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## Norman Lewis, Artist, Visionary, Humanist

Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis, November 13, 2015-April 3, 2016, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art

John Welch

One of the most fascinating and storied chapters in the history of American art is the one on the New York School of Abstract Expressionism.



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Norman Lewis, *Jazz Musicians*, © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Norman Lewis, c. 1950 Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York



The highlights are familiar: The New York School of Renegades rising in the era of McCarthyism. “A child or a monkey can do that!” Sure, Jackson Pollack thought, slap dash dribbling away until the revolutionary brilliance of what he was not only doing, but that also couldn’t be replicated, was recognized, then sinking into a haze of alcohol, crashing his car and dying. The whiskey-soaked tales of the Cedar Tavern. The inspiration of jazz. Painters visually echoing Charlie Parker’s virtuosic improvisations as the vinyl spun in their Greenwich Village lofts. Willem de Kooning wrote: “Miles Davis bends the notes. He doesn’t play them, he bends them. I bend the paint.”

A familiar, fascinating and storied chapter that included artists of diverse identities — African American, American Indian, women, gays — but was dominated in the official discourse by heterosexual white men.

One of the most prodigious of the overlooked Abstract Expressionists was Norman Lewis. The first ever comprehensive museum overview on the artist, *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* is on view, November 13, 2015-April 3, 2016 at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA).

The exhibition curator is Ruth Fine, a former senior curator at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

A San Francisco collector of Lewis’s work wrote to him in 1955 asking ‘Why the Hell Aren’t You Famous?’ according to *Procession* catalog essayist Jacqueline Francis. Ruth Fine notes in her catalog essay that Robert Storr, dean of the Yale School of Art, former MoMA curator and critic, riffing off the title of Ralph Ellison’s well-known book, *The Invisible Man*, once mused Norman Lewis is the “not quite ‘invisible man’ of Abstract Expressionism. Before this exhibition today’s art lovers might have to ask the same question as Lewis’s exasperated collector from the 1950s.

Ambitious in breadth and scope, *Procession* includes approximately 60 paintings on canvas and various types of board; and 30 drawings and paintings on paper. The exhibition is organized around six major themes—In the City; Visual Sound; Rhythm of Nature; Ritual; Civil Rights; Summation—each corresponding to major phases in the artist’s career which often overlap or intersect aesthetically.

Through *Procession*’s comprehensive treatment, Norman Lewis is elevated within the history of American art. In addition to demonstrating why Lewis should be as famous as contemporaries such as Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko, the exhibition brings coherence to interpretations of Lewis’ enigmatic yet prolific artistic career.

A companion exhibition at PAFA, *Stone and Metal: Lithographs and Etchings* by Norman Lewis features approximately 30 prints. A print thought to be Lewis’s first — an etching titled *Trees*, 1934, which is known in only one impression — is on view, as are unique color proofs from 1973/1975, that combine relief and intaglio printing techniques. Also shown are several little-known Depression-era lithographs by the artist and *The Red Umbrella*, 1972, Lewis’s most popular etching.

Born in Harlem in 1909 to parents from Bermuda, Lewis lived and worked in New York most of his life. He focused on figurative and figurative abstract work with social and jazz themes in the 1930s and early 1940s and transitions to more



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Norman Lewis in the studio Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York



[\(Enlarge Image\)](#)

Girl with Yellow Hat, 1936, oil on burlap, 36 1/2 x 26" Courtesy of the Reginald F. Lewis Family Collection © Estate of Norman W. Lewis;

\* The Dispossessed (Family), 1940, oil on canvas, 36 x 30", The Harmon and Harriet Kelley Foundation for the Arts © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



(Enlarge Image)

Title Unknown (Street Scene aka African Dance), 1947 oil on board, 20 x 30

cited: Girl with Yellow Hat, 1936 (the figurative subject most exhibited in Lewis's lifetime); The Wanderer (Johnny), a close second; Composition I (1945, arguably Lewis's first abstraction and seen in a frequently-reproduced photograph of him painting); and a 1947 work of unknown title that has been referred to as African Dance and Street Scene, which may be the earliest of Lewis's procession paintings.

Works on view by the mature artist include Civil Rights era paintings such as American Totem, Alabama, and Journey to an End; several carnival subjects; and a selection of what have been called Lewis's "atmospheric" works, including Arctic Night, 1951-52, borrowed from the Studio Museum in Harlem. The "Summation" section includes examples on both paper and canvas of Lewis' Seachange series which represent his final stylistic evolution.

During our exchanges, Fine also said it was exciting to present "many extraordinary works that have not been exhibited or reproduced repeatedly and that will be surprising to visitors." These include an untitled work depicting the March on Washington which Fine believes will become a signature work as a result of the exhibition.

She also predicts that works borrowed from private collectors, normally unavailable to the public, will become better known. They include Lewis's large canvases from 1969-1972 such as Confrontation and Aurora Borealis.

Re-invigorating and re-positioning a public understanding of the achievement of Norman



(Enlarge Image)

Carnivale II, 1962, oil on canvas, 64 x 52" © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

painters) started in 1963. Spiral focused on protesting social injustice and how race factored into the mainstream art world's interpretations of the work of black artists.

At the end of the 1960s, Lewis founded an art gallery, Cinque Gallery with Romare Bearden and others, and he taught at the Arts Students League of New York throughout the 1970s. He died largely unknown in 1979. His singular achievement was recognized by New York artists of his generation and by some members of the New York white and black cognoscenti however these were closely circumscribed groups.

Interested to learn how Ruth Fine conceived and organized the show, I began corresponding with her in June 2015. She told me that her installation plan utilizes wall color changes rather than actual partitions to transition between exhibition sections. This signals to audiences that the phases of Lewis' work corresponding with the show's themes are elisions rather than autonomous periods in the artist's work.

Fine also said that she did not try to define or categorize Norman Lewis as any one thing — e.g., Abstract Expressionist, Social Realist, Black Arts Movement artist, civil rights activist, printmaker, calligrapher, transcendentalist. Rather, the exhibition gives viewers the building blocks for interpretation by demonstrating the many facets of this artist's work and life. Fine believes Lewis would not have wanted his work in any category to have been locked into a single reading.

In pointing out seminal pieces from the artist's oeuvre, Fine



(Enlarge Image)

Arctic Night, 1951-52, oil on canvas, 40 x 52", The Studio Museum in Harlem © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

Lewis — an artist who is by all accounts an enigma — is no small feat. This process is aided by significant talent and resources. In Ruth Fine there is long experience on writing about and curating exhibitions on African American art. The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art (PAFA) and the City of Philadelphia provide generous institutional support within an accessible East Coast city. And the loan of an unprecedented amount of Lewis art to the exhibition is due largely to the cooperation of Lewis heirs — spouse Ouida Lewis and step-daughter Tarin Fuller — as well as The Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York which represents the Lewis estate.

The exhibition catalog, published jointly by PAFA and the University of California Press, includes a preface by David C. Driskell, noted African American scholar and artist; a 50 page chronology on the Lewis' life, and essays that Fine described in our exchange with understandable pride because of the publication's erudition and bountiful, luxurious illustrations. "The catalog was truly a group effort with everyone sharing their discoveries with each other as needed," said Fine.

This publication serves as a virtual, Lewis catalogue raisonné, a compendium of information on events significant to modernism, and a reference for interpretations of Lewis' work and its public reception.

Norman Lewis was not an obscure or unheard of artist during his lifetime. To the contrary, his extensive record of gallery exhibits and showings in other venues begs the question: why he is not more critically acclaimed?

Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



(Enlarge Image)

Composition I, 1945, oil on canvas, 40 x 24", The Thompson Collection, Indianapolis, Indiana © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



(Enlarge Image)

Title Unknown (Alabama), 1967 oil (full caption below)





(Enlarge Image)

Confrontation, 1971  
(full caption below)

In a concise, yet detailed, overview of the artist's exhibition history in the catalog, Helen Shannon encapsulates his public exposure into three core categories: non-commercial venues organized or sponsored by Negro organizations and leftists cultural groups during his figurative and social commentary phase 1933-1940s; commercial galleries and museums throughout the U.S. as he transitioned to abstraction in the 1940s and 1950s; and artist-run spaces or exhibitions associated with specifically positioning black artists in the history of American and modern art during the 1960s and 1970s.

Lewis was on the cusp of fame in the 1950s, says Jacqueline Francis, and had been included at that time among celebrated modernists in public forums. A notable example is his participation in an April 1950 discussion about the motivations and meaning of modernist art that included heavyweights such as Ad Reinhardt,

Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman and Louise Bourgeois, among others. The group's discussions were later published as *Modern Artists in America* (1951).

By 1954, Lewis was on the short list of artists considered "new talent" by *Art in America* but didn't make the cut. He was awarded a Popularity Prize at the Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting in 1955; showed in the Venice Biennial in 1956; and was featured in a popular magazine article with other notable African Americans, entitled "The Meaning of Harlem" in 1960.

So, why the mismatch between Lewis' obvious talents and commensurate recognition by the public and the art historical record? Is it race? Lewis' continual experimentation with formal approaches in art? An inability of scholars, gallerists or the public to grasp who the man was, what his art meant, how to define him?

The Procession exhibition and its excellent catalog will help viewers explore any and all of these possibilities in serious and meaningful ways. This is a signal achievement of the project. Another potential achievement may be its ability to help contextualize and educate the public about complexities that have confounded scholars and arts professionals when attempting or neglecting interpretation of African American art relative to the broad category of American art.



(Enlarge Image)

Aurora Borealis,  
1972-76, oil on  
canvas, 87 x 72", The  
Thompson  
Collection,  
Indianapolis, Indiana  
© Estate of Norman  
W. Lewis; Courtesy of  
Michael Rosenfeld  
Gallery LLC, New  
York, NY

Catalog essayist Jeffrey Stewart posits a theory about interpreting Lewis' oeuvre which points to why art historians and the makers of art stars in the 1950s might not have perceived its significance, and offers insight for understanding his work today.

Rather than situating Lewis within conventional understandings of art movements such as Abstract Expressionism, The Black Arts Movement or Social Realism, Stewart maintains that Lewis is beyond categorization in such terms because his work "...stands on its own and not in relation to context..."

Stewart argues further that Lewis must be understood in relation to a much longer and broader tradition among African American people of the 18th and 19th centuries removed from any foregrounding of urbanism, realism or racial modernism. This tradition, rooted in African American spirituals, folklore, literature and mysticism may be manifest in Lewis's obvious communion with transcendental elements of nature such as sea and sky throughout his life, even while sitting in the midst of a concrete jungle; and it is also resident in the artist's remove from identifications with categories—racial or otherwise—which "hijack the complex meanings of art."

Among the cultural criticism of the Black Arts Movement era are companion articles by Elsa Honig Fine (no relation to Ruth Fine) entitled "The Afro-American Artists: A Search for Identity" (1969) and "Mainstream, Blackstream and the Black Art Movement" (1971). Elsa Honig Fine's conclusions in those short but defining articles about the identity of African American artists and ways they were then being categorized in the mainstream art world aligns well with Stewart's contemporary claims about how Lewis

defies categorization.

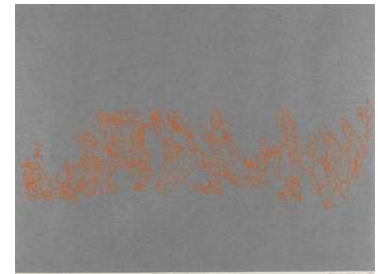
In the three principal typologies Elsa Honig Fine identifies during the black power era—art responsive and conversant with international styles (Mainstream); politically sensitive art conforming to conventional aesthetic vocabularies (Blackstream); or art wholly unresponsive to aesthetic conventions and norms and blatantly political (Black Art Movement)—there is no possibility of setting Lewis and his career in any one of these boxes and enclosing him in a single reading.

The more likely summation of Lewis' life and art is, perhaps, found in an aesthetic call to action noted by Elsa Honig Fine, which she attributes to sculptor Edward Wilson in her 1971 work, advising black artists ...to seek humanistic values, finding the universal in the



(Enlarge Image)

Title Unknown (March on  
Washington), 1965, oil on  
fiberboard, 35 1/4 x 47 1/2" L. Ann  
and Jonathan P. Binstock © Estate  
of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of  
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New  
York, NY



(Enlarge Image)

The Red Umbrella, 1972 (full  
caption below)



(Enlarge Image)

Untitled (Seachange), 1976, oil on  
Strathmore paper, 21 7/8 x 29 7/8"  
Collection of Valentino D. Carlotti ©  
Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy  
of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC,  
New York, NY

specific, and transformation of the Negro experience into "universally understood terms."

Of course, the more focused intent of young African Americans to use art to empower black people in their own communities and throughout the African Diaspora had its own strong and necessary rationale.

In many respects, *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* helps us see Norman Lewis' art in humanistic terms. We see how, in translating the specific to the universal, he responded with sophisticated insight and artistic virtuosity to the eras in which he lived.

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### A Sense of Place-Norman Lewis in Harlem: An Inquiry into the Laws of Nature

[Click here](#) to listen to Ruth Fine's talk on the Harlem-based life of Norman Lewis, "A Sense of Place-Norman Lewis in Harlem: An Inquiry into the Laws of Nature," recorded by the National Gallery of Art. At the time, January 15, 2006, Fine was NGA curator of special projects in modern art. Artist Sam Gilliam joins the discussion towards the end.

#### Full Caption Details

We are planning a redesign of the IRAAA content management system which will enable the system to accommodate complete caption details in the captions of longer articles. In the meantime, the full captions for three of the works shown in the article are listed below.

Title Unknown (Alabama), 1967  
Oil on canvas, 45 1/4 x 73 1/2 in.  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC  
© Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

Confrontation, 1971  
Oil on canvas, 88 x 72 in.  
Collection of Patricia Blanchet and Ed Bradley  
© Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

The Red Umbrella, 1972  
Etching in orange intaglio with gray relief on off-white wovepaper Plate: 11 7/8 x 15 5/8 in. (30.2 x 39.7 cm)  
The Studio Museum in Harlem  
© Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



(Enlarge  
Image)

American  
Totem (Klu  
Klux Klan),  
1960 oil on  
canvas, 74 x  
45 in. Estate of  
Norman W.  
Lewis © Estate  
of Norman W.  
Lewis;  
Courtesy of  
Michael  
Rosenfeld  
Gallery LLC,  
New York, NY