

# FINANCIAL TIMES

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## 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 wanted 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 labelled as a black painter. They responded to rejection by hiding in plain sight.

The rarest, most delectable treat in this elegantly conceived and beautifully installed show is the cornucopia of works by Lewis. Usually his paintings pop up, one or two at a time, in roundups of black modernists or galleries devoted to the early New York School. Now he's hitched 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 mouldered for decades – the macho posturing of her Abstract Expressionist cohort made sure of that, and so did the out-and-out sexism of its chief promoters. Hans Hoffman, 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 so good you'd never know it was done by a woman”. That disdain, plus Krasner's role as Pollock's long-suffering wife and warden, conspired to keep her out of the Ab-Ex canon. But the critical tide turned in her favour a long time ago, and a lavish retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in 2000 cemented her reputation as one of the premier painters of the movement.

That exhibition embraced the entirety of a half-century-long career that didn't really take flight until after Pollock's death in 1956; the current show cuts off while Pollock was still in the, um, picture. 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 clotted pinks, blues, oranges and yellows ooze 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 mutes meaning with a scrim of unintelligible signs.



In 1949, she and Pollock exhibited their work in a group show with the loaded title *Artists: Man and Wife*. The reviews were scathing. One critic remarked on “a tendency among some of these wives to ‘tidy up’ their husband's styles. Lee Krasner (Mrs. Jackson Pollock) takes her husband's paints and enamels and changes his unrestrained, sweeping lines into neat little squares 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, a damn good painter, thank you, and a little too independent.”

Lewis did have Krasner's missing disadvantage, of course, and though he painted exquisitely, race stood in the way of his reputation. Most African-American artists of Lewis's generation fought to expose the plight of poor and working class blacks, and they avowed the dignity of labour. In the 1930s 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 slowly I became aware 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 swaying 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

Anti-clockwise from above: “Crossing” (1948) by Norman Lewis; the artist himself; “Untitled” (1948) by Lee Krasner

Estate of Norman W. Lewis, Courtesy of Jander Fine Arts, New Jersey; Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

lattice with the sidewalk ballet. People rush along the busy sidewalk, leaving animate traces on shimmering canvas.

Like the other founders of the New York School, Lewis aspired to the sublime. He prized aesthetics, arced toward the universal, and set his sights on transcendence. But when political turmoil overtook him in the late 1960s, Lewis struggled to adapt his ethereal style to inner rumblings of rage. In a 1968 interview he posed the question: “I find that civil rights affects me; so what am I going 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 salmon-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 parenthetical title instructs us to read it as a historical illustration. That wedge of strokes is unmistakably a crowd of protestors, marching undefeated into the blood-red distance, demanding to be recognised, no matter how long it takes.

To February 1, [thejewishmuseum.org](http://thejewishmuseum.org)