

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Jewish Museum Opens 'From the Margins: Lee Krasner & Norman Lewis: 1945-1952'

*'They Were Very Cognizant of How Much They Struggled
and How Difficult It Was as an African-American and a
Woman'*

By
ANDY BETA
Sept. 11, 2014 5:16 p.m. ET



'Stop and Go (formerly Yes and No),' 1949, by Lee Krasner *The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS)*

A funny thing happened when the Jewish Museum was hanging its 2008 show, "Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976."

The exhibition curator, Norman Kleeblatt, already knew it would feature the work of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning as championed by that era's most prominent art critics, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. But in looking

at other artists of that era for context, Mr. Kleeblatt noticed visual similarities between Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, two of the lesser-known New York artists of that era.

"The modest scale of their work, as well as the heightened personal nature of the paintings, created a very different kind of energy," Mr. Kleeblatt said. "They were two artists who were part of the scene, but who were overlooked in all of the critical writings of the time."

On Friday, the Jewish Museum's newest show, ["From the Margins: Lee Krasner & Norman Lewis: 1945-1952,"](#) casts light on both painters, investigating how these two artists—one a Jewish woman, the other an African-American man—remained at the periphery of New York's postwar art scene, yet whose respective works have parallels.

"Because of scale of canvas, color palette, the nature of what they're both doing, Krasner and Lewis really do speak to each other in the way that a different pairing of Abstract Expressionism artists (from that era) wouldn't," said Lisa Saltzman, an art-history professor at Bryn Mawr College who contributed to the museum's accompanying catalog. Dark and densely patterned paintings like Krasner's "Untitled, 1949" and Lewis's "Congregation (1950)," indeed show a resemblance to one another.

Both artists drew on their heritage for their work. Krasner's lines evoke the practice of Hebrew calligraphy, while Lewis's work often references Harlem night life and jazz clubs. In contrast with the colossal scale of much of their peers' paintings, Krasner's and Lewis's canvases are of a more modest scale, many under 2 feet in height.

Krasner and Lewis were born and raised in New York City to immigrant families: Krasner to Russian Jewish parents in Brooklyn, Lewis to Bermudian parents in Harlem. They got their artistic starts within Work Projects Administration art projects in the 1930s and ran in social circles with prominent artists of their time.



'Twilight Sounds,' 1947 (detail), by Norman Lewis *The Estate of Norman W. Lewis/landor Fine Arts*

"Lewis would drink with these painters, was friends with them," Mia Bagneris, an assistant professor of art history at Tulane University, said, "but when it mattered in terms of getting notice from critics, that was when they couldn't see him."

Krasner, too, "was very much a part of the New York art scene," Ms. Saltzman said. "Despite that, her exclusion says more for how close she was yet how little attention she garnered."

As Pollock's wife, her career was frequently overshadowed by her husband's fame. When the two painters moved to Springs, N.Y., Pollock's studio was in a large converted barn, while Krasner's studio was relegated to an upstairs bedroom.

Lewis often painted within the cramped confines of his Harlem apartments, and like Krasner, "the actual physical constraints of their studios explain why they both worked on such an intimate scale," Ms. Bagneris said. "In a period when the most well-known painters are known for their monumental-sized paintings, the fact that both Krasner and Lewis worked on a smaller scale is almost telegraphic."

Lewis died in 1979, followed by Krasner in 1984, and for both artists, larger-scale exhibitions and critical reassessments came posthumously. "In their various interviews, both artists talk about the exclusionary practices of the period," Mr. Kleeblatt said. "They were very cognizant of how much they struggled and how difficult it was as an African-American and a woman. Lewis and Krasner were passed over."

["From the Margins: Lee Krasner & Norman Lewis: 1945-1952"](#) opens Friday and runs through Feb. 1, at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Ave., 212-423-3200.

<http://online.wsj.com/articles/jewish-museum-opens-from-the-margins-lee-krasner-norman-lewis-1945-1952-1410470184#printMode>