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REVIEWS

Exhibition Review: *"Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis."* Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (November 13, 2015-April 3, 2016), Amon Carter Museum (June 4-August 21, 2016), Chicago Cultural Center (September 17, 2016-January 8, 2017).

Reviewed by: Cynthia Fowler, Ph.D., is an art historian and Professor of Art at Emmanuel College in Boston, MA. Her research focuses on American modern art during the first half of the twentieth century. She recently edited *Locating American Art: Finding Art's Meaning in Museums* (Surry, UK: Ashgate, 2016). Fowler's scholarship also extends to American textiles, notably *Hooked Rugs: Encounters in American Modern Art, Craft and Design* (Surry, UK: Ashgate 2013).

P*rocession: The Art of Norman Lewis* is a stunning retrospective of the work of Norman Lewis (1909-1979), an African American artist active in New York from the 1930s until his death in 1979. The exhibition, curated by art historian Ruth Fine, was on view at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) last winter (November 13, 2015-April 3, 2016). It will travel to the Amon Carter Museum (June 4-August 21, 2016) and then to the Chicago Cultural Center (September 17, 2016-January 8, 2017). The collection of over ninety works by Lewis should be a treat for anyone, but especially those previously interested in Lewis's art but frustrated by the scant representation of his paintings on view in art museums. Documenting the artist's career from his early years as a representational painter to his later abstract works, the exhibition provides a comprehensive examination of the artist's oeuvre made possible by the outstanding collection of works procured for the show. Along with his paintings, a small exhibition of Lewis's lithographs and etchings is also part of the retrospective. A prolific artist with an impressive exhibition record during his lifetime, Lewis has, until quite recently, failed to gain the recognition that he deserves. This retrospective provides an important

corrective and argues for Lewis's unique contribution to American art from the mid-twentieth century and beyond.

The exhibition is theme-based and chronologically arranged, starting with the artist's early work in a section titled "In the City." The works in this section reveal the artist's early influences, which ranged from the abstract paintings of Wassily Kandinsky to African masks. Of particular interest is a display case dedicated to Lewis's needlework, which documents his training in "multiple needlework techniques by a Harlem-based tailor who also encouraged his creative activities." A connection between these experiments with textiles and the thread-like lines that define many of Lewis's later paintings is worth consideration, although not addressed in the exhibition. The subjects chosen by the artist for these early representational works document Lewis's social consciousness. *Two Women Reading* (1940) is a testament to his "commitment to education and literacy," and *The Dispossessed (Family)* (1940) recognizes the financial difficulties faced by many American families during the years of the Great Depression. Most poignantly, *Untitled (Police Beating)* (1943) focuses on police brutality directed at the African American community. Reproductions of these and many other paintings, prints and works on paper by Lewis are brought together in a beautifully illustrated catalog for the exhibition.[1]

The exhibition marks 1945 as the year by which Lewis had developed the style that would define his work, described as "daring juxtapositions of figurative and abstract elements." A section titled "Visual Sounds" supports previous interpretations of Lewis's paintings as informed by the rhythms of music. The painting *Jazz Musicians* (1948) makes this interest clear not only by the title but also the rhythmical quality of the painting created by an arrangement of vertical lines highlighted in places by spirals and accents of reds, whites and browns. The exhibition, at least indirectly, considers Lewis in relation to Abstract Expressionism, most evident in the sections "Rhythms of Nature" and "Ritual," which focus on two pervasive concerns for artists connected to this movement. Although the movement has been most closely—and myopically--defined by the works of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, Lewis was also an active member of the group and shared many of their main concerns. In an essay for the exhibition catalog by art historian Andrianna Campell, his connections to Abstract Expression are examined most fully.[2] In the exhibition itself, *Birds* (1950) (fig. 1) is among the most abstract of Lewis's nature paintings; flight is suggested by the painting's horizontal emphasis, but it is the pink and green streaks of color creating an abstract pattern across the largely brown canvas that give this painting its power. The exhibition title of *Procession* comes from a work in the "Ritual" section, *Untitled (Procession)* (c. 1960) (fig. 2), a watercolor on paper in which figures represented by quick, short, think black lines are repeated across the painting and set against a somber palette of deep reds and greys. Lewis's figurative allusions, however, have been used by art historians to marginalize him from the celebrated Abstract Expressionists of his time. Fine, as curator, also emphasizes Lewis's difference from the movement because he "continued to pursue figuration" while most Abstract Expressionists did not. The question of Lewis's relationship to Abstract Expressionism is a complex one. Fortunately, an outstanding

catalog essay by Black Studies scholar Jeffrey C. Stewart helps to unravel this complexity. Stewart recognizes "a sense of time and a sense of conscience" in Lewis's work "that seemed less emphatic in abstract expressionism."[3] At the same time, Stewart acknowledges a "universalism" that characterizes Lewis's abstract work and culminates in "a truly cosmic perspective on the foibles of humanity."[4] Stewart's perspective calls to mind challenges by other African American artists, most notably photographer Lorna Simpson, for us to imagine representations informed by the black experience to extend beyond this specificity to the larger, universal experience as well. [5]

The exhibition includes letters, exhibition catalogues and other paraphernalia that help to contextualize Lewis's art career. A video of Lewis being interviewed in 1976 is most poignant; it was the year of his first retrospective, organized by City University New York. In the interview, Lewis observed, "Painting pictures about social conditions don't change those conditions." Nonetheless, the artist dedicated key paintings to an expression of his outrage at the racism that defined 1960s America, an outrage that is directly explored in the section of the exhibition titled "Civil Rights." In 1963, along with thirteen other African American artists in New York, Lewis formed Spiral, a small group that grappled with the question of how abstract painting might address contemporary concerns like the Civil Rights Movement. Lewis successfully brings the two together in several powerful works. *Journey to an End* (1964) evokes a menacing Ku Klux Klan member in the white figure that dominates this large canvas and advances in a forceful forward motion. *Untitled (Alabama)* (1967) is more hopeful in its imagining of white and black figures marching together in a Civil Rights demonstration.

The final section of the exhibition, titled "Summation," is comprised of works from Lewis's final years. Reflecting on these works, Fine concludes that even at this late stage of his life, "Lewis never fully left earlier interests behind." Several large works provide a powerful end to the exhibition. A move from Harlem, where he lived for most of his life, to a larger studio space in Lower Manhattan, allowed Lewis to work with much larger canvases. *Triumphal* (1972), described by Lewis as "the painful beauty of America," and *Double Cross* (1971) (fig. 3) both demonstrate Lewis's continued use of the language of abstraction to grapple with the violence associated with racism in America. These are some of Lewis's most powerful paintings. In *Double Cross*, a group of abstract black figures are set against a deep red plane of color that evokes hell's fire. The figures form a circle that opens up to reveal two black crosses. Have these figures been "double crossed," as the title of the painting suggests, by the misuse of this important religious symbol? In spite of the inferno that alludes to racial violence, the figures hovering above it suggest the possibility of transcendence.

On September 10, 1977, just two years before he died, Lewis wrote Leo Castelli, director of one of the most prestigious art galleries in New York, to ask if Castelli might consider representing him. That this important American artist was in such a vulnerable position of being without gallery representation at this late stage of his career speaks to the racial discrimination that defined the times in which Norman Lewis lived. Castelli made a significant mistake in not jumping at the opportunity to represent Lewis, now

finally being recognized as one of the most significant artists of his time.[6] Lewis's estate is currently represented by the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York.

Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis is the second major retrospective of an African American artist to be organized by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in less than five years. In 2012, the museum held an equally compelling exhibition, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: Modern Spirit*, with another outstanding exhibition catalog.[7] The museum is positioning itself as an important venue for the serious consideration of African American art and should be commended for its work.

Author's note: All quotations and citations are directly from the wall text and other material on display in the *Processions* exhibition unless indicated by a footnote.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1 Norman Lewis, Birds, 1950
oil on canvas
34" x 58 7/8", signed and dated
Private Collection, Calistoga, CA; © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

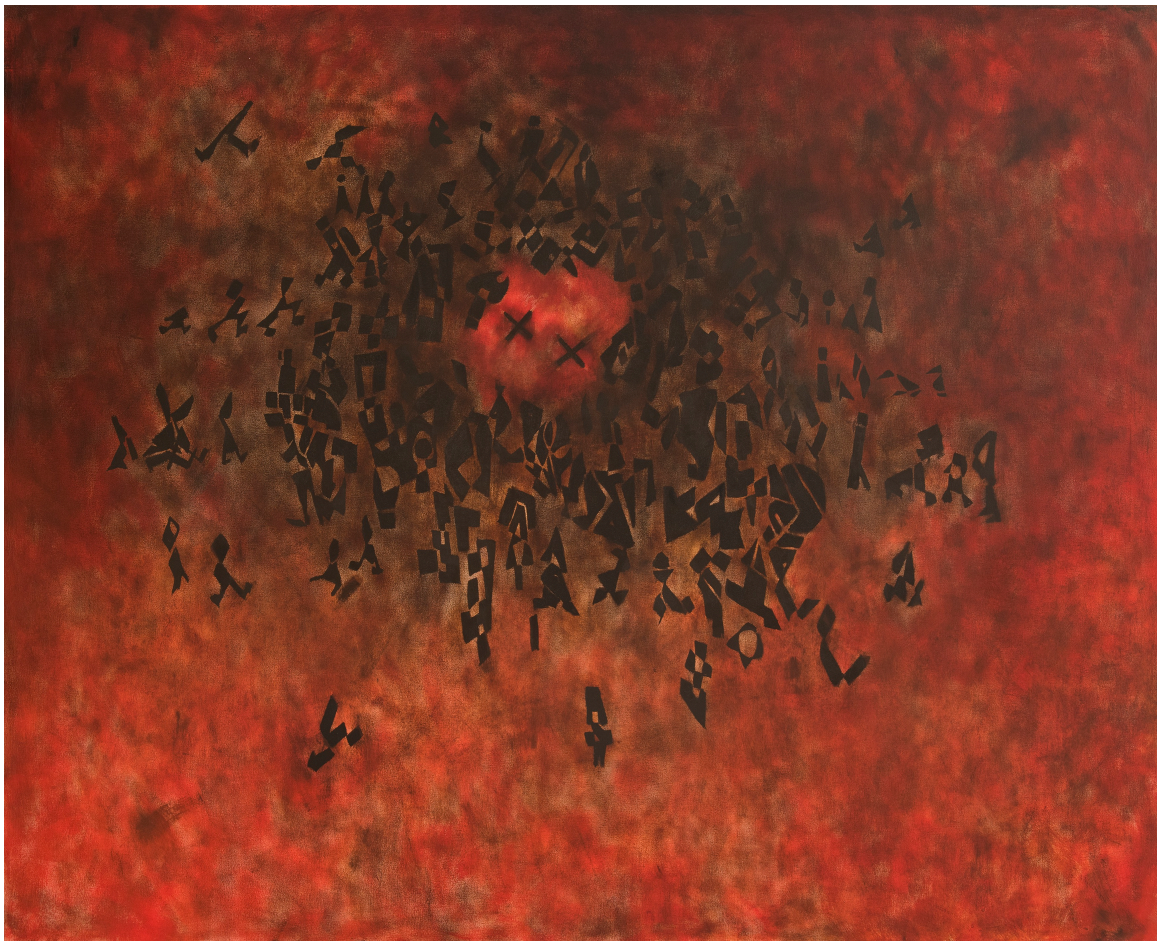

Fig. 2 Norman Lewis, Double Cross, 1971
oil on canvas
72" x 88 5/8", signed and dated

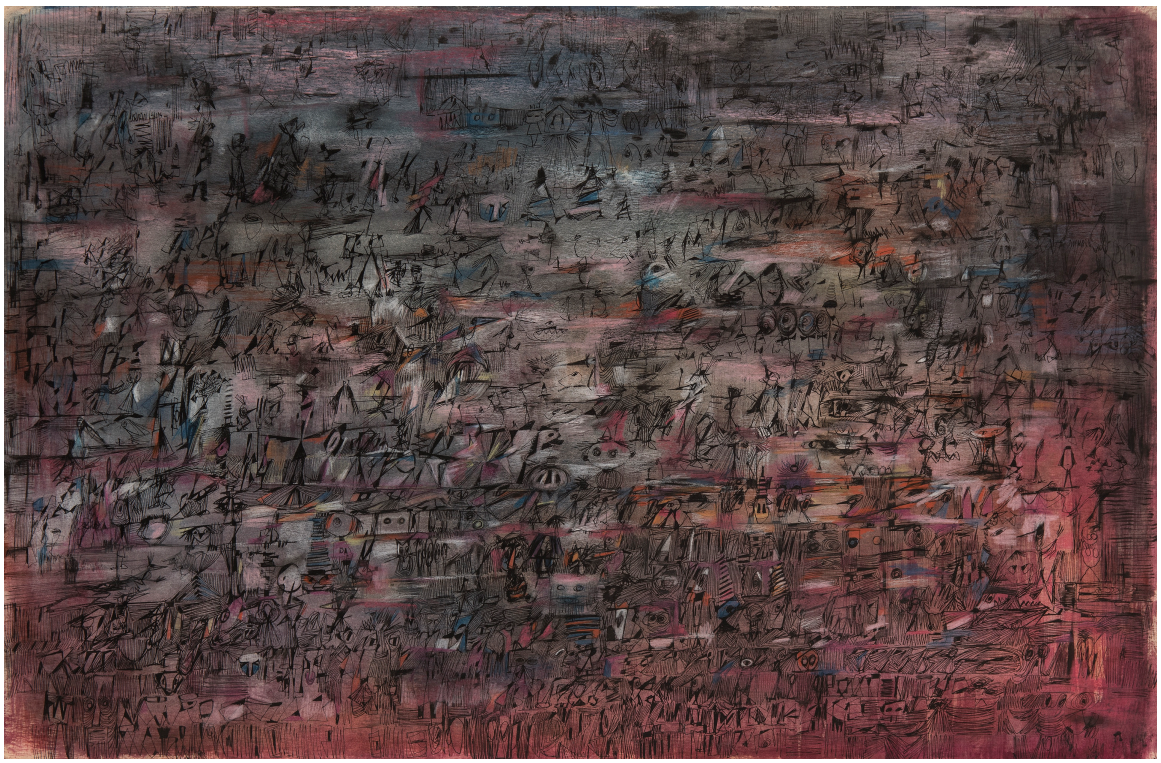

Fig. 3 Norman Lewis, Untitled (Procession), c.1960
watercolor, ink, crayon and graphite on paper
26 1/8" x 40 1/8", signed
© Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY'

Notes

[1] Ruth Fine, ed., *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

[2] Andrianna Campbell, "One World or None: Hints of the Future in Norman Lewis's Abstract Expressionism."

[3] Jeffrey C. Stewart, "Beyond Category: Before Afrofuturism There Was Norman Lewis," 174.

[4] Ibid., 190.

[5] For a discussion of this issue in regard to Simpson's photography, see Huey Copeland, "'Bye, Bye Black Girl': Lorna Simpson's Figurative Retreat," *Art Journal* 64.2 (Summer 2005): 62-77.

[6] Fine notes in her catalog essay that there is no known evidence that Castelli ever responded. Ruth Fine, "The Spiritual in the Material," 19.

[7] Anna Marley, ed., *Henry Ossawa Tanner: The Modern Spirit* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2012).