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Norman Lewis

The African-American artist's abstract paintings are the subject of a reappraisal
By Hilarie M. Sheets

"I USED TO paint Negroes being dispossessed, discrimination," Norman Lewis recalled in a 1968 interview for the Smithsonian Institution, referring to how he, like many of his African-American peers in the 1930s, had felt the imperative to represent black life in America that was too often invisible to the larger culture at the time. "Slowly I became aware of the fact that this didn't move anybody; it didn't make things better." In the mid 1940s, refusing to allow his style or subject matter to be circumscribed by expectations, Lewis abandoned social realism and began to develop a more expansive and lyrical abstract language that suggested universal ideas about human nature, which he pursued with deep commitment until his death in 1979.

Born in New York in 1909 to parents who had emigrated from Bermuda, Lewis navigated the uptown and downtown art worlds with uncommon fluidity. From 1933 to 1935, he studied at Columbia University while painting at the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts in Harlem. In 1936 he was accepted into the Federal Art Project of the WPA. He was a core member of the 306 Group, an organization of black writers and artists, including Romare Bearden, who met at the Harlem studio of Charles Alston. And he was the only African-American to participate in the landmark Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 in New York City in 1950. There, he worked alongside artists such

as Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Ad Reinhardt—whose discussions were fundamental to defining Abstract Expressionism.

If Lewis was a presence in the New York School at the time, he is absent from the 15 books by the influential critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, who wrote the prevailing narrative. While he was represented by the prestigious Willard Gallery from 1946 to 1964, where he had eight solo shows, and he was included in the historic 1951 MOMA exhibition "Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America," Lewis had to work variously as a taxi driver, elevator operator, tailor, cook, and house painter to support himself.

"It's hard to see that Lewis was not a victim of racism," says Ruth Fine, an independent curator who is organizing the artist's first full-scale retrospective, which will open at Philadelphia's Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in No-

Norman Lewis's oil on canvas *Untitled*, ca. 1957, achieved an artist record \$581,000 against a high estimate of \$350,000 at Swann Auction Galleries in 2013.

vember. “He also wasn’t a muscular artist,” she says, referring to how he inscribed his canvases with precision and delicacy rather than bravura brushstrokes. “The guys who weren’t muscular didn’t quite make it in the same way. There’s now a re-looking at him.”

This reassessment of Lewis’s oeuvre includes the 2014 exhibition “From the Margins” at New York’s Jewish Museum, which paired him with Lee Krasner, another artist in the critics’ “blind spot,” according to chief curator Norman Kleeblatt, who found remarkable rapport in the modest scale Lewis and Krasner both worked in, and in the hieroglyphic nature of their imagery.

Lewis’s use of energetic, calligraphic line in all-over compositions across fields of hazy color began to coalesce by 1950 into what became his signature “little people” pictures. In these canvases, abstracted linear figures resembling musical notations congregate in various types of processions and express human behavior in groups—sometimes celebratory, sometimes threatening. “Little people” paintings of great color and vitality are now the most sought-after works by Lewis, fetching well over half a million dollars in transactions with private dealers, according to Michael Rosenfeld, whose New York gallery has handled Lewis’s work for more than two decades and, as of last December, exclusively represents the estate.

Rosenfeld, who loaned paintings to the Jewish Museum, says that after the opening of “From the Margins,” he received more calls about Lewis than he had for any other artist as the result of an exhibition. In the 1990s, according to the gallerist, it was Lewis’s early (pre-1945) genre scenes of African-American life that drew the most interest. Demand for these works, which are rare, remains strong. *Meeting Place (Shopping)*, 1941, sold in February 2013 at Sotheby’s New York for \$125,000, Lewis’s third-highest auction price. But the dramatic shift in his market has come from institutions and collectors who now include Lewis’s abstract work in the larger conversation of midcentury avant-garde American art. “We’ve sold works by Lewis to collectors of Abstract Expressionism in South America and Europe, which is a testament to how broadly the market is growing,” says Rosenfeld.

Two museums fought over an untitled, circa-1960 purple canvas

Meeting Place (Shopping), 1941, fetched \$125,000 at Sotheby’s New York in 2013. This early work took Lewis’s third-highest price at auction. Below, *Midnight Carnival*, 1960, set the artist’s record for a work on paper when it brought \$55,200 at Swann in February 2010.

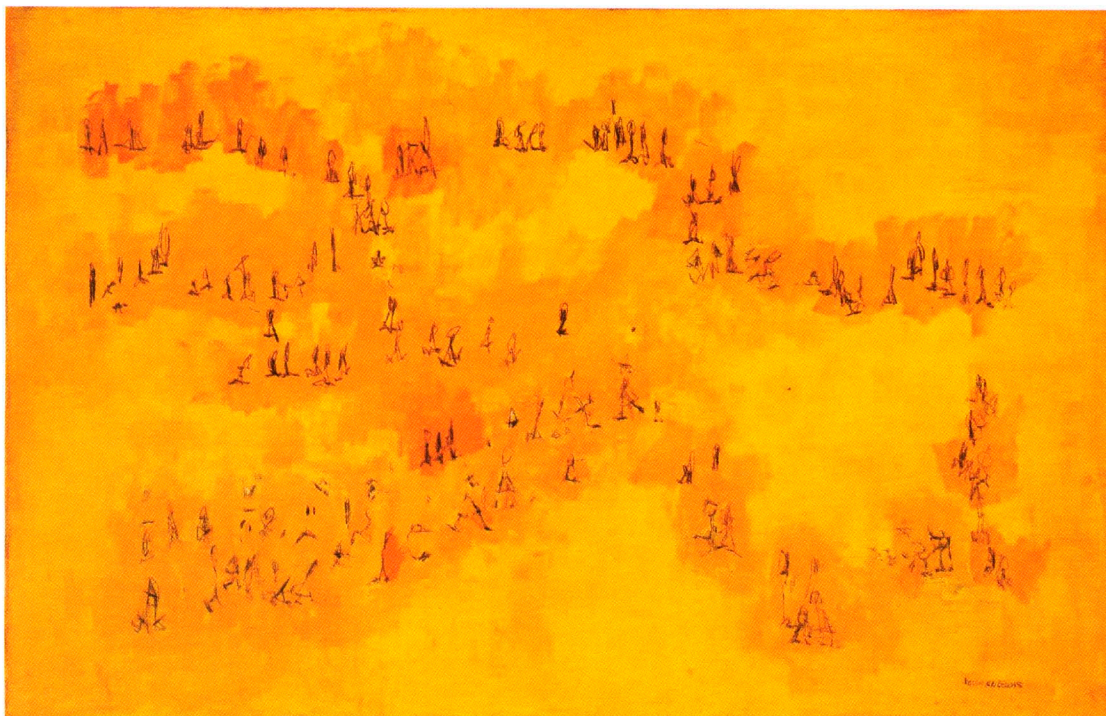


with dense clusters of allusive marks in a 2008 sale at Swann Auction Galleries, according to Nigel Freeman, director of the house’s African-American fine art department. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston was the winner at \$312,000, far past the high estimate of \$200,000. That record was shattered in 2013 by very aggressive bidding from institutions and individuals for an untitled, radiant blue painting with twinkling motifs, circa 1957, bought directly from the artist by a woman who had taken art lessons from him in Harlem (he told her it was inspired by a view of Morocco just after sunset, according to the auction catalogue). The canvas went to a private collector for \$581,000, well in excess of the \$350,000 high estimate.

Swann has handled the lion’s share of Lewis’s work at auction. Neither Sotheby’s nor Christie’s had enough context to provide on Lewis’s market, according to representatives, given how seldom they’ve seen his paintings. “It’s going to change,” says Freeman. “When you sell a painting for over half a million dollars, it gets people’s attention, and there’s going to be a lot more of his work coming on the secondary market.”

For Rosenfeld, the recent auction record publicly substantiates Lewis’s market, but it’s the tip of the iceberg. “Paintings have sold privately for significantly more than the auction record,” he states. Indeed, many more pictures by Lewis have changed hands through private dealers than through auctions.





Procession in Yellow, ca. 1955, a "little people" picture available at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery for \$380,000. Below, *New World Acoming*, 1971, a late oil on offer from Bill Hodges Gallery for \$750,000. Both dealers have long handled Lewis's work.

for \$18,750, more than twice its high estimate. The auction record for a work on paper is \$55,200, achieved in 2010 at Swann for the 26-by-40-inch *Midnight Carnival*, 1960.

In the retrospective, Fine will include about 30 works on paper alongside some 60 canvases, predominantly drawn from private collections. She estimates the collectors are evenly split between black and

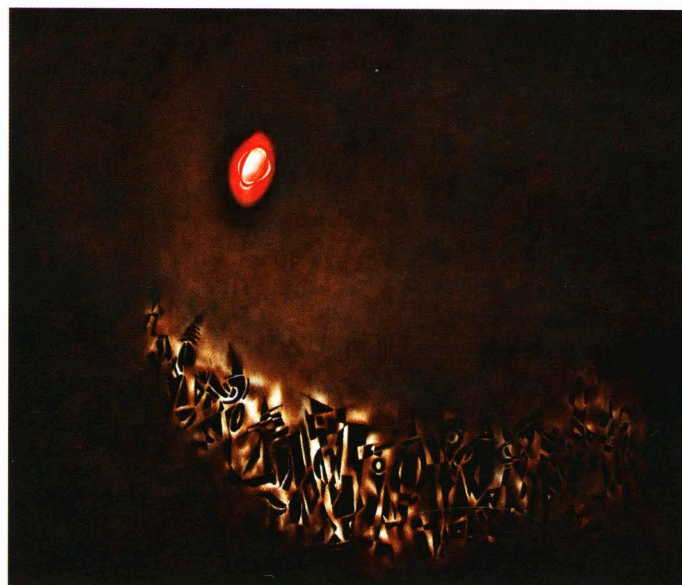
"The best pieces haven't come to auction—it's the same thing with Alma Thomas and Beauford Delaney," says Aaron Payne, a Santa Fe-based dealer who has often handled transactions for people who knew Lewis and acquired works directly from him. "Part of the reason I think people have gone back and looked at him is that you can get a major Norman Lewis painting for \$500,000 to \$600,000, whereas comparable works by his contemporaries would be millions of dollars," says Payne, referring to first-generation Abstract Expressionists like De Kooning and Kline. Both he and Freeman see the strongest interest in Lewis's seminal Abstract Expressionist works dating from the late 1940s and the 1950s, such as the auction record-setter.

New York dealer Bill Hodges, who has owned and traded a substantial number of Lewis works in the past several decades, sees similar strength in Lewis's works from the 1960s and 1970s. In these later pieces, his palette became brighter, his scale larger, and he evoked civil rights themes—in works such as *Double Cross*, 1971, with dark forms encircling two crosses at the center of a red field—while resisting easy narratives. "I feel within the next couple of years, sometime after the retrospective [in Philadelphia] opens, we're going to see a million dollars for one of these pictures," says Hodges, who sold *Twilight Sounds*, 1947, to the Saint Louis Art Museum and donated *Alabama II*, 1969, to the Birmingham Museum of Art.

"The amazing thing about Norman Lewis is that there's not one moment that is hotter than another in his career," says Rosenfeld, who currently has in his inventory *Sea Change VI*, 1976, a brilliant blue canvas with a wave of tumbling circular forms from Lewis's last major body of work, inspired by travels to Greece. It is priced at \$575,000.

Lewis was a prolific artist, having made some 400 paintings on canvas and approximately 1,600 works on paper, which are often highly finished oils rather than studies for canvases. "He used a very dry brush with not a lot of medium, almost like he was rubbing the pigments into the paper," says Freeman, who has seen even small works on paper selling consistently above estimates at Swann sales. Last June, for instance, *Untitled (Abstract Composition)*, 1961, measuring 19¾ by 24 inches, went

white, although several African-Americans—including Raymond McGuire, Rodney M. Miller, and John Thompson—have particularly large collections of work by Lewis. "He walks on water for the people who admire him," says Fine. That group encompasses artists, too. Over the years, she has discussed Lewis with a younger generation of African-American painters who have pursued abstraction, including Sam Gilliam,



Melvin Edwards, William T. Williams, and Jack Whitten. "There was hostility in the black community to abstraction," says Fine, referring to pressure many African-American artists felt, from groups like the Black Arts Movement, to reflect without ambiguity the beauty of their community. "I think it was very much Norman Lewis who gave them permission to be abstract artists. He was a huge force in allowing other people to do what they wanted to do." ■

From the Files

Franz Kline called Lewis "one of the most underrated artists in the country."

At the 1955 **Carnegie International** in Pittsburgh, Lewis's painting *Migrating Birds*, 1953, was the crowd favorite and received the Popular Prize.

In 1963 Lewis, along with **Hale Woodruff**, **Romare Bearden**, and others, formed **Spiral**, a collective to explore how African-American artists could respond to the civil rights movement and promote social change.