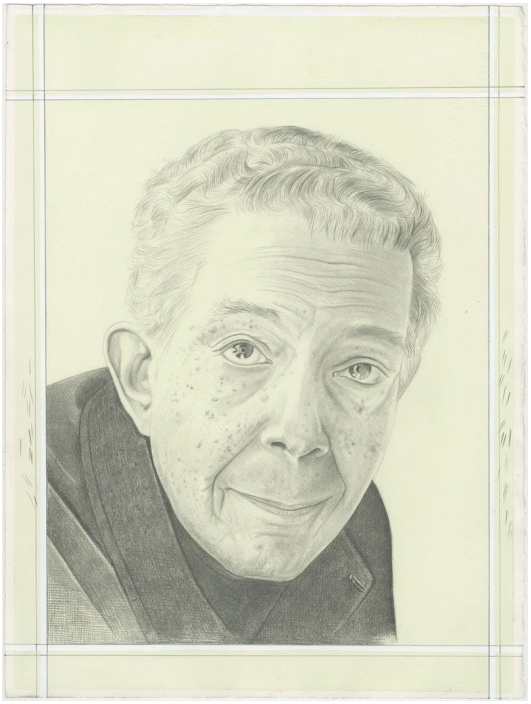
THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Art | In Conversation

Fred Eversley with Allie Biswas



Portrait of Fred Eversley.
Pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

For his current exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery in New York, Fred Eversley has produced a new body of sculptures that realize ideas initially explored by the artist in writing some fifty years ago. The “Cylindrical Lenses,” which consist of six vertically-oriented structures measuring between seven and nine feet tall, mark the first time that Eversley has made free-standing, floor-based works in resin—a material that has been intrinsic to his practice since the very beginning. In the late 1960s, the artist pioneered a method of casting dyed liquid plastic in circular molds that were first spun on a lathe and then, on a rotating turntable. This resulted in tubular and parabolic casts, cut into various shapes with parabolic forms—the parabola being the only shape that concentrates all kinds of energy, whether light, movement or sound, to a single focal point. This unique shape has guided the artist’s objectives across the decades. As Eversley has said, “my work is all about energy, so playing with and pushing the boundaries of the parabola has been the focus.”

Installation view: *Fred Eversley: Cylindrical Lenses*, David Kordansky Gallery, 2023. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.

Allie Biswas (Brooklyn Rail): Let’s start with a geographical transition that is often cited when discussing your trajectory. Having grown up in New York City, you trained as an electrical engineer at Carnegie Mellon before relocating to Southern California, in 1963, to take a job in the aerospace industry. You worked at Wyle Laboratories from 1963 until 1967, designing high-intensity acoustical laboratories for NASA Houston, which were used for the Gemini and Apollo space missions. How did these experiences lead to you becoming an artist?

Fred Eversley: While I was working at Wyle, I was taking night classes at UCLA in French and Beat poetry and photography. My grandfather had experimented with photography, so that’s how I had originally got into that. On the way back from class, a couple of times a week, I would stop by to see Edith Wyle’s mother. Edith was married to Frank Wyle, who had offered me the job at his company, Wyle Laboratories. I had met Frank through his son, who was in my fraternity at Carnegie Mellon, in Pittsburgh. Edith was a painter, a student of Rico Lebrun, and part of a community that included Lee Mullican and Luchita Hurtado, so I was introduced to that generation of artists in Los Angeles early on. Edith was also a patron and later opened a special type of gallery, with a restaurant, called The Egg and the Eye, across the road from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In 1973 it became the Craft and Folk Art Museum, now Craft Contemporary. I actually gave her the idea, which was based on the same concept as Serendipity 3 in New York, where I used to go as a teen and where Warhol was a regular at the time.

Rail: Connected to your upbringing in New York, I understand that you worked at the Folklore Center in Greenwich Village, while you were in high school, so you were exposed early on to those who might be described as pioneers in the arts. Izzy Young's store, of course, became the focal point for the American folk music movement at the time.

Eversley: I was surrounded by artists at the Folklore Center and I would go to shows at the Judson Memorial Church which gave artists a space to hold their exhibitions and performances. Alexander Hay, Bob Rauschenberg and many more artists were part of that scene. I was also taking Zen Buddhism classes with Alan Watts.

Rail: When did you start to meet artists of your own generation after moving to Southern California?

Eversley: After briefly living in Hawthorne, which is east of El Segundo, I moved to Venice Beach. There were a number of jazz musicians living there. The person who owned my building, who lived next door, was a professor at an art school. I quickly became involved with the community of artists living in the area—people such as Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, John McCracken, James Turrell and Charles Mattox. Some of them were making works that relied on technology, so, as an engineer, I would help them with technical things. I had a car accident in early 1967, which broke my thigh and resulted in me using crutches for over a year. I left Wyle and started taking photographs, setting up a darkroom in my apartment, since all I could do was carry a camera around my neck. A set of photographs that I ended up taking was of a Frank Stella print, made at the famous lithography house, Gemini. One of those images was used as the back cover for an issue of *Artforum* magazine.

Rail: Did Stella ask you to photograph his work?

Eversley: No, Gemini asked me to photograph his work. Sid Felsen and Stanley Grinstein had founded Gemini just a year earlier. Grinstein was a major LA collector and he invited artists to the parties he held, so I got to know him well. They belonged to a small Jewish community in West LA and were also both part of the same ZBT fraternity as me.

Rail: How did you transition from photography to sculpture?

Eversley: Charles Mattox, who was a kinetic sculptor living and working in Venice Beach, started this venture called the Aesthetic Research Center, (ARC), which was interested in connecting artists and technologists. He asked me to become a technical advisor for the center, given my background in engineering. The initiative was informed by what Robert Rauschenberg was doing in New York with Experiments in Art and Technology (EAT) which he and Robert Whitman had formed in 1966 with the engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer. Charles let me use his studio to play with ideas. I started using some of his tools. His lathe was particularly interesting to me.

Rail: How did these initial works, or experiments, turn out?

Eversley: As I had been taking photographs, I started encapsulating the photographs in plastic. I was trying to figure out how to get the photograph to lie flat within a solid plastic material. This led to glueing together several layers of acrylic plastic, which took the form of a rectangle. I would then cut the rectangle into various shapes, which I polished. These were the constructions that led to my work in polyester resin. I received a lot of support from Rauschenberg and Mattox, who were interested in what I was doing with these little sculptural things, and also my good friend John Altoon, who lived four doors from Mattox’s studio. It was John who encouraged me to forget the photographic element and just deal with plastic, which he thought would be more interesting. He was a great artist, a leading figure at the Ferus gallery, and he influenced me a lot. He had a serious side, but also a surprising playfulness and a personal approach to his work that made a deep impression on me.

Fred Eversley, *Untitled (cylindrical lens)*, 2023. Cast polyurethane, 97 1/2 x 28 1/4 x 12 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Tom Powel Studio.

Rail: It sounds as though you were very much part of a group of artists, at this point, who were collaborative and supportive of each other. Would it be right to say that your origins as a sculptor were dependent on this sense of kinship?

Eversley: Yes. That is all true. This support encouraged me to go out on my own and explore the possibility of a career that involved making things, rather than staying at Wyle and following the standard path of an engineer. The Venice art scene at the time had a very generous and energetic atmosphere. We helped and inspired one other. Everyone was experimenting with new materials and new ideas, which were openly shared.

Rail: You have described a context that later, in 1971, was formalised by the term "Light and Space," which had resulted from an exhibition at the UCLA Art Gallery titled *Transparency, Reflection, Light, Space: Four Artists*. With this terminology came the implication that what you and your peers were doing could be understood as a movement. Do you feel as though you shared ideals with other artists working in your circle in Los Angeles, relating to Op art and Minimalism?

Eversley: Terms like "Light and Space" and "Finish Fetish" were really not very much used back then, but of course we spoke about light and material finishes; how to get the bubbles out of the resin and such. To me, it was very much about pristine transparency and high-level polishing, in order to get the best effects. Light exposes the internal reflections and refractions within my work. More than anything, though, I set out to explore the very special properties of the parabolic shape. Given that my work was principally about the parabola, ideas around Op art and Minimalism were not too much of an influence. My interest in the visual kinetic effects of the parabola doesn't have much in common with two-dimensional graphic effects. My work is three-dimensional and it deals with the real shifts that happen within the object itself, as light hits it. I was thinking about how the object is affected by the viewer, as they walk around it. My work has always been driven by my own intuition, as well as my scientific knowledge and beliefs relating to the exploration of energy. I am thinking about the energy that is felt in the environment and within people; in the beach community that surrounded me in California. The sun and the waves gave me a great feeling of liberation.

Rail: One point to highlight is that your career took off in New York. If I understand correctly, it was Rauschenberg who had told you to speak with galleries in New York because he thought that curators in Los Angeles wouldn't be helpful to you.

Eversley: That's right. That was Bob's advice. He came to visit me often when I was in Mattox's studio and we remained friends until he passed. He told me to go and see his dealer in New York, Leo Castelli, and that is what I did. We had all actually encountered each other at a party after an opening at the Pasadena Museum. Rauschenberg pushed me in the pool while I was on crutches and Castelli helped pull me out. Anyway, I visited him in New York and Leo liked my work a lot but didn't offer me a show. While I was there, though, I met his assistant Ivan

Karp. He wanted to give me an exhibition at the gallery he was opening in SoHo called O.K. Harris. I showed there in 1970.

Rail: Looking at your exhibitions history from this time, I wanted to ask you about shows from this period that mirrored the evolution of the Black Arts Movement. In 1970 your work was included in two major surveys: *Dimensions in Black* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla, and *Two Generations of Black Artists* at California State College at Los Angeles. This was another context for your work, relating to the role of abstract art made by Black artists.

Eversley: I was of course happy to be included in several group shows at this time, but as I had mostly interacted with my local art scene in Venice, I was not as familiar with the community of Black artists in California, as there were very few Black artists in the beach community. But I wouldn't say that the exhibitions you've mentioned focused specifically on what might be called black abstraction. Aside from these shows, 1970 was a very busy year for me when everything happened almost at the same time. I had a major one-man show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the spring, as well as solo gallery shows in Chicago, New York and California.

Rail: In 1972 you abandoned color for the first time and made works using a palette of black, white, and grey. I know you have said, in conjunction with your show at Art+Practice in 2016, and Rose Art Museum in 2017, where Kim Conaty grouped these works together, that they started in jest, when John McCracken commented on the criticism you had received for not making "Black art."

Eversley: Well, my first monochrome lens cast was a completely clear work, showing no color, made in 1972. One of the very first clear lenses I produced was acquired by Ruth Braunstein, now in LACMA's collection and currently on display in the museum's *Light, Space, Surface* show. I was very fascinated by transparency and the optical effects of the parabolic lens all by itself, so this was the first step away from multi-colors and multilayering. What you are referring to relates to when I started to use McCracken's can of black pigment, which was in 1973. And, yes, there is a story to that, which connects to an event that I hosted in my studio for a Black artist group who came over to visit after a symposium. They were all happy to be invited, drinking my booze and smoking my dope, but they didn't have many positive things to say about my work and rather criticized it. I got frustrated and went to visit McCracken, my next door neighbor, afterwards, telling him about what had happened. He laughed and said: "why don't you take my can of black and start making some Black art?" The black piece was radically different from what I had done before, but it turned out great as it allowed me to discover a whole new quality to the lenses. They became opaque, reflective black mirrors and this started me off in a whole new direction of monochromatic explorations. These black works were followed by a few white opaque lenses. Then I made some gray works by mixing black and white pigment. I rather purposely relate my work to the cosmic world, as I strive for universality and want any viewer to use their imagination. I therefore leave most of my work untitled. But as I draw inspiration from the universe, I've sometimes called these works "black

hole,” “white dwarf” and such, as they represent the same concepts as these stars expanding their energies.

Rail: Can you describe the first sculptures you made which fully incorporated polyester resin?

Fred Eversley, *Untitled (cylindrical lens)*, 2023. Cast polyurethane, 97 1/2 x 28 1/4 x 12 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Tom Powel Studio.

Eversley: In 1968, I test-cast some small circular conic forms, using a molding block in Mattox’s studio, after which I made my first rectangular mold. This was the first mold that I spun in motion, attaching it to the axis of the lathe. This turned out very interesting and led me to create cylindrical molds that I could use to cast multicolored, multilayered polyester resin tubes in. By 1969, after being given John Altoon’s studio, who had died unexpectedly, I was fully focused on casting polyester resin, in motion.

Rail: What was your process for making these works?

Eversley: I would pour liquid plastic into a cylindrical mold that had been af-

fixed to the horizontal axis of the lathe. The mold would spin as the axis rotated. The centrifugal force of the spinning action pushes the liquid plastic to the outside of the cylinder and I would cast it in three layers, from the outside in. This would result in a tubular cast. The layers of plastic are identified through the colors, meaning the dyes that I use. For these early works I used violet, amber and blue. I then used a bandsaw to cut the plastic cylinders into truncated wedges and various cylindrical shapes, which I would sand and polish to high finishes.

Rail: Presumably, after the cast has been made, the plastic then needs to be treated in order to achieve the polished finish.

Eversley: The surface texture of the cast is really rough at first. The casting technique is very time-sensitive and precious, in that it relates to the specific properties of chemicals, as well as the importance of timing. But the hard, physical work is the process of sanding and polishing, which is ninety-nine percent of the labor.

Rail: These sculptures went onto form the basis of your first solo exhibition, at the Whitney Museum, in 1970. What was your intention at that moment, as an artist?

Eversley: The show was installed on the ground floor gallery and I think there were twelve pieces or so. Having started out at a very small scale, I had pushed hard to rapidly increase my work in size over a short period of time. That was what was on my mind. I was also starting to formulate my ideas in more detail and it was clear to me that my sculpture was all about the spectator and their engagement with the work. I wanted people to engage with the objects.

Rail: So the priority has always been to focus on this relationship; how the viewer thinks about themselves in relation to the sculpture?

Eversley: Yes, this relationship is essential. As is the internal quality of the object itself, which actually drives this interaction with the viewer. I am interested in the sculpture’s ability to refract and reflect light, as well as its surroundings. Both of these things have always been my primary motivation. I want to attract and give back energy to the viewer. I want to put them into a meditative state of contemplation, relating to themselves and others, and their environment.

Rail: The exhibition at David Kordansky is titled *Cylindrical Lenses*. With this show, you are realizing for the first time ideas that you initially explored, only in writing, in 1970. When did you first record these ideas?

Eversley: Well, the works in the show are based on the same concept as my earliest work, which I was just describing, that I started to make in 1968 in Charles Mattox’s studio, using his lathe. At that time, I had begun to draw sketches and document my thoughts as calculations and diagrams. I contemplated how I could use this piece of machinery to spin resin around its horizontal axis. I started out by making cylinders with a diameter of just three inches and then went up to eight inches. In late ‘69, I had retrofitted a turntable, so I was then able to spin

Installation view: *Fred Eversley: Cylindrical Lenses*, David Kordansky Gallery, 2023. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Tom Powel Imaging.

liquid plastic around a vertical axis up to a diameter of twenty-four inches. With this vertical axis, the gravitational force and motion creates a perfect parabola. In these first parabolic works, I cut the casts in various geometrical shapes that exposed the parabolic curve. In early 1970, as I was rapidly increasing my work in scale, I aimed to make these cylindrical sections much larger—six to ten feet tall. I’m not sure exactly when I first documented this idea, but I do remember writing about it in a letter to Barbara Rose in April 1970, ahead of my Whitney show.

Rail: As you mentioned, you started working with the parabolic form in 1969 and this has been the primary focus of your practice in the decades since. It’s a unique form in that it is the only shape that is the perfect concentrator of all forms of energy, meaning that it concentrates light, heat and sound identically to a single focal point.

Eversley: The whole theory, which goes back to Newton’s spinning bucket, is simple: while liquid is spun in motion around a vertical axis, a perfect parabola is created, because the rotation and gravitational force pushes the liquid down and up around the edges of a cylindrical bucket or mold. I actually started to explore this initially as a young teen, when spinning Jell-O that I had placed into a cake pan on a phonographic turntable. In late ‘69, I returned to this principle and tried to explore how this might be possible using polyester resin. At the time, I was only making three-color, three-layer cylindrical casts in violet, amber and blue dyes, so I wanted to try to make these parabolic casts using the same three layer combinations, which was a bit challenging, but it worked.

Rail: What made this process demanding?

Eversley: The challenging part of my multicolored, multilayered works is to get the timing of the layers right, so that each layer catalyzes at the right time and creates the effect that I am intending to achieve. This is about precision. So there are a lot of parameters that I am having to consider. For instance, the small changes in temperature in the room and the humidity play into this. Each day has a slightly different set of conditions that need to be taken into account for creating the recipe. It is a lot of science, but over the years you learn how to navigate these conditions. You also learn how to allow chance to become part of the process, which leads to finding new phenomena of colors and layer combinations. It is really an endless way to explore within a singular form.

Fred Eversley, *Untitled (cylindrical lens)*, 2022. Cast polyurethane, 108 x 28 1/4 x 14 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Tom Powel Studio.

Rail: The distinction between the parabolic lenses, for which you are mostly known, and the cylindrical lenses that you have made for your Kordansky show is an important one to make. What is the difference between the two forms?

Eversley: Once I had figured out how to make parabolic casts, I soon created my first “full” parabolic lens, by which I mean that I didn’t cut the form into another shape, but polished and displayed it in the same circular parabolic shape that the cast created. Once the cast succeeds, it is just a lot of sanding that is required, to create a perfect smooth finish. That sanding process, and the parabolic shape, is what turns the object into what I would term an optical lens. My new cylindrical lenses, displayed at Kordansky, are technically best explained as plano-convex lenses. They are full cylindrical forms, made from resin, which have a diagonally tapered section at their uppermost section. Instead of focusing the light and surrounding environment to a single point, these cylindrical lenses focus light along one vertical line, which creates a rather special effect.

Rail: How does the viewing experience change in this regard, depending on what kind of lens is being looked at?

Eversley: Both lenses distort the background. In the parabolic lenses you see a concentrated circular image of the person looking at it, as well as the view behind them. In the cylindrical lenses, a linear field of optical phenomenon appears. So if one person stands in front of the sculpture and looks at another person, who is situated on the opposite side of the sculpture, you will see the image of either viewer becoming fluid and multiplied. It will shift and dissolve, depending on the angle of the light and the viewer’s position. These lenses in the exhibition are mind-bending. Their color intensity shifts radically as you alter your position towards them, from left to right, and also as you look at them from top to bottom.

Rail: Perhaps the most obvious difference, at first sight, between the parabolic (plano-concave) and cylindrical (plano-convex) sculptures relates to scale. The new works are between seven and nine feet tall. What were you interested in achieving by increasing the size of the work?

Eversley: Right. This is the first resin series that I have made that consists of large, free-standing sculptures. I wanted to create works that are bigger than the human figure, in terms of height, but with a width that relates to human proportions. This was to optimize the level of bodily interaction with the works, from toe to head and beyond. Also, since these sculptures are floor-based, and self-gravitating by default of their tapered shape, they are as steady as rocks. There is an element of weight, of a distribution of mass, at play.

Rail: Matter is definitely pronounced in these works, as is the overall optical phenomena.

Eversley: Each object’s internal refractions, reflections, and color changes are incredible—I would even say more mesmerizing and multifaceted than in my parabolic lenses. Those works, of course, are complex, but in these new cylindrical lenses the viewer gets a fuller sensory dimension that is very captivating and playful. What they see changes so radically. Each work really does reveal infinite combinations of the viewer and their surroundings. This quality makes them appear like cosmic portals that connect the viewer quite literally with other dimen-

Fred Eversley, *Untitled (cylindrical lens)*, 2023. Cast polyurethane, 88 x 18 1/2 x 16 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery. Photo: Tom Powel Studio.

sions. I saw this first-hand last summer, as I temporarily placed one sculpture in a public setting. All kinds of people stopped to interact with it. It was quite wonderful to see this instinctual response. It was also wonderful to see the sunlight hit the sculpture, transforming and intensifying its color quite radically.

Rail: Were there any previous attempts, prior to this new body of work at Kordansky, to explore large-scale forms?

Eversley: Yes. I have made several large-scale sculptures, mostly for outdoor commissions, but also for indoor exhibitions. As I mentioned previously, in 1970, I found a couple of large turntables in an auction and I retrofitted them so that I could make large parabolic lenses with a mold diameter of about forty inches. Then, in early 1971, I made a very large, customized mold, with a diameter of ninety-six inches. With that mold, I made my largest-to-date parabolic lens. It was really challenging to spin-cast in that size. Also, all of the work that I was making at the time was in three-layer, three-color casts, which was very demanding to produce at that scale. Up until right now, though, I had never previously

made a large-scale resin series that consists of floor-standing sculptures.

Rail: What is the biggest scale that you've worked at so far?

Eversley: My largest sculpture to date is thirty-feet tall and also made from cylindrical cut sections, but that work is fabricated from mirror polished steel. It is the first outdoor competition that I won, for Miami International Airport. That was *Parabolic Flight* (1980). In this work, I presented two parabolic-cut, cylinder tubes that created a wind turbine. I intended for them to self-generate their energy so that their neon up-lit could be activated at night.

Rail: How have the works that feature in the exhibition allowed you to develop your production processes relating to casting?

Eversley: The new works are not spun in motion, although I am still pouring liquid plastic, and they are not based on multicolored layering. It is also a different type of resin that I am using. They are made from polyurethane resin, not polyester resin, from which my parabolic lenses and all earlier work are made. The polyurethane resin that I use is crystal clear, and very durable, so that is exciting. The material enables me to go up in scale. Another thing is that this resin can function outdoors, which adds a new dimension and new possibilities for the work.

Rail: Will you use this material for your Public Art Fund commission in Central Park, which launches in the fall?

Eversley: Yes. That will be my first outdoor resin sculpture. It will measure between twelve and fourteen feet in height and be situated at the southeast corner of the park, in the Doris C. Freedman Plaza. I've titled the work *Parabolic Light*. I am also in the process of exploring new developments in stainless steel, which I am returning to after some time. That material can also be taken to new dimensions these days, compared to when I used it earlier on in my work. I will use this new technique for a permanent outdoor commission that I won last year to honor Mr. Abele, a prominent African American architect who designed an adjacent church in the site's park in West Palm Beach. This will be completed in 2024 and it will be my largest installation so far.

Rail: Let's talk about color. The new sculptures incorporate a palette of violet, coral, rose, cyan, turquoise and blue. What is your relationship with color, or, more specifically, with pigment? What is especially interesting about this current body of work is that it powerfully highlights how pigment can be manipulated as part of your making process. In these sculptures, pigment moves between complete saturation and borderline absence.

Eversley: Most of my work is actually made using dyes. They are soluble liquid dyes which means that I can keep the translucency of the resin and its optical see-through effects. Sometimes I will use pigments, but that creates an opacity, so that works differently. But it is interesting to play with because it creates a mirror effect. So rather than seeing through the material, you actually see yourself. In a

way, these opaque works, which use pigments, are more introverted.

Rail: What kind of dyes have been used for the new sculptures?

Eversley: In the new works, it is a special kind of liquid tint, similar to the dyes. But it is really always the geometry of the lens that creates the natural color gradation, in both my parabolic lenses and the cylindrical lenses. The change in color is a direct consequence of the shape’s change in thickness. It is the shift from thick mass to very thin mass, at the center of the spherical parabola, or, as in the new works, from the thick surface at the base of the sculpture to the thin top of the parabolic arc, that creates the various intensities of color. So the most intense color starts at the bottom of the sculpture, while the top arc is almost colorless, which gives a sense of upward striving that feels quite dramatic.

Rail: What about choosing colors? Do you have a process for that?

Eversley: Certain colors resonate more with me than others. When I started out with violet, amber and blue, continuing to vary their relationship with each other over a few years, it was simply because they worked together. I felt that each color had so much possibility in relation to each other, just by mixing them differently and using various concentrations. In 2018, I made an installation that incorporates the full color wheel, which is something that I am still working on. It enabled me to discover new color relationships and combinations. Since the pandemic I have explored color through navigating different types of new dyes, pigments and also powders.

Rail: I imagine, though, that your intuition is first and foremost the deciding factor, thinking about how you described the function of chance in your casting process—learning to trust your instincts, in a way.

Eversley: Right. More than anything, I explore colors that I think have the most energetic effect. Color is light, so it all comes back to that. I am always thinking about how light reacts in my work. The sculpture has to attract the viewer, from a distance, in order for them to want to start exploring its inner dimensions and move around the work. They should be compelled enough by what they see to want to get closer and discover more.

Contributor

Allie Biswas

Allie Biswas is a critic based in London. She is co-editor of *The Soul of a Nation Reader: Writings by and about Black American Artists, 1960-1980*.