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African American Art: 3 Credit Course Research Paper

Norman Lewis

The Posthumous Success of a Post-War Painter

Within the history of African American artists in the United States, Norman Lewis is singular in his commitment to the genre of abstract expressionist painting from the 1940s until his death in 1979. The canon of Abstract Expressionism, that was championed by ‘The New York School’ of avant-garde artists, has been considered one of America’s great cultural contributions to the history of fine art in the 20th century. The artists participating in this movement worked in dissimilar abstract forms with the goal of expressing emotions through their paintings. Norman Lewis’s contributions to this movement equaled his contemporaries in terms of the volume of his artistic output and the skill with which he engaged in developing the aesthetic expressionism in his work. Furthermore, as a black man living in the United States during the height of the civil rights movement, Lewis had a unique social and racial perspective that he strove to communicate through abstract expressionist painting. Despite his important contribution to Abstract Expressionism, Norman Lewis received much less of the exposure and commercial success that other white painters of the same movement did during his lifetime. The factors that influenced the inequality with which Lewis’s work was received in the arts community ranged from his race, to the aesthetic preferences that drove the African American art scene, to the political importance of the abstract expressionist movement during the Cold War. In more recent years, the revisionist work of art historians and museums has begun to correct the vast oversight of Norman Lewis’s contributions to the canons of Abstract Expressionism, African American art, and American art history.

Norman Lewis began his painting career in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance during the 1930s. For a period during the year of 1933 he worked in the studio of the sculptor Augusta Savage, and later was also a participant in the 306 group of Harlem Renaissance artists so named for their meeting place at 306 W. 141st Street.¹ The writings of African American literary scholars such as Alain Locke influenced much of the visual artwork that was produced during this time in Harlem. In his 1925 essay *Enter The New Negro*, Locke proposed and argued for the establishment of an African American visual culture all of its own.² African American arts and culture publications such as *Survey Graphic* and *Crisis*, that were influential to many Harlem Renaissance artists, published works by black artists that often depicted the lives and struggles of black people in America. As a result of their needing to directly tackle pressing issues of persecution such as lynching in the United States, artworks published in these magazines more often depicted these visceral scenes and crises, as opposed to engaging in abstraction or more aesthetic artistic pursuits.

As an African American artist from this era, Lewis came to prioritize the later aesthetic nature of his artwork over the figural subject matter of the black experience. Born and raised in Harlem, Lewis started out like many of his contemporary African American artists, painting scenes that he observed in his daily life. *Girl with Yellow Hat* (1936) and *Two Women Reading* (1940) are some examples of his earlier work that dealt with the figure. By the late 1940s, however Lewis's style was moving progressively into abstract expressionist painting, and this would remain his chosen genre for painting from then on. During an oral history interview of

¹ Ruth Fine, and Norman Lewis. *Procession: the art of Norman Lewis*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015, p. 248.

² Alain Locke, "Enter the New Negro." *Survey Graphic*, March 1925.

Norman Lewis conducted by the Smithsonian Institution in 1968 on the subject of his career in painting, Lewis elaborated on his motivations for this transition into working fully in abstraction:

...the thing that I noticed was the individuality and how Matisse saw certain things, how Picasso saw and the whole--really, after one learns the history is to see what one can contribute as beautiful. And this was the thing that sort of drove me away from--like I used to paint Negroes being dispossessed, discrimination, and slowly I became aware of the fact that this didn't move anybody,³

Lewis goes on to elaborate in this same portion of the interview, that he felt that the political action that he participated in, in the form of picketing, was an effective way to fight for the necessary social progress needed for African Americans, but that his “protest painting” could not directly affect these political outcomes. He therefore decided to abandon figural depictions of the African American experience in order to pursue, in the context of the history of painting, his own expression and statement of himself as an individual. As he put it in his interview, with concern to his painting, Norman Lewis was trying to find the answers to the questions: “what can I say, what do I have to say that can be of any value, what can I say that can arouse someone to look at and feel awed about”.⁴

Lewis’s career in abstract expressionist painting spanned the height of the civil rights movement in the United States. Even though his aesthetic pursuits and decisions remained driven by his own visual preference and craft, it is impossible to ignore the social and political context within which Lewis worked. His works of art are inherently expressive of his experience as a black man in America. As he worked in the abstract expressionist style of painting throughout his career, Lewis varied in how directly he would choose to approach the racial subject matter contained in his work. A particular series of black and white, and red and white paintings of similar calligraphic style, which he executed during the 1960s were more overtly associated with

³ Oral history interview with Norman Lewis, 1968 July 14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴ Oral history interview with Norman Lewis

the struggles of civil rights movement, and the antagonism of the Ku Klux Klan. Titles that Lewis gave to these works such as *Rednecks* (1960) and *Alabama* (1960) directly draw attention to the artist's racial context and establish grounds for viewers to derive an expression of emotion and meaning contained within these abstract paintings on the subject of civil rights.

When the *Spiral* group of African American artists was organized in 1963, Norman Lewis was elected as its first president.⁵ This conglomerate of black artists, who met at the studio of Romare Bearden sought to engage with each other in a discussion on how they could contribute as black artists to the political struggle of African Americans in the United States. At the same time that the group organized logistical action such as traveling to join the March on Washington in 1963, they also debated on topics such as what the aesthetic nature of their artwork should be as African Americans.⁶ The group was short lived in its existence, and was only able to put together one group exhibition in the summer of 1965. Regardless of the group's lack of longevity, however, the fact that Norman Lewis had a leading role in its formation is a testament to both his commitment to and support of the civil rights movement, as well as the respect that the other black artists in the group had for him.

During the 1960s, the civil rights movement garnered prominence and political support, as well as violent opposition from whites showcasing racism and bigotry in America. In March of 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led protests against voter discrimination that took place between Selma and Montgomery, Alabama. The police brutality that was committed against African Americans during these demonstrations was heavily documented in photographs.⁷ The subsequent dissemination of these pictures by the media stirred further emotional response from

⁵ Fine, 80.

⁶ Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art*. Oxford History of Art. Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 185-6

⁷ Jeff Wallenfeldt. "Selma March." Encyclopædia Britannica. March 14, 2018.

the public, and these images from Selma became a focal point for the civil rights movement. It was during the same Spring of 1965 that the images of these marches in Alabama were vastly influencing the visual culture in America, that Norman Lewis produced his painting *Processional* (1965) for the Spiral group's *First Group Exhibition: Works in Black and White*.⁸ The painting makes use of white paint in jumbled calligraphic form over a black background; the upper and lower thirds of the canvas consist of solid black bars that taper and allow the center stripe of the image, made with the white paint, to widen vertically as it moves from left to right on the canvas. The entire composition captures the emotive feeling and imagery of a moving body of indistinguishable figures, and alludes to the civil rights protestors marching in Selma, Alabama. This interpretation of the work is embellished by the title "Processional", that Lewis gave to the painting, and was also confirmed by Lewis during his oral history interview in 1968. During this conversation between Henri Ghent and Norman Lewis, when discussing the context of the painting, Lewis describes the meaning that he felt was conveyed in *Processional* as a result of its abstract style.

MR. LEWIS: ...But then the things became less and less realistically human looking but became something that should have been, which is part of painting. Instead of individual masses and showing a lot of heads it was just a blob of black paint or white paint, like something that I did in the Selma thing.

MR. GHENT: Is that the procession painting that you did?

MR. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. GHENT: Oh, that was a beautiful one, yes.

MR. LEWIS: It was just—there are white and black people who feel a togetherness so that you can't tell who is white and who is black. I think this whole goddamn thing of black and white, you know, we haven't yet learned how to live as people together.⁹

⁸ Fine, p. 80-85

⁹ Oral history interview with Norman Lewis

During this conversation, we can see how the artist strives to create a real symbolism and meaning that can be derived from his abstract expressionist painting. Lewis expresses his desire to blur the lines and differences between black and white individuals through his abstraction of the subject matter contained in the painting. In the particular case of *Processional* (1965), it is clear that Norman Lewis's experience of the civil rights movement is heavily imbued into the artwork.

Although his abstract artwork was highly expressive of the African American experience, many museums have only recently begun to collect Norman Lewis's works as part of the canon of African American art.¹⁰ In order to derive a political or social commentary about the African American experience from the visual culture produced by black artists, it has been much more conducive for art critics and curators to interpret works that included figural representations or depictions of African Americans. During the 20th century, museums and art critics in the United States more often chose to exhibit and propagate those African American artists who created representational images depicting African American life. Painters such as Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, who both portrayed African American people as figural subjects in their paintings, have been well collected by major art museums since the 1940s.¹¹ Both of these artists work in a visual style that is representational enough that audiences can immediately identify the subject matter of their paintings. Museum curators and cultural publications that wanted to include paintings that depicted the African American experience could easily go to works such as these, that portrayed black people, and were executed by black artists in America. In contrast, black artists such as Norman Lewis, who worked in abstraction during this era, received less support from art collecting institutions.

¹⁰ CBS News. "Reappraising the art of Norman Lewis." March 20, 2016.

¹¹ "The Collection | MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art.

It is easier to understand how this difference in representation may have occurred, when you imagine the perspective of a white museum curator during the mid-twentieth century. It would have been a much greater task to interpret the racial context of an abstract expressionist painting by Norman Lewis than the more representational depictions of Bearden or Lawrence. In order to discuss the emotive response to the civil rights struggle contained in Lewis's work, it would require a more involved analysis and conjecture into the experience of an African American man in the United States at the time. Therefore, when approaching the subject of race relations in the United States, it has been easier for white curators to select works that portray the subject matter directly, rather than emotively. Beyond these interpretive and aesthetic reasons within the museum community that Lewis's work may have received less support, there were also large, even international, political factors, that may have further contributed to Norman Lewis's lack of success during his career as an abstract expressionist painter.

Following World War II the world's geo-political landscape shifted enormously. It was during this time that the United States' powerful political and economic position caused it to fully emerge from its historically isolationist foreign policy. America moved into a new, heavily involved role in world affairs. Following the end of what was the largest military conflict in human history, there emerged a new form of global confrontation. The Cold War, was a conflict between the post-war superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union. Each of these nations sought to promote its own way of life as a structure for rebuilding global order. During this conflict the United States found a strong need to promote American capitalism and democracy as being superior to the Soviet alternatives of communism and totalitarianism. Thus, American art and culture became an important medium through which the nation's political ideologies could be propagated.

An analysis of the development in the American media's portrayal of abstract expressionism in the post-war era shows how the United States came to embrace this art form as a representation of American democracy and freedom. The new manner with which newspapers and periodicals such as *Life* magazine began to discuss the abstract art at this time, emphasized the importance of the individual expressionism that was being conveyed in the art.¹² Art critics and institutions in the media promoted the idea that abstract painting represented freedom and democracy. In the process of establishing an argument for how to appreciate American abstract expressionist painting, the media also engaged in the profiling of the particular individuals who were creating this art.¹³

A group of New York City abstract expressionist artists who came to be known as “The Irascible Eighteen” received a large amount of this media coverage. The controversy surrounding the Irascibles’ protest of an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, served to emphasize these particular eighteen painters’ greater level of individuality within the modern art world. They were fashioned by press coverage to represent individual expression, vitality, freedom, and thus, democracy on the highest level.¹⁴ Notably excluded from this group of eighteen abstract expressionist artists, is Norman Lewis, or for that matter, any artists of color. In the effort to equate this new style of abstract expressionist art with the principles of American democracy and freedom, the inclusion of African American artists would have posed a problematic contradiction, given that the United States had vast discrepancies between the liberties and

¹² Russell W. Davenport "A Life Round Table on Modern Art: Fifteen Distinguished Critics and Connoisseurs Undertake to Clarify the Strange Art of Today." *Life*, October/November 11, 1948.

¹³ Life Magazine. "Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?" *Life*, August 8, 1949.

¹⁴ "18 Painters Boycott Metropolitan: Charge 'Hostility to Advanced Art'." *New York Times* (New York), May 22, 1950.

freedoms available to African Americans and whites. Indeed, the Soviet Union made consistent efforts to point out this hypocrisy in their anti-American propaganda during the Cold War.¹⁵

Norman Lewis was, in many cases, friends with and a contemporary of the members of the abstract expressionist art group that benefited commercially from the media exposure from *Life* magazine and other media outlets. However, Lewis was notably excluded from these publications coverage of abstract expressionism. Unlike his white counterparts in the movement, as an African American, Lewis's expressionist paintings inherently bore the mark of his racial context, and therefore made a political statement that fell without the political objectives that existed in the country for propagating and supporting this artistic movement. This counterproductive situation that Lewis found himself in, that his artwork was, in fact, too political for the abstract expressionist movement, is well conveyed in a statement made by his widow Ouida Lewis during an interview at the Jewish Museum. With regards to Norman Lewis's artistic relationship with Ad Reinhardt, who was a member of the Irascible Eighteen, Ouida says "Norman would talk him into stuff. [Ad] got into the black paintings and I think it made his career. Norman painted black and everybody got nervous—they thought, oh he's a revolutionary. But it was OK when Ad painted black! (*laughs*),"¹⁶ Even though Norman Lewis and his friend Ad Reinhardt sought to pursue the same artistic endeavor, Lewis's work bore more political weight as a direct consequence of his race and status as an African American in the United States.

In contrast to the level of artistic ability, knowledge, and spirit that Norman Lewis brought to the abstract expressionist movement, he experienced relatively little commercial

¹⁵ Theodore R. Johnson, "How American Racism Aids Our Adversaries." *The Washington Post*, September 17, 2017.

¹⁶ Ouida Lewis, "Ouida Lewis on Norman Lewis." Interview by Norman Kleeblatt. The Jewish Museum. February 5, 2015.

success during his lifetime. Lewis would experience little to none of the fame or fortune that came to certain other white artists participating in the abstract expressionist movement. Norman Lewis also watched during his career as he was surpassed by other African American painters in the institutional collecting of their artworks. As a result of his stylistic choices, Norman Lewis found himself without the African American arts community, who were in the midst of developing a visual culture that represented and presented their experience through more figural works. The lack of commercial and institutional recognition for Norman Lewis's paintings cannot be attributed to his artworks' lack of quality, aesthetic appeal, or importance. Instead, Lewis was subject to the political and social ramifications of his context as an African American artist working in the abstract expressionist style during the mid-twentieth century. Even though he did not experience the same levels of success as some of his contemporaries of the abstract expressionist movement, Lewis never gave up on his aesthetic pursuits in painting. In the conclusion of his 1968 oral history interview, Norman Lewis, then in the later part of his career, commented on his motivations for painting that still existed for him then:

I keep wondering with the new things that I see when am I going to paint, what am I going to do. And I don't know what I am going to do. Because I find that civil rights affects me; so what am I going to paint, what am I going to do. I don't know. And I am sure it will have nothing to do with civil rights directly but possibly I just hope that I can materialize something out of all this frustration as a black artist in America, an experience which is typical to something that would happen to a black cat in America. And I don't think white painters have any opportunity to do it. I think it has to come from black artists. And I am sure if I do succeed in painting a black experience I won't recognize it myself. I'd have to live with it many years and not destroy it because it is unfamiliar to me, but just do it and keep it. And see it around me and possibly, eventually it will become a part of me as a person and something that I welcome seeing.

MR. GHENT: Thank you, Norman Lewis. [END OF INTERVIEW.]

(Oral history interview with Norman Lewis, 1968 July 14. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution)

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