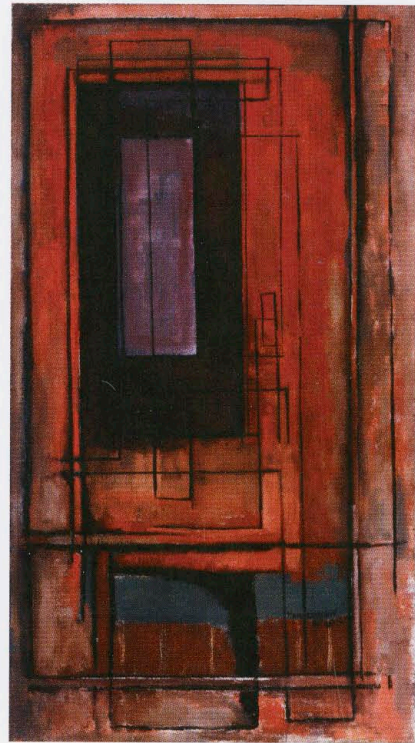


LEFT Lee Krasner, *Untitled*, 1949, oil on composition board, 48" x 37".RIGHT Norman Lewis, *Untitled*, 1946, oil on canvas, 36¼" x 20⅞".

LEE KRASNER AND NORMAN LEWIS

JEWISH MUSEUM
SEPTEMBER 12 - FEBRUARY 1

In the heady world of 1940s Abstract Expressionism, Lee Krasner (1908–84) and Norman Lewis (1909–79) were outliers. Lewis was black in an all-white market, Krasner a lone woman on the macho scene. While the superstars—like Krasner’s husband, Jackson Pollock—painted big, asserting their privilege and that of their patrons, Krasner and Lewis generally worked in smaller formats, making pieces for modest rooms. This was due partly to circumstance. Lewis worked in a fetid basement, while Krasner painted in a cramped bedroom, ceding to Pollock a spacious barn. The external forms seem to shape the idioms.

The Jewish Museum’s fine show “From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945–1952” balances the two voices. Lewis, immersed in the jazz of the day, is elegant and improvisational. He scratches abstracted figures onto black-coated Masonite or smudges muted

browns to suggest rooftops disappearing into a *sfumato* of New York smog. Sometimes he spins delicate doodles like an ultra-refined Miró. His black-and-white *Every Atom Glows: Electrons in Luminous Vibration* (1951) prefigures Op art in the way it tricks the viewer’s eyes.

Krasner paints little shapes, running across the canvas in gridlike rows. Her work from the late 1940s and early ’50s is handsome in a somber sort of way. Black and brown tend to predominate, enlivened by white and touches of red and ocher. Some of the pieces evoke ancient tablets or—some critics have suggested—the Hebrew writing that Krasner practiced as a child. Other works could be construed as boneyards. *Kufic* (1965), a wall-size work done nine years after Pollock’s death, suggests calligraphy writ large. It feels like a big exhalation of a breath held for a long time.

MONA MOLARSKY