

VAN DOREN WAXTER

Arthur Monroe

Know Your Axe

September 17 – November 8, 2025



Untitled, 2003, Oil on canvas, 77 x 96 in (195.6 x 243.8 cm) (AM 021)

Van Doren Waxter is thrilled to present *Know Your Axe*, an exhibition of monumental paintings spanning three decades by the late American painter, Arthur Monroe (b. 1935 – d. 2019). This exhibition showcases Monroe's ineluctable works that evince their jazz and Beat influences. This is the gallery's first exhibition of the artist since announcing representation of the Arthur Monroe Estate, and will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, with an essay by Seph Rodney.

In Monroe's paintings, the bright yellows, deep oranges, and striking combination of contrasting colors are balanced with commanding strokes of black and white, anchored by his use of the grid, which underpins the works. Each stroke is a direct response to the one made before, and the bursts of confident spontaneity, as well as the intermittence, all lie equal on Monroe's canvases. Much like his travels from New York to Mexico to California, Monroe's painting is everywhere and everything all at once— a synthesis of each moment collected, as he navigated the 1950s art world as a young Black man, without an effort to fit in or follow a predestined path. From the white-dominated AbEx scene in the East Village, where he studied under Hans Hofmann and mingled with Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, to the war he fought in Korea, Monroe's life was abundant with persistence and extemporization.

As a painter who rubbed shoulders with the legends of the Beat Generation, including jazz musicians Charlie "Bird" Parker and Nina Simone, and the poets Leroi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) and Ted Joans, Arthur Monroe had no confusion about painting as a categorical genre and the specificity it entailed. Art critic Seph Rodney writes in his essay for the exhibition, "He's a bridge between the arts, the literary, visual, and musical, demonstrating that his particular creative work — paintings — aren't a translation of some other art form; they are their own visual language, his own now and forever." When left with the most elemental tools of image making, Monroe creates rhythm and space unique to painting, distinct from language or music.

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Although Monroe was deeply engaged with the local community of creatives everywhere he lived, like many marginalized artists of the 20th century, his work and practice suffered from exclusion in art history. In Oakland, California, where he spent more than 40 years of his life, Monroe converted the Oakland Cannery Warehouse into the first legal live-work space for artists in the city and advocated for the rights of artists to live and work as he did. He also cared for the historic collection at the Oakland Museum of California as their chief registrar and taught African American studies at the University of Berkeley, and San Jose State College. Monroe remarked that being a Black artist was “a tow to carry,” and for him, to carry that weight was to uplift those around him. Within this exhibition is the fruit of that devotion to art and humanity, that tireless exploration of visual culture and paint as a social force.

About the artist

Arthur Monroe (b. 1935 – d. 2019) was an African American Abstract Expressionist who lived and worked in the Bay Area. During his lifetime, Monroe exhibited at prestigious institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, NY); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (San Francisco, CA); the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis, MN); the Oakland Museum (Oakland, CA); the Museum of the African Diaspora (San Francisco, CA,) to name a few. His artwork resides in the permanent collections of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (Washington, DC); Crocker Art Museum (Sacramento, CA); Kristiania University College (Oslo, Norway); the University of Agder (Grimstad, Norway); and the de Saisset Museum (Santa Clara, CA). His collected papers from 1950 - 2019 were acquired by the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art in 2019, and he was the subject of a solo museum exhibition in 2024 at the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art.

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