken from newspapers and magazines, found on street corners, unearthed at rummage sales, and given to him by others. By creating such depth of collage and layering of meaning, Saunders resists easy answers to the questions of art and life. Autobiography, American history, global events of the day, art historical references, racial stereotypes, and advertisements swirl together, breaking down cultural hierarchies and categorization. The sheer density of his works in the 1990s troubles any fixed idea of interpretation, emboldening our own agency to discover associations and make meaning.

“Art is about being engaged and accessing your power. It’s funny that people argue against ethnic commitment and involvement. It doesn’t take anything away from the art. It just adds more layers to what art is about.”

—Raymond Saunders, 1994

Over the years, Saunders has been known to embellish his exhibitions of paintings by placing objects such as flowers, stuffed animals, and jars of paint near them, pinning additional sketches or printed material beside them, or even drawing or painting directly on the wall to extend a piece into space. Returning to past work, tinkering with it, responding to its nuances, expanding its possible meanings—these predilections reveal much about Saunders’s process and approach to painting. Rarely are his works “finished” in any conventional sense, and their ephemeral qualities suggest an art akin to life.

**“I think it’s sort of fallacious to think that when you see something in a gallery that’s finished, or when you see something hung, it’s complete. It’s just where it is for some other reason. And you know that process is still ongoing.”
—Raymond Saunders, 1994**