


Finally...A Museum Retrospective of Norman Lewis' Striking Art World

By SUSAN LEWIS • DEC 7, 2015

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Norman Lewis working on Composition I, 1945

COURTESY OF WILLARD GALLERY ARCHIVES

Norman Lewis (1909 - 1979), a Harlem-born, African-American artist whose work spanned different styles and a range of subjects - including nature, the city, music, and civil rights - achieved some significant recognition during his lifetime, but he's never been the subject of a comprehensive museum retrospective...until now.

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The **Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts** is hosting ***Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis***, on view until April 3, 2016. WRTI's Susan Lewis spoke with Curator Ruth Fine.



Listen

10:49

Listen to PAFA Guest Curator Ruth Fine talk with WRTI's Susan Lewis about Norman Lewis, his striking art, his inspirations, and why he's not better known today.



(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wrti/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/LEWIS-DISPOSSESSED-FAMILY.jpg)

The Dispossessed (Family), 1940, Oil on canvas

Transcript:

Susan Lewis: It's a really beautiful, striking exhibition. I understand it's the first comprehensive survey of his work.

Ruth Fine: It's the first comprehensive museum survey. I would say it's the first museum retrospective since he died – he had a show at – well, actually, never. During his lifetime, in 1976, he had a show at CUNY graduate center – and not even in the gallery – I gather it was a pedestrian mall. The work hasn't been given the full respect it deserves.

SL: And why is that?

RF: I think for a lot of reasons.

One of them is that he was a black artist painting in a complicated way that engaged both issues important to the black community and the white community...Never arrived at a single signature

You look at late Rothko, you know you're looking at late Rothko. You're looking at a late Newman, you know you're looking at a late Newman. You look at a late Lewis, you don't necessarily looking at a late Lewis, because you could be looking at another late Lewis and it would look different.

What I'm hoping is that we're at a time now where artists who work in diverse styles are acceptable. It's not viewed as confusion; it's viewed as broad mindedness, or something like that. I'm hoping that that will be helpful to Lewis.



http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wrti/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/LEWIS-AFTERNOON700px.jpg

Afternoon, 1969, Oil on canvas

CREDIT THE PAMELA J. JOYNER & ALFRED J. GIUFFRIDA COLLECTION © ESTATE OF NORMAN W. LEWIS; COURTESY OF MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY

We're also at a time where we're re-looking at people who have been overlooked for various reasons, like racial prejudice being certainly one of them. But also his style itself is a gentle style in many ways. He's a

quieter painter. The lesser-known people of his generation – black and white – are being looked at again.

SL: The exhibition is so interesting in the way it's organized. It's organized by subjects that informed his work, or different interests he had. And I understand he was informed by music, by nature, by the city, by everything, really, around him. He was a very curious person. I'd love to talk about music for a second.

RF: Well, you know everybody wants black painters to be inspired by jazz, black artists invented, and he was inspired by jazz, but he was also inspired by classical music. He had an older brother who was a violinist, both classical and jazz. And Lewis, himself, in the '70s, he was working steadily at the art students league. So I think he probably had a more stable income. In his archives there are a lot of brochures from concerts, both black and white artists. He played the piano. I don't know precisely what he played; I haven't come across any music. Had a big record collection – it was pretty broad in its range, so I think every kind of music.



http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wrti/files/styles/x_large/public/201512/LEWIS-CANTATA.jpg

Cantata, 1948, Oil on canvas

CREDIT THE DAYTON ART INSTITUTE, © ESTATE OF NORMAN W. LEWIS;
COURTESY OF MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY

SL: There are three paintings in the show called *Jazz Musicians*, but there's one painting called *Contata*.

RF: I think Norman Lewis was a vacuum cleaner, in a sense that I think he was immensely intelligent and curious. I think he listened to whatever music he could find to listen to, however he could find it to listen to. He went with his brother to rent parties, where his brother would play. So I think probably the music he heard most of was jazz.

SL: It seems that his music was informed by the world around him, but also by the sense that art could be used to make a difference in people's lives, and could play some social role.

Well, that's a complicated question. He claimed always that at a certain point, he came to believe that art was not going to change the minds of people about how society should be treated; that the people who needed to see the paintings probably wouldn't see them anyway, and that painting needed to have an aesthetic basis.

So in that sense, he's philosophical about what art can do. He's philosophical in what he says. In terms of what he does, there is a section in his show called "Civil Rights," and I think his "American

"In his highly own, personal

Totem," his "Alabama Journey to the End," and several that are untitled are "Redneck Birth." These are tough social activist paintings.

There's an early watercolor of a police beating. And the early '40s is about the moment when he started thinking this isn't what he wanted to do anymore. But I don't think it ever left him. I think he was who he was.

way, he did do social activist paintings, and he did romantic landscape paintings. And he did them the same year, that's what I find so amazing." -Ruth Fine

In his highly own, personal way, he did do social activist paintings, and he did romantic landscape paintings. And he did them the same year, that's what I find so amazing. The early '60s, the height of the civil rights movement - tough, tough times in this country - he was doing what seem to me to be "as tough" paintings as possible.

He was involved in all the - well when he was invited to the African exhibitions that featured art by African Americans, at which there were many in the '60s. He wasn't always invited, because just as the white community may not have been always welcoming to him as an artist, because he was black, the black community wasn't as welcoming with him as an artist, because he wasn't painting what they wanted him to paint in an obvious way. So there were many exhibitions featuring African-American artists in which Lewis did not participate. It seems clear to me he wasn't invited or he would have participated.

Wow. With such variety in his body of work, there's never the less a theme, which I guess this exhibition takes its name from, the theme of " Procession?"

I think the procession is one thing that goes through the work.

What holds the work together for me, and it suits what he said about aesthetic issues -- are his amazing curiosity about artistic materials, and what you can do with them.

How many ways can you use a pencil? How many ways can you inscribe a line into wet paint, and what's the difference between a line that just takes the paint off, and a line that's drawn with a pencil so that you have complicated pencil drawings in wet paint in one painting.

For me, that's what goes through the work and what absolutely ties the body of work together, is if you look at how they are made, they aren't all made the same way, but they are all made with a kind of curiosity about the making of visual images on two dimensional surfaces. That's what ties it.

The Procession, was for me, was the most common idea, in the sense that there were the Labor Day, and other processions in Harlem. He was very interested in Carnival, in the '50s, when he went to Europe, and then the Civil Rights marches. And picketing - he was on picket lines. I think that kind of procession also would have mattered a lot to him.

He became engaged with union and labor activities early on. He had a whole community found their origins there- black and white. He also talks about that in the video tape, talks about joining with white

activists at various points in his life – being engaged with anti-racism and anti-Semitism. His active interests were broad too. He was the man of the world. He absolutely was a man of the world.

What kind of recognition did he have during his lifetime, and how does this exhibition alter that?

It's interesting; he was in 130 group shows in his lifetime. He won the popularity prize in 1955, for The Carnegie International; it was the most important international shows. The public who went to the show voted his paintings, the one they loved the best. He was in the Venice Biennale in 1956. His work was in the collection of the Chicago Art Institute in 1953. So he was in major museum collections. He was in a major gallery in from the mid '40s to the mid '60s.

He got very good reviews; the reviews of his shows were generally positive. But on the other hand, one review said, he was in the Willard Gallery with Mark Toby, and the review said something like well there can be only one Mark Toby, and one could say, well you know there could only be one Norman Lewis. Who knows which way the influence went?

What I really wanted the exhibition to do was to make public the range of the work in a way that made it coherent; that the fact that there are lots of kinds of ideas, images, approaches, over a period of almost 50 years, I didn't want that to get in a way of being coherent. He kept adding to what he was interested in.

The **Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts** is hosting *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*, on view until April 3, 2016.

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