

## Filling Out the Story: On the Art of Norman Lewis

by [Stan Mir](#) on [March 12, 2016](#)



Norman Lewis, "Confrontation" (1971), oil on canvas, 88 x 72 inches, Collection of Patricia Blanchet and Ed

Bradley (© Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY)

Norman Lewis (1909–1979), in the last two decades of his life, fused black struggle with abstract painting. This was not the only way in which he was a unique and significant 20th-century artist.

“Confrontation” (1971) hangs in the main lobby of the Hamilton building at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA), where [Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis](#), a major exhibition of Lewis’s work will run through April 3, 2016. In this painting, the artist viscerally links a skirmish between Civil Rights protesters and law enforcement to the power of color. He once said, “color can evoke a great deal of visual excitement, to see colors that you don’t ordinarily see, that you take for granted. I don’t think that so many people would be killed on the street if they really saw a red light, if they really looked at it.” Within the cloud of red hovering across the painting, there are shapes suggestive of flags and violent altercations between protesters and riot police. Lewis remarked in 1968 that violence is “as homogenous as apple pie to America.”



Norman Lewis, “The Wanderer (Johnny)” (1933), oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches (© Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY) (click to enlarge)

While Lewis is mostly known as an abstractionist, he painted social-realist works depicting black experience in his early career. In “The Wanderer (Johnny)” (1933), a man huddles over a small fire in a shed, his face turned down, and his collar turned up. His hat and shoulders are covered with snow. Notably, the man’s hands reveal his racial identity, not his face.

The upper right corner provides the only glimpse of the outside world. Lewis, instead, channels the world through this worn-down and alienated wanderer. In Lewis’s third exhibition, held in 1933, “The Wanderer” won \$10.00 and an honorable mention in a competition organized by the New York State Department of Education at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition took place in a classroom, not a gallery.

In the early 1940s, Lewis wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt to declare his interest in public service. PAFA has the letter on display in a room with a strong sampling of Lewis's figurative work, which makes clear how much his social interests were bound up with his art at that time. As a black man, he had seen firsthand the violence and poverty in his communities. Many of his observations appear in his work from the 1930s and '40s, and then again in his abstract works from the early '60s through the end of his life. "Police Beating (Untitled)" (1943), shows a cop standing over a black man and beating him with a billy club. The beaten man's bloodied face is indistinct, but the faces of the white onlookers, one of whom is grinning, are clear. In a 1976 interview, conducted for his retrospective at CUNY that year, Lewis said he painted social subjects earlier in his career because he believed it would change the way people think if they were to see what was actually happening to black folks. Eventually, he felt that his social-realist works were not making a difference, so he tried to separate his political interests from his aesthetic concerns and turned toward abstraction.

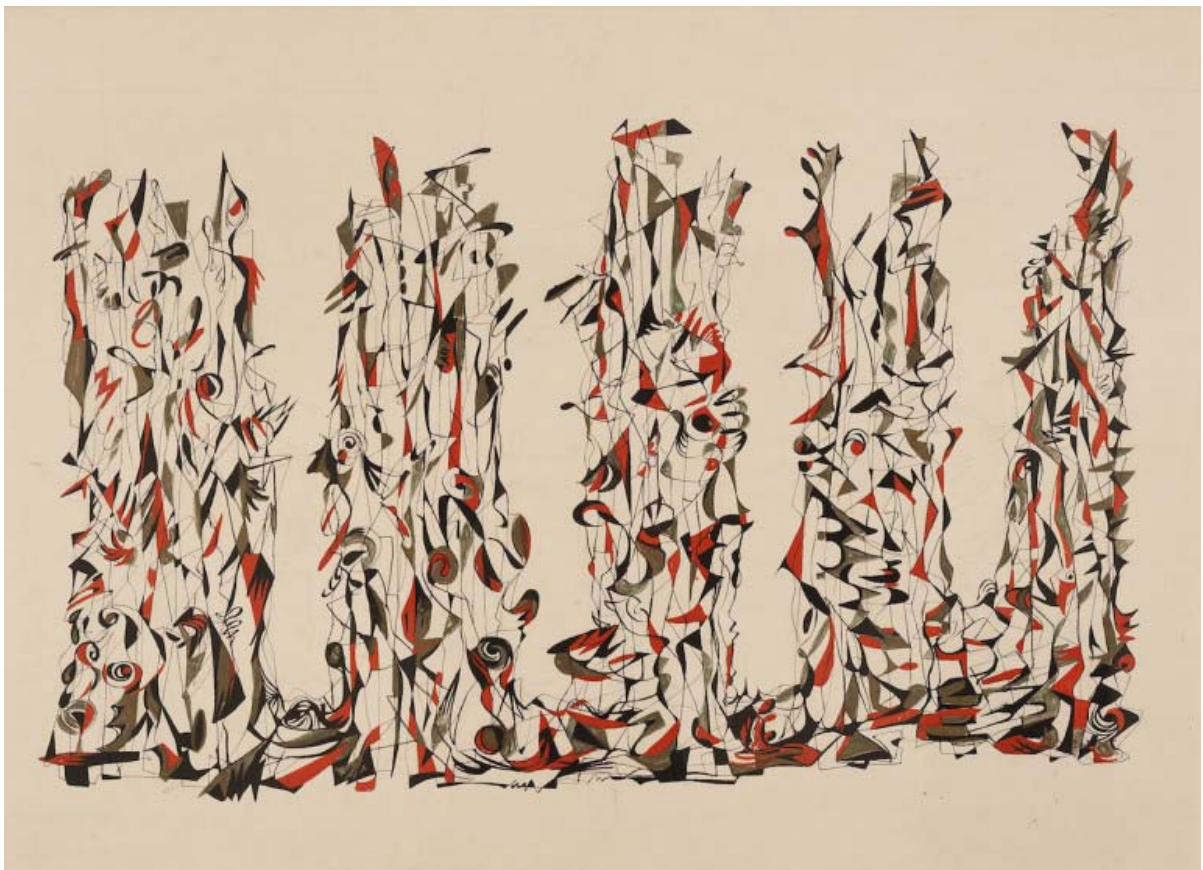


Norman Lewis, "Untitled (Police Beating)" (1943), watercolor, ink, and graphite on paper, 20 x 13 7/8 inches (courtesy of Rodney M. Miller Collection, © Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery)

LLC, New York, NY)

By the mid-1940s, Lewis made the transition to abstract painting and joined the Willard Gallery, which would be his first and only representation. One particularly striking work from this period, "Too Much Aspiration" (1947), is an opaque watercolor, with ink and graphite on paper. Lewis would paint an untitled, large-scale version of it in 1953, which the Newark Museum has recently acquired for its collection. In the watercolor, Lewis displays his calligraphic skills with five columns resembling tree trunks, all of which appear to be within the same rooted network. And the title, in the context of race and racism, seems particularly pointed.

Lewis was indeed an aspirational, ambitious artist, whose work was often included among that of fellow abstract painters in exhibitions at major museums, such as LACMA and MOMA, from the late 1940s to the '60s. He also participated in many of the dialogues about the future of abstract art. A [photo](#) memorializes the important Artist Sessions at Studio 35 in 1950, which shows Lewis as the only black man seated at a table with bowls of pretzels, bottles of beer, and painters like Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hoffman, and Robert Motherwell; Ad Reinhardt, who was a close friend since at least the 1940s, sat across from him. There were also a few women: Hedda Sterne, Janice Biala, and Louise Bourgeois. The sessions took on many topics, one of which was naming their kind of art. After much debate, the group decided upon "Abstract Expressionism."



Norman Lewis, "Too Much Aspiration" (1947), opaque watercolor, ink, and graphite on paper, 16 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches, L. Ann and Jonathan P. Binstock (© Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY) (click to enlarge)

Even though Lewis participated in the exhibitions and discussions around abstraction, he appears in none of the so-called important historical narratives of that time, and there are no monographs on his work. Irving Sandler, in *The Triumph of American Painting: A History of Abstract Expressionism*

(1970) and *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties* (1978), both of which are thought to be definitive histories of that period, does not even footnote Lewis. Dore Ashton, who has also written extensively on Abstract Expressionism, doesn't mention the painter in her work either. How is this possible? Somehow Sandler found room in his book for Richard Diebenkorn, who never lived in New York and was associated with San Francisco Abstraction and the Bay Area Figurative Movement. His name is even featured on the cover. Perhaps this isn't all that surprising. Diebenkorn was friends with many of the New York School painters and drew direct inspiration from them. Lewis, on the other hand, seems not to have developed relationships with these painters, other than with Reinhardt. But I don't buy that line of thinking. It seems more likely that Lewis's experiences as a black artist did not fit into the stories Sandler or Ashton wanted to tell. Ironically, in a more recent book, *Avant-Garde to Pluralism: An On-the-Spot History* (2006), Sandler still couldn't find room for Lewis.

Lewis and other black artists are also missing from iconic photographs of that time, which gives the false impression that only white painters worked in an Abstract Expressionist style. Consider the famous photograph of "The Irascibles" in *Life* magazine in 1951. Hedda Sterne is the only woman in the photo among a large group of men that includes Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, and Ad Reinhardt. There are no people of color. The group became known as "The Irascibles" because of their protest against the Metropolitan Museum of Art's conservative jury for the 1950 show, *American Painting Today*. The painters were disappointed that there wasn't enough "advanced art" selected for exhibition. To these artists, "advanced," meant, "abstract." Racial or gender identity was not a concern. If there were even just one or two black artists in this photo, the moniker "irascible" would possibly have been seen as socially subversive and therefore dangerous. Instead, the photo consists of white artists who are grumpy and taking a stand. There's no harm in that, right?

The ubiquity of the *Life* photograph and the faulty histories of Abstract Expressionism have meant that white artists have been less likely to know black artists such as Lewis. But, because black culture has had to maintain its own histories when no one else would, a black artist is likely to know of Lewis and the painters in the photograph. Similarly, African-American poet and critic Fred Moten's recent [comments](#) in *Entropy* (December 28, 2015) on the influential literary critic Marjorie Perloff's description of Michael Brown as a "huge" and "scary" black man shed some light on this problem. Her comments were part of her attempt to defend Kenneth Goldsmith's appropriation of Michael Brown's autopsy for a conceptual text, "The Body of Michael Brown," which was performed at Brown University last spring. As Moten points out, he has had to know more about her than she has ever had to know about him, or any other black artist for that matter:

I breathe some air that Marjorie Perloff breathes. I like some poetry that Marjorie Perloff likes. At the same time, we don't like one another, even though we don't know one another; at the same time, even though I don't know her, I know a lot about her. As a matter of fact, I know a lot more about her than she knows about either me or herself. That's a function of our education. I had to learn about her and many of the things that have gone and continue to go into the making of her. She has never been so obligated, a condition that induces not only ignorance but also cold-heartedness.

Moten's insightful comments demonstrate that the problem of the one-way cultural street is still here, even in the supposedly high-minded milieu of a literary critic such as Perloff.

Corinne Robins mentions Lewis in a chapter on black artists in her book, *The Pluralist Era*, from 1984. She also includes a comment from Mary Campbell Schmidt, published in her introduction to The Studio Museum in Harlem's 1980 Ed Clark retrospective, which points out that the familiar narrative of Abstract Expressionism leaves out not just Lewis's involvement with the Club, but also

Romare Bearden's with the Kootz Gallery and Ed Clark's at Brata, an artist cooperative. After this mention of Lewis in 1984, it seems his name doesn't appear again in a book until Clifford Ross's 1990 *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics*, in which he is included in a caption for a photo of the discussions at the Artist Studio. He is also a footnote. The problem here is that incomplete historical accounts promote ignorance in the public imagination. Potentially, this neglect can affect artists, too, but they often have the smarts to promote interest in under-recognized predecessors and peers when critics have their heads turned elsewhere.

With Lewis's name and likeness being nearly impossible to find in books on Abstract Expressionism, it's no surprise that his work is only recently starting to receive attention from museums. These days, many museums around the country, according to Randy Kennedy's "[Black Artists and the March Into the Museum](#)," published in November in *The New York Times*, are playing "historical catch-up." As the article describes, curators trained since the '90s understand the need for a more thorough picture of 20th-century art, one that includes the contributions of black artists. While some collections include traditional works by black artists, abstraction has mostly been ignored. Michael Rosenfeld, a New York dealer, said in the article, "Up until about five years ago, when curators came to us, they were really only interested in narrative works that showed the black experience so they could demonstrate in no uncertain terms to their visitors that they were committed to representing black America." So little has changed since W.E. B. DuBois' 1926 essay, "[The Criteria of Negro Art](#)," in which the author criticized the aesthetic limits placed upon black artists by the white establishment. Curators and art historians, until recently, have not been paying close enough attention to either Lewis's paintings or to his significant involvement with Abstract Expressionism. His paintings, even when abstract, portray black experience – a black artist made them.

While white male painters, such as Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, had the social privilege of self-expression and the comfort of knowing that expression would be potentially welcomed, Norman Lewis faced the economic struggles of a black artist. In the 1930s, when he was participating in an artists' cooperative, he discovered that he was paying double the rent the white artists were paying and promptly quit the co-op. And then in 1957, as many of his white peers were developing a following, Lewis earned a New York City taxi license that he used to supplement his income through the late 1960s. Trying to manage an artistic career and earn a living was a constant struggle for him.

In addition to driving a cab, Lewis supported himself over the years with teaching positions at the Augusta Savage House and Studio and the Harlem Community Art Center. Teaching, for Lewis, was akin to social work, according to Jacqueline Francis in her well-researched PAFA catalogue essay, "The Presence of Norman Lewis." His former students have remarked that he didn't lecture or insist upon particular styles. Unfortunately, the Jefferson School of Social Sciences, where he taught in the 1940s, didn't see it the same way. They thought his course on abstraction wasn't important to their curriculum and didn't renew his contract. Ad Reinhardt taught there around the same time and was also let go. The school wanted to promote only social realism. Lewis also co-founded the Harlem Artist's Guild; served as President of Spiral, an African-American artist collective; and co-founded, in 1969, Cinque Gallery, which was devoted to garnering recognition for young minority artists.

As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, Lewis continued his lifelong commitment to social causes and participated in protests like the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which was organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; Reinhardt, Romare Bearden, and Jacob Lawrence joined him in that protest. Meanwhile, in his painting, he sought a way to join abstraction to his political activism. In 1967, he painted "Untitled (Alabama)," which consists of a predominately black background and two triangular shapes, tightly packed with white and black lines that conjure people, crosses, and Ku Klux Klan hoods; the triangles form a blade slicing through black space.



Norman Lewis, "Title Unknown (Alabama)" (1967), oil on canvas, 45 1/4 x 73 1/2 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (© Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY) (click to enlarge)

Earlier in the sixties, Lewis painted what one might call abstract portraits of Klan members. All of these mostly untitled works are deeply haunting, but also subtle and discreet. Abstraction seems to have given Lewis some measure of protection in these works, as if providing the opportunity to claim that they are simply abstract paintings. What surprises me, or at this point perhaps shouldn't, is that whenever I read about Philip Guston's paintings of hooded Klan figures from the early '70s, Lewis's work doesn't come up in the discussion. It should. The hullabaloo around Guston at that time was his surprising return to figuration, and a cartoonish one at that. Those works are indeed notable, but place them within a larger dialogue and Guston's use of humor to point out the absurdity of the KKK contrasts starkly with Lewis's more somber paintings. To Lewis, the Klan is beyond the realm of humor, even beyond satire. What might Lewis have thought of Guston's work?

Throughout his career, Lewis resisted labeling and often said that he didn't want to paint "black art." Reviews of his work rarely mentioned race, but he noticed that when a potential buyer found out he was black, the exchange would become more difficult, and sometimes even fall through. In the 1976 interview, the painter said that he might have had a stronger following and fared better financially if he had engaged in "the verbal and the social." He thinks he was mistaken to believe that painting would be enough, but Lewis was averse to art world schmoozing, or "verbal garbage," as he termed it. An earlier [interview](#) with Henri Ghent, from 1968, shows that that this issue is more nuanced. From Lewis's perspective, the Willard Gallery, his sole representation from 1946 to 1965, did not do enough to help him negotiate the social expectations of the art world. Lewis's studio was in Harlem, at far remove from the downtown scene, and many buyers were anxious about the trip uptown. In 1967, he moved into a loft on Grand Street. There, he had more space to paint, but he did not have any representation for the last fifteen years of his life. He was on his own.





Norman Lewis, "American Totem" (1960), oil on canvas, 74 x 45 inches (© Estate of Norman W. Lewis, courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY) (click to enlarge)

Perhaps one of the reasons the histories largely ignore Lewis and many other mid-century black abstract artists is because their work was made with the Civil Rights movement as a backdrop, and as much as some of the white artists and critics during that era may have supported that movement, the incorporation of hitherto unknown black artists into the story of Abstract Expressionism would mean having to account for the the ingrained racial biases of the institutional art world. It is more comfortable for artists and the culture around them not to feel complicit with the messy details of violence and persecution. Just look at the work. That's what's important, some might think. That view suggests the illusion that our society has transcended such concerns as identity, whether that identity is based on race, religion, gender, or even geography.

Some might think the call for the story to be more inclusive and to acknowledge the role of race diminishes the work in some way, or that it pigeonholes an artist. But what's worse, invisibility or the recognition that artists are part of a social fabric? The dominant narratives for white artists already pay attention to some aspects of identity. Art historians and critics describe Jackson Pollock's and Clyfford Still's defining upbringings out west, or the immigrant lives of Mark Rothko and Jack Tworkov. In those stories, success comes easier when contrasted with Lewis's experiences. The Pollocks and Stills of Abstract Expressionism had the privilege not only to become artists, but also to receive full-blown recognition for their innovative work.

Lewis's innovative, socially-conscious abstract painting, thanks to the work of curators at PAFA and younger scholars, will now play a larger role in the histories of mid-century abstraction. This should be a boon to young artists who might be trying to navigate their own political and aesthetic interests. A deeper familiarity with the names of artists such as Lewis, Alma Thomas, Hale Woodruff, Howardena Pindell, Jack Whitten, and many other under-known artists of color, will fill out the story of American abstraction so that the future doesn't reflect the faulty records of the past.

**Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis** continues at the *Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts* (118 N Broad Street, Philadelphia) through April 3.

### **Featured Norman Lewis Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts**

Norman Lewis (1909-1979), in the last two decades of his life, fused black struggle with abstract painting. This was not the only way in which he was a unique and significant 20th-century artist.