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ART 09/14/2016, 01:03pm

Exhibit puts Norman Lewis into the context of an art movement



This untitled Norman Lewis representation of a jazz club fom 1945 is composed of oil and sand on canvas. | © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

Kyle MacMillan - For the Sun-Times

A few decades ago, the history of abstract expressionism seemed well established and its main exponents, including heavy-hitters like Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko, all firmly identified.

But a recent series of exhibitions is questioning the accepted narrative of that transformational mid-20th-century art movement and arguing for the recognition of key participants who curators believe have been wrongly undervalued. Among them are “Women of Abstract Expressionism” at the Denver Art Museum and “Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis.”

The latter, the most comprehensive exhibition ever of the work of the New York-based African-American painter, was organized by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. It will go on view from Sept. 17 through Jan. 8 at the Chicago Cultural Center, with a public preview from 5 to 9 p.m. Sept. 16.



Norman Lewis at work. | Provided photo

The show was overseen by Ruth Fine, who served in 1980–2002 as the curator of modern prints and drawings at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. She became a Lewis admirer after encountering his works on paper, which she called some of the most original of his time. “I just think his work is very important, very beautiful and very special and not well enough known,” she said.

Never completely abandoning the figurative imagery that characterized his early work, Lewis (1909–1979) always pursued multiple directions in his emotionally involving abstraction. Some compositions were more monochromatic and atmospheric, and others consisted of kind of linear constructions such as “Roller Coaster” (1946).

Starting around 1947, a recurring theme was abstracted processions of sometimes calligraphic figures such as the ink on paper “Untitled (Procession)” (circa 1965). They were inspired by Caribbean processions in Harlem, celebrations of Carnival in Europe and marches during the civil rights movement.

‘PROCESSION: THE ART OF NORMAN LEWIS’

When: Sept. 17–Jan. 8

Where: Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington

Admission: Free

Info: (312) 744-6630; chicagoculturalcenter.org

A preview from 5 to 9 p.m. Sept. 16 includes a 6 p.m. panel discussion with exhibition curator Ruth Fine and artists Dawoud Bey, Torkwase Dyson and Amanda Williams.

The show's title, "Procession" refers both to this interest as well as his highly developed if sometimes unorthodox process of making art. "There are many things by him that I still can't figure out how they were made," Fine said.



"Ritual" from 1962 comes courtesy of Tom Burrell of Chicago. | © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

Lewis was very much a part of the New York art scene of his time. He knew many of the major abstract-expressionists and was close friends with famed abstractionist Ad Reinhardt, and his work was disseminated nationally. The Art Institute of Chicago, for example, was one of the earliest institutions to own his work, acquiring three of his drawings in the 1950s.

But despite such artistic reach, the painter remains under-recognized. Not only did he suffer discrimination, he did not make the kind of representational, racially themed work that often has been expected of African-Americans.

“He became engaged by abstraction at the very start of his career,” Fine said, “and stayed with it throughout his career. It had ups and downs and there were always the parallel paths, but it was never without a concern for abstraction.”

Because of his adherence to these simultaneous currents, Lewis was hurt by never arriving at a signature style like the floating color fields of Rothko or the all-over, drip compositions of Pollock.



The Ku Klux Klan is referenced in Lewis' "American Totem" from 1960 | © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

“Lastly, he was never a muscular [gestural] artist,” Fine said. “Mainly the muscular artists are the ones that become known. More gentle artists like [Richard] Pousette-Dart or John Ferren of that generation were never as well known as the kind of the primary six – Motherwell, Rothko, etc.”

Lewis was engaged in socio-political issues, Fine said, and much of his art exhibits political overtones despite his protestations to the contrary. These became most apparent in the 1960s with a group of pieces that refer to the Ku Klux Klan, such as “Rednecks” and “American Totem.”

The touring retrospective features more than 60 of the artist’s works, including oils on canvas as well as drawings and prints. Especially looking forward to it is Chicago abstract sculptor Richard Hunt, who became friends with the painter in the 1960s. Though the work of the two differs stylistically, Hunt called Lewis an “admired elder statesman” who influenced his attitudes and thinking as an artist.

He saw the show at the Pennsylvania Academy and took part there in a panel discussion on Lewis’ contributions. “There was work that I knew,” Hunt said. “I had seen it on the easel or around the studio or in a show. To see it together with other things that I hadn’t seen, like the very large paintings and some of the very early things, was both a confirmation of his stature and an eye-opener.”

✚ NORMAN LEWIS ✚ CHICAGO CULTURAL CENTER

