Masterstrokes from the margins

An elegant survey focuses on two US artists—one a woman, one black—unfairly neglected in their lifetimes. By Ariella Budick

The Jewish Museum’s From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945–1952 takes a subtle, thoughtful look at two artists—one female, one black—often consigned to the fringes of art history. Both were first-generation Americans (her parents were from Russia, his from Bermuda), New Yorkers, children of the Depression, and beneficiaries of the Federal Art Project. Both reached maturity just as Abstract Expressionism was taking hold, and both watched their friends—romance collectors and dazzle the public while they waited for someone to notice them. And yet this is a show about ambivalence, not just neglect. They seemed to be known for their talents, not slotted into special categories. And so Krasner struggled to be anything but a female artist, and Lewis went out of his way to avoid being labeled as a black painter. They responded to rejection by hiding in plain sight.

The rarest, most direct treat in this elegantly conceived and beautifully installed show is the conversation of works by Lewis. Usually his paintings pop up, one or two at a time, in roundups of black modernist galleries devoted to the newly emerging New York school. Now he’s hatched a ride into the Jewish Museum with Krasner, and the pairing’s greatest benefit is that it offers a whole lot of Lewis.

Krasner has been less ignored. True, her reputation considered for decades—the macho posturing of her Abstract Expressionist cohort made sure of that, and so did the cut and dry sexism of its chief promoters. Hans Hofmann, her teacher, believed that “only men have the wings for art”; the highest compliment he could bestow upon a female student was “this painting is as good as you’d never know it was done by a woman.” That disdain, plus Krasner’s role as Pollock’s long-suffering wife and caretaker, conspired to keep her out of the Ab-Ex canon. But the critical tide turned in her favor: a large time span, and a Jewish retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in 2000 cemented her reputation as one of the prime painters of the movement.

That exhibition embraced the entirety of a half-century career that didn’t really take flight until after Pollock’s death in 1956: the current show cuts off while Pollock was still alive, unutterable. Around 1947, as he was beginning to experiment with his radical technique of painting without a focal point, Krasner embarked on a similar series of adventures, called “little images.” In “Noon,” gobs of dotted pinks, blues, oranges and yellows smear across the canvas. Yet a rigid armature holds the whole thing together, preventing the smudges from seeming chaotic and turning a sensual explosion into a systematic tour de force. Other works in the series mimic ideographs of a forgotten language. Whatever Krasner might be trying to communicate, she mates meaning with a sense of unrelenting signs.

In 1949, she and Pollock exhibited their work in a group show with the leading Little Arts, Men and Wives: The reviews were scathing. One critic remarked on a "tendency among some of the women to 'bitch up' their husband's styles." Lee Krasner (Mrs. Jackson Pollock) takes her husband's paints and enamels and changes his unstrained, sweeping lines into neat little circles and triangles. Scarred by the experience, she did not exhibit again until 1951, and two years later destroyed a trove of work from this period. But she pushed forward with unyielding determination. Later on, she took pride in having beaten the odds. "The only thing I haven't had against me was being black," she said.

"I was a woman, Jewish, a widow, adored good painter, thank you, and a little too independent." Lewis did have Krasner's missing disadvantage, of course. And though he painted expressively, he stood in the way of his reputation. Most African-American artists of Lewis's generation fought to escape the plight of poor and working-class blacks, and they preserved the dignity of labour. In the 1950s he too aligned himself with a programme of social commitment, painting destitute drifters and washerwomen. But he grew disillusioned and chafed against the Left's oppressive demands. "I used to paint Negroes being dispossessed, discrimination, and slavery. Because of the fact that this didn't move anybody, it didn't make things better." His spirit drew him towards abstraction, though he never gave himself over to it entirely. Like Krasner's, his pictures function as screens that both hide and expose his identity. Behind the waving lines of "Jazz Band," you can just make out instruments and musicians in a darkened club. In "Untitled" (1946), an orange, violet and aqua grid resolves into a Harlem block with its row of brownstones cleaved by narrow windows. "Crossing" (1948) animates a vertical lattice with the sidewalk ballet. People rush along the busy sidewalk, leaving abstract marks on shimmering canvas.

Like the other founders of the New York School, Lewis is inspired to the sublime. His prized aesthetics, veered toward the universal, and set his sights on transcendence. But when political turmoil overtook him in the late 1950s, Lewis struggled to adapt his cerebral style to inner rumblings of rage. In 1965 he interviewed the poet the question: "I find that right now I am fighting against the impact of the violence, I am fighting to paint, what am I going to do? I just hope that I can materialise something out of all this frustration as a black artist in America."

His solution, "Untitled (Alabama II)," looks at first like a salami-coloured rectangle with a darker pink patch of chunky, slashing brushstrokes off the right. Without a wall label, we might even mistake the painting for pure abstraction. But the parenthesis title instructs us to read it as a historical illustration. That wedge of smoke is unmistakably a crowd of protesters, marching under the blood-red distance, demanding to be recognized, no matter how long it takes.

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