

Raymond Saunders *Déménagement*

1 February–22 March 2025
108, rue Vieille du Temple, Paris



Raymond Saunders, *Untitled*, 2006
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David Zwirner is pleased to announce *Déménagement*, an exhibition of paintings and works on paper by American artist Raymond Saunders (b. 1934) at the gallery's Paris location. Curated by Ebony L. Haynes, this presentation is Saunders's second solo exhibition with David Zwirner and marks the artist's first exhibition in Paris in twenty years.

Saunders once called Paris—where he kept a studio, spent summers, and regularly exhibited during the 1990s and 2000s—"a home away from home," embracing the French capital as a generative place for art making and community building. The city offered a hopeful environment and freer way of life with fewer of the social and racial constraints endemic to American culture, one that held opportunities for artists to be in broader conversation with audiences and institutions at large. Saunders acted on this by opening his studio as a residency of sorts to his students visiting from California, offering them some of the same opportunities that he was given in decades prior.

In February 1994, Saunders helped organize "A Visual Arts Encounter: African Americans & Europe," a conference held at the Palais du Luxembourg, Paris, which brought together Black artists, writers, curators, and intellectuals to discuss the experience of Black American artists in Europe. While convenings such as this event and others worked to advance this desire and reflected Saunders's ongoing dedication to community building, many artists—including Saunders—did not achieve widespread visibility. Nonetheless, this active circle of international artists and intellectuals formed a significant group of cultural figures whose impact on the Paris art world followed in the lineage of kindred expatriate communities before them.

The works in this exhibition bring together Saunders's extensive formal training with his own observations and lived experience. A vast range of materials and textures entangle in his compositions to create unexpected visual rhymes and resonances that reward careful, sustained looking and allow for a vast and nuanced multiplicity of meanings. The title—*déménagement* (in English, "moving")—derives from a collage made in Saunders's Paris studio that repurposes a box featuring the logo of a French moving company. While this idea speaks to the artist's own experience of circulating between cities—Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Oakland, and Paris, among others—and traveling widely throughout his career, it also broadly evokes his ongoing method of sourcing materials for his work in the various locales where he lived and visited, as well as his practice of taking things from one place to another.

Saunders's dynamic bricolage approach is evident in the paintings on view in the main gallery. Generally defined by a monochromatic black ground and square-format composition, these paintings on wood panel or canvas are often worked over with white chalk—both a pointed reversal of the traditional figure-ground relationship and a nod to Saunders's decades spent as a teacher. Enhanced with a typical range of other markings, materials, and talismans—some directly linked to the artist's Parisian life—these compositions demonstrate his singular aesthetic. Many works incorporate motifs that recur throughout Saunders's mature oeuvre, such as scrawling text, urnlike vases, and flowers, some resembling nonnative species whose presence suggests a transatlantic migration.

An adjacent gallery space contains a focused installation of intimate, elegantly restrained depictions of flowers rendered in watercolor and graphite on white paper. Sparse, graceful, and a surprising counterbalance to the larger, black-ground paintings, these compositions showcase the fine and occasionally whimsical quality of Saunders's line. The artist has employed lyrical contours and gestural marks to depict single or multiple blooms that, grouped together, resemble a chart of floral species or a collection of flower pressings.

Also exhibited is a selection of paintings made on doors and panels, all of which originate from Saunders's time in Paris. These works, which are often displayed leaning against the wall, further blur the boundaries between painting and assemblage and open themselves to additional layers of meaning. Installed together, these tall, towering paintings inhabit a physicality that suggests both presence and displacement—embodying an artist who works across mediums, formats, and cities to produce an oeuvre that is at once constructed and improvisatory, didactic and deeply felt.

This show anticipates the group exhibition *Paris noir: Circulations artistiques, luttes anticoloniales 1950–2000*, which includes work by Saunders and opens at Centre Pompidou, Paris, on March 19, 2025, as well as the artist's forthcoming major solo exhibition *Raymond Saunders: Flowers from a Black Garden*, which opens March 22, 2025, at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, before traveling to the Orange County Museum of Art, Costa Mesa, California.

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Born in Pittsburgh, Raymond Saunders first studied art in the city's public schools, participating in a program for artistically gifted students. His mentor, Joseph C. Fitzpatrick, the director of art for Pittsburgh's public schools, taught other artists including Andy Warhol, Philip Pearlstein, and Mel Bochner. Through Fitzpatrick's support and encouragement, Saunders earned a scholarship to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia; once there, he also took courses at the Barnes Foundation organized through the University of Pennsylvania, before returning to Pittsburgh and earning his BFA from the Carnegie Institute of Technology in 1960. He subsequently earned an MFA from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland in 1961. In 1968, he accepted a teaching position at California State University, Hayward, eventually joining the faculty of his alma mater (now California College of the Arts), where he remains professor emeritus.

In 1967, Saunders achieved wide recognition when he published the pamphlet *Black Is a Color* as a rebuttal to an article by the writer Ishmael Reed about the Black Arts Movement. In this text, Saunders argues powerfully that Reed fails to capture the vastness of Black expression and in doing so siloes Black artists and their work as delimited by the category of race alone. He concludes with the imperative that we necessarily separate identity from artistic output, that "we get clear of these degrading limitations, and recognize the wider reality of art, where color is the means, not the end."¹

Saunders has been the recipient of honors such as a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award (1963), a Ford Foundation Award (1964), a Rome Prize Fellowship (1964), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1976), and two National Endowment for the Arts Awards (1977, 1984).

In 2024, David Zwirner announced the co-representation of Saunders with Andrew Kreps Gallery. The announcement was accompanied by a two-part solo exhibition of the artist's work, *Post No Bills*, curated by Ebony L. Haynes, held concurrently at David Zwirner's 519 and 525 West 19th Street galleries in Chelsea and Andrew Kreps's gallery at 22 Cortlandt Alley in Tribeca.

Work by the artist is held in numerous public collections, including the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts; Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkeley; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; M. H. de Young and Legion of Honor, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Museum Brandhorst, Munich; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Phoenix Art Museum; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Saint Louis Art Museum; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Seattle Art Museum; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among others. He lives and works in Oakland.

¹ Raymond Saunders, *Black Is a Color* (self-published, 1967), n.p.