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“From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945–1952”

JEWISH MUSEUM

Compare and contrast—that indelible Art 101 injunction so central to creating meaning between the work of often incongruent and marginalized figures—is the analytical mode that this exhibition, “From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945–1952,” invites us to adopt. Lee Krasner (1908–1984), daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants and the wife of Jackson Pollock, was long ago reinstated as an Abstract Expressionist notable; Norman Lewis (1909–1979), an African American artist and founding member of the Spiral group, on the other hand, remains relatively underknown.

This richly suggestive exhibition, which remains on view through February 1, intercalates a double journey—playing Krasner’s knave to Lewis’s jack. The show begins with more or less realist self-portraits made by both artists, then moves on through the range of possibilities opened by Cubo-Surrealist fusions typical of the 1930s. By the later ’40s, Krasner and Lewis hit their stride. But in the background rests the uncontested Pollock of the miracle decade when he departed from Jungianism for the pure abstraction of the allover drip paintings of 1947–’51—Abstract Expressionism’s apogee.

Insofar as Krasner is concerned, the putative similarities between her small, patterned paintings circa 1950—almost woven in their effect—and Pollock’s gestural allover have been an interpretive chestnut ever since Barbara Rose’s canonical Krasner retrospective and monograph in 1983, a notion also taken up in the disputatious 1989 Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith Pollock biography that, perforce, had much to say about Krasner as well. Still, some contend that, in addition to the patriarchal condescension implicit in the Krasner/Pollock comparison, it is also “pseudomorphic,” in that a small visual episteme is being compared to a sprawling allover that refuses to coalesce into a stable pattern. In the present exhibition, the historical example of Krasner/Pollock is echoed in the Krasner/Lewis juxtaposition and, for the almost forty works included, it is the real heart of the show. Indeed, despite the broad comparison of their work, it is really only this small sector of overlap that binds Krasner and Lewis together.

In 2008, Norman L. Kleeblatt, chief curator of the Jewish Museum, mounted the exhibition “Action/Abstraction,” a presentation meant to clarify the high-noon rivalry between Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, the patriarchs of AbEx criticism. For this show, Kleeblatt is joined by Stephen Brown, the museum’s assistant curator: Pointing to



Norman Lewis,
Twilight Sounds,
17, oil on canvas,
23½ × 28”.

the critic was ultimately clobbered, even as they now allow figures such as Lewis to be “revalorized” as serious contenders.

Aside from two astonishing, Mark Tobey–like abstractions by Krasner from 1948, Lewis’s works surely equal her better-known efforts when not, indeed, surpassing them—during the dates covered by the exhibition, in any case. (Admittedly, in appealing to notions of manifest quality, I am guilty of the same arrogance that once revealed the clay feet of our brazen god.) Ultimately, Lewis’s work between 1947 and 1948 carries the day; Krasner’s decorative patterns are, not to mince words, rather banal. One need only look at the textiles and ceramic decoration typical of the ’40s to see that. By contrast, Lewis’s threading *Magenta Haze* and *Twilight Sounds* (both 1947) or the skitish calligraphy of *Jazz Band*, 1948, are intriguing, nervous armatures, further enlivened by flickering patches of color so tiny they appear cloisonné. What a delight! “From the Margins” provides a fresh aesthetic kick in the eye.

—Robert Pincus-Witten

Krasner’s patterned works—Adolph Gottlieb and Landes Lewitin should also be remembered with regard to such pictograms—the curators infer a broad range of affinities, exploring formal miscibility rather than approaching their subject with a pontifical *de haut en bas* attitude. The latter is particular to Greenberg’s overconfident belief in abstract painting’s dialectical drive toward flatness and his own overweening self-regard as to recognizing the “quality” inherent in such work. These were the bugbears by which