



Welcome to Culture Type!

An exploration of black art through vintage and contemporary books, magazines and catalogs, Culture Type shares invaluable interestingness culled from the published record on black art.

ABOUT
BOOKSHELF
CONTACT

SEARCH

BOOKS & CATALOGS MAGAZINES EXHIBITIONS AUCTIONS BEST ART BOOKS YEAR IN BLACK ART NEWS CULTURE TALKS

College Art Association Honoring Ruth Fine for Norman Lewis Catalog: 'I Wanted it to Visually be Compelling and Comprehensible'

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Feb 6, 2017 · 5:55 am

No Comments

Like 47 Tweet



Curator Ruth Fine previews Norman Lewis exhibition at PAFA – Nov. 12, 2015 | Photo by Victoria L. Valentine

THE COLLEGE ART ASSOCIATION (CAA) announced recipients of its 2017 Awards for Distinction and art historian Ruth Fine is among the honorees. Fine organized "Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis," the first major museum retrospective of Norman Lewis (1909-1979), and edited the accompanying catalog. She is being recognized for the exhibition catalog with CAA's Alfred H. Barr Jr. Award, named for the art historian and founding director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

Lewis turned to Abstract Expressionism early in his career and thereafter pursued it continuously. Greatly influenced by jazz, literature, nature, and the Civil Rights Movement and its attendant indignities and triumphs, he was politically conscious and active in the Harlem art community.

Fine's weighty volume offers a comprehensive look at Lewis's life and work. Overflowing with scholarship and

CONNECT



SUBSCRIBE

Get Culture Type in your inbox. Submit your email address to be notified of new posts.

Email Address

RECENTLY PUBLISHED



VMFA Acquires Paintings by Important 20th Century African American Artists Eldzier Cortor and Palmer Hayden

Feb 14, 2017



Pamela Joyner, Influential Collector of African American Art, Joins Board of J. Paul Getty Trust in Los Angeles

Feb 13, 2017



Ebony Cover by Illustrator Kadir Nelson Projects 'American Ideals, African American Patriotism, and Love of Family'

Feb 12, 2017



Public Arts Organization Creative Time Appoints London-based Elvira Dyangani Ose Senior Curator

Feb 10, 2017



Vilcek Prize Winner Nari Ward to Recreate 'We the People' Installation at New-York Historical Society on President's Day

Feb 10, 2017

research, it features critical writings, more than 200 images of the artist's paintings and works on paper from the 1930s to 1970s, documentary photographs, and a comprehensive 26-page chronology that includes a number of question marks, conflicting information and references to "unknown" details to encourage further research. Fine's opening essay follows a preface by David Driskell. Early on, she explains what she intends to consider:

"This essay describes the broad chronological development of Lewis's oeuvre within the context of his life," Fine writes. "It focuses on when and how imagery, materials, and methods entered his practice and how they overlap with those already engaged. It also points to critical interactions between Lewis's works on paper and on canvas—his emphasis on drawing in paintings, and painting on paper—and highlights ways in which he diligently blended these processes."

The liberally illustrated, 85-page essay is called "The Spiritual in the Material." An apt, perhaps fortuitous title, given the award. Fine cites its origin in her notes. It's a phrase from Barr's writings on Abstract Expressionism in Germany found in the 1936 catalog "Cubism in Abstract Art," a seminal exhibition at MoMA.

Fine retired from the National Gallery of Art where she spent her career, a distinguished tenure that included organizing "The Art of Romare Bearden" in 2003, the museum's first major retrospective of an African American artist. I spoke briefly with Fine at a press preview of "Procession," when the exhibition debuted at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), and later had a more lengthy conversation with her by phone.

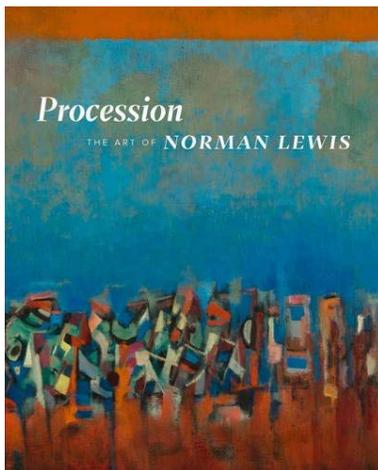
We discussed Lewis, his practice, the challenges he faced over the course of his career, and how the retrospective came together. We also talked about the exhibition catalog for which she is receiving the Barr award at CAA's annual conference in New York on Feb. 15. I asked Fine what she wanted to accomplish with the volume and her approach in terms of its presentation, contents, and contributors. Excerpts from our conversation about the catalog are below.

Compelling and Comprehensible

RUTH FINE: The first thing I am going to tell you I think people wouldn't approve of very much, but I actually wanted somebody to be able to look through the book and if they didn't read a word they would know who Lewis is as an artist. And so there are, I think, 250 images. There are enough documentary photographs to show something about his life, his teaching. The section of, there's like a portfolio of drawings and that's feeding on initial interest in his drawings. There's a portfolio, almost, of the large paintings to show the range of the paintings. There's the checklist of the prints, the ones that we knew, although already that's out of date because Swann has something coming up that's not in that list. I knew we didn't know them all, but we tried. I wanted it to visually be compelling and comprehensible.

"The first thing I am going to tell you I think people wouldn't approve of very much, but I actually wanted somebody to be able to look through the book and if they didn't read a word they would know who Lewis is as an artist."

— Curator Ruth Fine



POPULAR READING



Ebony Cover by Illustrator Kadir Nelson Projects 'American Ideals, African American Patriotism, and Love of Family'



Pamela Joyner, Influential Collector of African American Art, Joins Board of J. Paul Getty Trust in Los Angeles



2017 Venice Biennale List Includes African American Artists Sam Gilliam, Senga Nengudi, and McArthur Binion



VMFA Acquires Paintings by Important 20th Century African American Artists Eldzier Cortor and Palmer Hayden



Where My Girls At? 20 Black Female Artists with Solo Exhibitions on View this Fall



Vilcek Prize Winner Nari Ward to Recreate 'We the People' Installation at New-York Historical Society on President's Day



History Makers: 10 African American Firsts in Modern and Contemporary Art Continue to Resonate Today

2017 VENICE BIENNALE LIST INCLUDES AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS SAM GILLIAM, SENGA NENGUDI, AND MCARTHUR BINION



HISTORY MAKERS: 10 AFRICAN AMERICAN FIRSTS IN MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART CONTINUE TO RESONATE TODAY





NORMAN LEWIS, "Ritual," 1962 (oil on canvas). | Courtesy of Tom Burrell, Chicago. © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York N.Y.

Meditation on Art

RUTH FINE: My own essay was meant to give an overview of how he worked and what he did. The essay on the prints was meant to give an overview both of the prints but also the workshops in which he participated, because he participated in many of the important workshops of his period so that would give a sense of the community spirit that printmaking engendered in artists. The essay that Jeffrey Stewart wrote was really meant to be a meditation and a response to the work, something that would touch upon the interest in music, the interest in culture, the interest in place. It's just a far-reaching mediation on art, not an art historical study at all.

Exhibition Opportunities

RUTH FINE: The Helen Shannon essay was meant to give an overview of exhibition opportunities that he had because that would reflect exhibition opportunities in general for African American artists. We've documented 130 group exhibitions in that catalog which is amazing and the truth of the matter is I've since learned of two more and I suspect I'm just going to keep learning about them. But I felt it was important to, I didn't know of a place that really gave that kind of overview for African American artists, what places might be special for them. He also exhibited in all the Pennsylvania Academy exhibitions and was part of the art lending libraries at MoMA and the Baltimore Museum.

Chronological Research

RUTH FINE: Adrianna Campbell's essay is a reflection on one exhibition and she also did the chronology. All of us who were doing research, if we found something out, we sent it to her. She may have found it out on her own, but everybody was contributing to it. Adriana's a very serious researcher. She went into all the Census records, the shipping records. I couldn't have done the research because I am not the kind of online researcher that she is. She's much younger than I am. We started out with 12 pages and expanded it to 48.

A Fuller Picture

RUTH FINE: What am I forgetting? And Jackie Francis's essay, I thought this touched upon such fabulous comparisons—him as a teacher kept coming up, him as being of Caribbean origin, and also his political connections. There were three very important aspects of him as a person that impacted his art that seems to require a more focused approach than you would get in a chronology or that I was giving in my discussion of the work. I guess I wanted it to have a fuller picture of him as a person, of him as person in the community, whatever community was under discussion, and of the ambience of the world in which he functioned.

“I guess I wanted it to have a fuller picture of him as a person, of him as person in the community, whatever community was under discussion, and of the ambience of the world in which he functioned.” — Curator Ruth Fine



CULTURE TALK: BRITISH PAINTER HURVIN ANDERSON ON PERSONAL AND POLITICAL HISTORIES



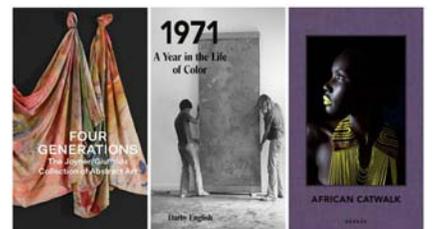
NEW YEAR, NEW ART: WHAT TO LOOK FORWARD TO IN 2017



CULTURE TYPE: THE YEAR IN BLACK ART 2016



CULTURE TYPE PICKS: THE 12 BEST BLACK ART BOOKS OF 2016





From left, NORMAN LEWIS, "Composition I," 1945 (oil on canvas). | The Thompson Collection, Indianapolis, Indiana, © Estate of Norman W. Lewis, Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY; The artist in his studio working on "Composition I." | Courtesy of Willard Gallery Archives

Questions Remain

RUTH FINE: There are lots of question marks in the catalog. The editors kept wanting me to remove the question marks. I said, "I don't want to remove the question marks. I don't know what the answers are." I think part of the reason there was so little chronology before we did this is because it was so hard to get facts. And we still don't have all the facts. So I think if someone looked through the catalog and looked at all the vague things that I said and that are in the chronology, go for it and find out what the real answers are. I purposely left in the questions because it took us a lot of work to get as far as we got, even if we didn't succeed. I felt if we left in as much as we had, then at least somebody is starting from a better place than we started.

Lots More Books

RUTH FINE: It seems to me there is years of work, lots of exhibitions, lots more books. I think this is the most comprehensive of what's out there, but in no way do I think it is satisfactory. I mean, if I had two more years it would be better. Exhibition catalogs need to be done with the exhibition, whether you are finished or not. Not every place feels like that, but in my life exhibition catalogs were done on time or they were not done. We never played around with that. Some exhibition catalogs come out long after the show has opened. That didn't enter my mind because the catalog goes to press a year before the exhibition goes on the wall. Some of what you find out in that year you can insert in the editorial process, but there always was something you can't figure out. Now I'm hoping that a lot of people will take it up. **CT**

BOOKSHELF

Ruth Fine has authored, edited and contributed to a number of catalogs over the years. Comprehensive and beautifully presented, "Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis" features a major essay by Fine and contributions by several other scholars. The nearly 300-page volume also includes a lengthy chronology documenting Lewis's life and work and reproductions of the artist's notes. "The Art of Romare Bearden" accompanied the Bearden exhibition Fine curated at the National Gallery of Art. Her writing and interview with photographer Frank Stewart give context to "Romare Bearden," Stewart's visual biography of the artist. More recently, Fine contributed to the exhibition catalog "Martin Puryear: Multiple Dimensions."



BACKSTORY: NINA CHANEL ABNEY REVISITS HER FIRST MAJOR PAINTING, 'CLASS OF 2007'



FOODWAYS: ARTISTS AND MUSEUMS ARE EMBRACING THE CULTURAL, CREATIVE AND CONVIVIAL ASPECTS OF THE CULINARY EXPERIENCE



HOW MUCH IS THAT PAINTING? 10 BLACK ARTISTS WHOSE WORK GARNERS TOP DOLLAR AT AUCTION



ARCHIVES

Archives [Select Month](#)



Featured on the cover of the catalog: NORMAN LEWIS, "Title Unknown (March on Washington)," 1965 (oil on fiberboard). | L. Ann and Jonathan P. Binstock. © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



NORMAN LEWIS, "Aurora Borealis," 1972-76 (oil on canvas). | The Thompson Collection, Indianapolis, Indiana, © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY





NORMAN LEWIS: *Alabama*, 1960 (oil on canvas). | Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



NORMAN LEWIS, "Untitled (Procession)," c. 1965 (ink on paper). | Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY





NORMAN LEWIS, "Carnivale II," 1962 (oil on canvas). | Private Collection, Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



NORMAN LEWIS, "Untitled (Red)," c. 1975 (oil on paper). | Collection of Peg Alston, © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

559 total views, 20 views today

Like 47 Tweet

You Might Also Like:

- 

College Art Association Paying
- 

Newark Museum Acquires Norman
- 

At Swann African American Art
- 

Record Breaker: Norman Lewis

Tags: Norman Lewis, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Ruth Fine