MARY LOVELACE O'NEAL

Requiem

October 29 - December 19, 2026

"From the beginning, Mary Felice was a great storyteller."

- David Driskell

"The mystery and the magic of the making are above all else the important things for me—watching the unfolding."

- Mary Lovelace O'Neal

Boesky Gallery is pleased to present *Requiem*, an exhibition of work by Mary Lovelace O'Neal (b. 1942, Jackson, MS; d. 2026, Mérida, Mexico) from the 1980s and 1990s—the period in which the artist honed her rich, personal iconography. *Requiem* is the first posthumous exhibition devoted to Lovelace O'Neal, who died in May at the age of 84.

Throughout her 65-year career, Lovelace O'Neal wrestled with the intimate and the monumental, the minimalist and the expressionist, the personal and the collective across paintings, prints, and drawings. Renowned for her keen sensitivity to color, Lovelace O'Neal moved fluidly between abstraction and figuration; human, animal, and architectural forms often lurk beneath vivid, painterly surfaces, while enigmatic, inscrutable titles hint opaquely at narratives never revealed.

Requiem chronicles a transformative time in Lovelace O'Neal's career, both personally and artistically. Settling in the Bay Area at the tail end of the 1970s, Lovelace O'Neal established an illustrious academic career and embarked on an extensive agenda of international travel throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In California, the hint of submerged color that had appeared throughout the artist's early, minimalist-inspired lampblack paintings burst forth from their erstwhile restraints. An expressionistic impulse—first discovered in David Driskell's class at Howard University—reemerged in grand, physical gestures. As she wove childhood memories and visions of distant lands into her ongoing investigation of color and abstraction, the artist's distinct visual language began to coalesce. A cast of imagined characters—"whales and mermaids, little pigs and butterflies, panthers and white doves"—percolating in the recesses of Lovelace O'Neal's mind came to life on canvas, and a latent sense of narrative emerged across her oeuvre, as if each work embodied a scene from a grand mythology cultivated within the artist's imagination. "There is incubation, storage of images, reinvention of images," Lovelace O'Neal once said. "I want to touch something in the viewer's genetic memory."

Lovelace O'Neal's pantheon of characters appear in various guises throughout *Requiem*: panthers gallop through palaces and semi-human figures jive through dance halls while daisies and calla lilies hold a funeral for a dearly departed daffodil. Figures emerge from defined architectural spaces while planes of gesture, color, and pattern slip back and forth into one another, as Lovelace O'Neal continued to grapple with the ever-present tension between expressionist and minimalist. Nowhere is this more evident than in *What's time to a pig* (c. 1990s), where hints of a vivid, gestural composition are just visible beneath washes of dark brown, black, and green, reminiscent of the velvety surfaces of her early lampblack work.

Place, too, had a profound impact on the development of Lovelace O'Neal's visual

language during this period. Throughout these years—while managing a tenure-track academic career at the University of California, Berkeley, serving as chair of the Department of Art Practice, maintaining a rigorous studio practice, and exhibiting extensively—Lovelace O'Neal traveled for lengthy periods in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and South America. She kept a journal along her travels, returning to the studio with memories of characters, tales, and sensations that would emerge on canvas. "For me," Lovelace O'Neal wrote, "visiting other places is something that becomes synthesized in such a way that I'm not even aware that it has happened." Latent memories of performing in her father's productions of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*—recalled upon her first visit to Morocco in 1984—wove their way into *Panthers with Socks* (1985–90). The veiled women Lovelace O'Neal encountered in North Africa mingled in her memory with the Civil Rights leaders of her youth, leading to *Race Women Series #7* (1992–93). The sense of wonder she experienced as she wandered through the labyrinthine markets of Marrakech animates *Flowers and Still Life, Who Expected It* (1991–92).

Borrowing its title from *Requiem for a Daffodil* (1997), the exhibition celebrates the creation of Lovelace O'Neal's grand mythology—the imagery drawn from the "corners of her mind" made manifest on canvas—which would continue to illuminate the enigmatic tales of her work for the remainder of her life. "Her paintings," art historian Floyd Coleman wrote, "are a quest to capture the meaning of her existence, works that are wrought from reflection and from feeling and caring deeply. [Lovelace] O'Neal's works are lyrical and vivid expressions of a singularly gifted artist who extends our vision, for her works do not pass easily from the mind's eye; they linger and nourish our sense of being."

ABOUT MARY LOVELACE O'NEAL

Lovelace O'Neal's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond in 2026; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA in 2024; the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson, MS; and the Cité International des Arts, Paris in 1994. Her work was featured in the Whitney Biennial in 2024. Lovelace O'Neal was presented the Artiste in France award from the French government in 1993; following the six-month residency, her work was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Cité International des Arts in Paris, which traveled to the French Embassy in New York. Her work will be featured in a forthcoming exhibition at MoMA PS1, and has previously been included in exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; the California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA; the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.; the Brooklyn Museum, NY; the Baltimore Museum of Art, MD; and the St. Louis Art Museum, MO, among others. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the de Young Museum, San Francisco, CA; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; the Smithsonian Institutions, Washington, D.C., the Brooklyn Museum, NY; the Baltimore Museum of Art, MD; the Mott-Warsh Collection, Flint, MI; and the National Museum of Fine Arts, Santiago, Chile, among others. Lovelace O'Neal earned a BFA from Howard University in 1964 and an MFA from Columbia University in 1969. Beginning in the late 1970s, Lovelace O'Neal taught in the Department of Art Practice at the University of California, Berkeley; she was awarded tenure in 1985, and later served as chair of the department. She retired from teaching in 2006, and later served as Professor Emeritus.