



Melvino Garretti, *Space Versus Space* (2018)  
(installation view). Image courtesy of the artist  
and Vernon Gardens. Photo: Paul Salvesson.

In 2007, free jazz innovator Ornette Coleman described “sound grammar” as patterns of “electronic words” whose meanings can vary according to the frequency of their soundwaves. This concept provided the title for an album he had released the previous year, notable for its diverse quotation of musical genres. Melvino Garretti, an appreciator of free jazz himself, showcases his own stylistic polymorphism in his dense installation at Vernon Gardens. Like Coleman, Garretti deftly contorts compositional traditions. Melding conceptual gestures with technical finesse, his clay forms and sculptural bricolage reveal and flout his formal training.

At the center of the exhibition, stacks of discarded metal produce cages—sourced from a chain of South L.A. grocery stores—act as plinths, lending a totemic quality to the sculptures that they support. Two of these untitled works (executed in 2009 and 2013, respectively) recall Garretti’s “sculpted paintings,” which he began in the 1980s by draping hand-painted fabrics over armatures, resulting in three-dimensional structures that echo California assemblage techniques of the 1960s and 70s. In the two untitled works on view, clashing patterns and colors reverberate through layers of textured cloth. Surrounding them are several hand-sculpted ceramic vessels, festooned with pudgy spikes. Their rims are

lined with upwardly pointing spindles, which playfully frustrate their hosts’ implied functions as containers.

Above these sculptures, melted plastic toy parts dangle from the ceiling, suspended by monofilament lines. By applying the elemental process of fire to synthetic material, Garretti abstracts the shapes into their nearly unrecognizable forms. These alchemical atmospherics reemerge amongst a number of ceramic masks hanging on the gallery’s perforated steel walls. Their multiplied facial features echo Cubist anatomies; their fabric headdresses nod to the Pan-Afrikan futurist aesthetics of Leimart Park’s jazz scene in the 1980s and ‘90s, with which Garretti was himself engaged.

Like some of the best free jazz, the exhibition’s tightly-packed configuration can overwhelm upon first approach. Prolonged observation, however, discloses the meticulousness underlying Garretti’s boisterous display. His dissonant visual grammar draws its strength from combining moments of sculptural and painterly precision with expressionistic flourishes of knowing disregard for the rules he clearly learned so well.

Jeanne Dreskin, “Melvino Garretti at Vernon Gardens.” *Carla* (May 4, 2018), accessed online.