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Canvas politics: Norman Lewis and the art of Abstract Resistance

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CANVAS POLITICS: NORMAN LEWIS AND THE ART OF ABSTRACT RESISTANCE

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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CANVAS POLITICS: NORMAN LEWIS AND THE
ART OF ABSTRACT RESISTANCE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Purdue University

by

Mindy HM Tan

In Partial Fulfillment of the

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of

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West Lafayette, Indiana

To my greatest inspiration, my grandfather, 陳溪河,
and to my parents who made all this possible.

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This dissertation is undoubtedly about integrity, an undying commitment to the road seldom taken, and the triumphant joys of beating the odds; subjects I have learned a great deal about from my partner, Zach Medler. I am forever indebted to him.

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ABSTRACT

Tan, Mindy H. Ph. D., Purdue University, May 2015. Canvas Politics: Norman Lewis and the Art of Abstract Resistance. Major Professor: Leonard Harris.

Norman Lewis (1909-1979) is best remembered, perhaps erroneously, as the first African American Abstract Expressionist. In this dissertation, I argue that he is better suited as a Social Abstractionist and an Abstract Allusionist based on the life he lived, the work he produced, and his involvement in both black art and the Abstract Expressionist movement.

I begin by presenting a comprehensive overview of Lewis' biography and oeuvre. Painting from the 1930s to the late 1970s, his aesthetic sensibilities can be categorized into three distinct phases: 1) in the 1930s, answering to the call for a new presentation of the Negro, Lewis, under the guidance of philosopher Alain Locke, painted in a style commonly associated with Social Realism; 2) in his second phase starting in the mid-1940s, Lewis, disillusioned with the inefficiency of painting Social Realist works, began transitioning into a more abstract style of figuration; 3) in the final phase of his career from 1946 to the time of his death, Lewis worked on a series of fully abstracted paintings for which he became best known. During this time, Lewis developed his own symbolic language to present racially informed paintings.

My analysis will cover different ways to better understand Lewis' position and contribution to the post World War II art scene in America. To this end, I call him both a Social Abstractionist and an Abstract Allusionist. I posit that these terms give new contexts to Lewis' aesthetic, and demonstrate his innovations in fashioning his own complex cultural identity.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. Now, that formula may seem to threaten the collapse of an entire political world.

Alternatively, it may be greeted with extraordinary relief at the passing away of what at one time seemed to be a necessary fiction.

-- Stuart Hall¹

Benny Andrews' portrait of Norman W. Lewis features the artist looking dapper in a black blazer, white collared shirt, and a cigarette in his left hand (1985; figure 1.0). This is the way most of Lewis' friends and colleagues remember him—a dignified, talented, albeit stubborn man, whom Romare Bearden called “a loner.”² This “loner” is finally getting some recognition from the art world more than three decades after his death.³ His paintings are in the collection of prestigious institutions such as The Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington D.C., and the Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut. Likewise, his works have been the feature of fifteen solo shows from 1936 to 2009, and included in more than thirty group exhibitions.⁴ During his lifetime, Lewis won multiple awards and grants for his work, and also received the honor of representing the United States in the esteemed 1956 Venice Biennial. Yet despite the accolades, scholars and audiences alike are just now starting to learn about his significant position in American art history.⁵

In the past, art historians and critics have struggled with trying to fit Lewis' art into a particular genre. Some have complained that his painting style was “all over the place.”⁶ Other art historians mention that he was a victim of racial prejudice—he was not white, so he could not be part of the revered Abstract Expressionists.⁷ Ironically, there exists another group of critics and art historians who lament that his work lacked “black” enough subject matter to be considered a significant part of Black art. Lewis participated in shows with members from both groups but he would never fully be accepted by either.

His struggles to make it in the art world highlight the issues centered around canon formation and what one might term “the politics of culture.”

Art historian Ann Eden Gibson has addressed this perplexing conundrum in an unpublished essay, “Two Worlds: African American Abstraction in New York at Mid-Century.” Gibson argues that black artists who had participated in and contributed to white-identified artistic explorations— from exploring Primitivism in the 1920s and 1930s to Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s—have not yet achieved the same level of commercial success as their white colleagues. According to her, the four areas of conflict that have hindered black artists include social segregation, racial discrimination, the problem of Primitivism, and the burden of double consciousness.⁸ Lewis’ stepdaughter, Tarin Fuller, agreeing with Gibson’s arguments, also mentions that it was Lewis’ “racial identity that had prevented him from receiving due recognition for his achievement.”⁹

In *Canvas Politics: Norman Lewis and the Art of Abstract Resistance*, my objective is to re-write the importance of Lewis into the “blackstream” and mainstream histories of American art and in the process, provide a useful range of contexts in which to consider the social value of his art.¹⁰ The project is thus twofold: the first is to establish the significance of Norman Lewis by showing that his contribution to both the history of black art and Abstract Expressionism earned him a rightful spot amongst the popularly canonized artists; the second is to present the unique ways in which Lewis managed to create an aesthetic out of his blackness and his desire to paint in an abstract style.

“Abstract Resistance” thus refers to the outcome of the merger, as best evidenced in his Civil Rights painting series completed between the 1960s and 1970s.

After nearly seventy years, Abstract Expressionism has upheld its place in American art history and popular culture. Though artists popularly associated with the movement were never a group in any organized sense, the term “Abstract Expressionism,” as Jonathan Fineberg explains, could be commonly understood as a body of work by American artists Hans Hoffman, Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, and David Smith “which placed American art at the forefront of the international avant-garde for the first time.”¹¹ Likewise, David Craven understands Abstract Expressionists works as responses by artists to their environment and expressions of a marginalized and counter-cultural political ideology.¹² According to Stephen Polcari, “Most Abstract Expressionists . . . employ forms and themes such as vitalism, the primitive and archaic mind, ritual change, the continuity of the past and present, and spatial layering as a symbol of the unconscious.”¹³ What Fineberg, Craven, and Polcari’s analyses point to, is that Abstract Expressionism is a historical movement that cannot be understood outside its own context. To realize the full impact of its importance, we must study it within its own terms of reference and context. Therefore while modern art developments in postwar America may be cursorily explained as a search for individual identity imbedded within cultural and political ideologies in the country, more importantly for the purposes of this discussion, these developments placed art makers, such as Lewis, in the realm of subjective creation and gave legitimacy to artistic self expressions in ways which the traditional arts in the region did not. For the

purpose of this dissertation, I use the term “Abstract Expressionism” as a general designation for the group of loosely affiliated artists who may not have defined themselves as a movement, but whose work exhibited features such as spontaneity, and expressivity in spite of the lack of a cohesive style.¹⁴

Two of the important and influential art critics during this time were Clement Greenberg, and Harold Rosenberg. Acknowledging that the mid-20th century was a time of great change in the art world (and arguably throughout the world), Greenberg and his contemporary Rosenberg recognized that the American art world was in an unprecedented position to achieve dominance in cultural spheres that had never before been open. Greenberg wrote, “Modernist art develops out of the past without gap or break, and wherever it ends up it will never stop being intelligible in terms of the continuity of art.”¹⁵ For Greenberg, the essence of modernism rested in the division of the arts into discrete fields that could then be reduced to their most elemental qualities. Greenberg’s formalist values are however too simple and overlook the experimental ideas and social implications for this new art. Rosenberg, a much more subtle theorist than Greenberg, saw the development of modern art in the United States as a complicated and unsteady undertaking. Unlike Greenberg who theorized an unbroken connection between Europe and the United States, Rosenberg understood that the “discovery of *modern* art by Americans in the first decades of this century did not rid them of their old habit of misplacing themselves.”¹⁶ Rosenberg argued for a theory of American Modernism that would see the American artists not as inheritors of the past but as innovators able to solve new, modern problems with new solutions. Most early viewers of Abstract Expressionism subscribed to the term “Action Painting” coined by Rosenberg, to describe

the way the artists expressed themselves on canvas, paying little consideration to form or subject matter.¹⁷

Greenberg championed the art of Jackson Pollock, who became one of the most well known of the Abstract Expressionists artists. At the age of 37, Pollock received the honor of being the “Greatest Living Painter in the United States,” a title bestowed upon him in Dorothy Seiberling’s 1949 article in *Life*. On the cover of the August 8th, 1949 issue, Jackson appeared on the cover posed as a rebellious Western hero, representative of the new generation of artists. She hailed him the “shining new phenomenon of American art,”¹⁸ a view shared by many other notable art critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Lee Krasner, Pollock’s wife, acknowledges the profound effect of Sieberling’s article in *Life* on Pollock’s popularity. She said that,

It was the first instance of a mass circulation magazine reaching a public very innocent about modern art and telling them, in a featured article, about the significance of what was happening [in the New York art world after World War II, in the late 1940s].¹⁹

Pollock’s honor, however, came with its fair share of criticism too. Though for the most part Americans were readily receptive of his highly abstracted “drip” paintings, and proud of the recognition he brought to the American art scene, there were critics who spoke against his “violent” and seemingly chaotic art too. For example, Emily Genauer called his creations “a mop of tangled hair” that she gave her the “irresistible urge to comb out.”²⁰ Others called him names like “Jack the Dripper.” When asked if he thought there could be a purely American art, Pollock told an interviewer that,

The idea of an isolated American painting, so popular in this country during the 'thirties seems absurd to me, just as the idea of creating a purely American mathematics or physics would seem absurd ... And in another sense, the problem doesn't exist at all; or, if it did, would solve itself: An American is an American and his painting would naturally be qualified by the fact, whether he wills it or not. But the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any one country.²¹

Pollock's nonchalant statement may underplay the importance of the notion of "authenticity" (its assertion, or the fear of its loss) as what has always been most critically at stake in mid-20th century American art, but the attention focused on him testifies the Americans were indeed looking for a kind of art that could qualify as both authentically "modern" and "national." Since the late 1940s, art practices and art writings have revolved around these twin concerns with American-ness and modernity. Even as the definitions of "American" and "modern" continuously changed, what remained constant was the search for a way of collating both identities.

Pollock capitalized on his fame, but never totally assimilated into the realities of modern life. In 1956, when some of Pollock's works were featured in the *Modern Art in the United States* show in London, Pierre Restany recalls that

Paris was increasingly afraid of . . . New York. After the war the Parisian dealers thought they could reestablish the position of the 1920s and 1930s and wanted to repeat the hegemonic situation, but they gradually realized that New York was stronger. They organized an anti-American mafia-- Galerie de France, Charles Carpentier, Maeght, Leiris--[and] they created

an official mainstream, an abstract post-Cubism, . . . as a tool of war against New York. They tried to struggle against the U.S. by creating an official school of Paris.²²

While the Parisians were apprehensive of American modernity, Pollock played the ever-gracious host by warmly welcoming the increasing numbers of famous European artists in America. In an interview with Robert Motherwell, Pollock shared that he recognizes the fact that most important paintings in the last hundred years had been done by the French. He said, “the fact that the good European moderns are here now is very important, for they bring with them an understanding of the problems of modern painting.”²³ Pollock’s attitude brings to light the readiness of the Americans to accept foreign ideas and different outlooks on art.

While a great number of art historians have discussed the general importance and legacy of the American Abstract Expressionist movement, my argument aims to be more specific by drawing attention to the work and life of Norman Lewis as the example of an artist who has had to negotiate his contributions from the sidelines. With my research, I seek to locate the work of Lewis through the employment of interpretive strategies employed in art history, cultural studies, and Black aesthetics. These critical discourses allow for the idea that the concepts of representation and racial identification are dynamic. Blackness is not a stable entity, it is, as depicted by Lewis, always existing in tensions and conflict in a dialectical relationship with other groups. As guiding threads, I have made use of two interrelated themes--one historical, the other philosophical.

In the following chapter, I begin by outlining Lewis’ biography and proceed to provide an overall chronology and aesthetic trajectory for his work. I identify Lewis’

formal and thematic developments through his artistic career and will discuss several of his important series of paintings that illuminate his experience of being a black artist in postwar America.

Chapter three attends to several of Lewis' paintings from the 1940s through 1960s that shed light on his understanding of race and his personal experience with racism. Lewis intertwines the spontaneous act of painting and the conscious forming of content – content largely related to race matters, at public and private levels. In this chapter, I also focus on the role of politics in Lewis' art. As early as 1946, Lewis wrote a philosophical thesis in which he remarked of his own aesthetic progression that he withdrew from “an over-emphasis on tradition” that treated art “as reproduction or as convenient but secondary medium for propaganda.”²⁴ Twenty years later, in 1966, during the completion of a group of paintings bearing titles charged with the intimations of Civil Rights activities, Lewis reiterated his philosophical position during a group interview for *ArtNews*: “I am not interested in an illustrative statement that merely mirrors some of the social conditions ... Political and social aspects should not be the primary concern: esthetic ideas should have preference.”²⁵ I will use a selection of Lewis' paintings from 1944-1977 to show how Lewis' artworks may engage in relationships with political positions while not engaging in propaganda. I will also discuss his political activism that took place outside of his paintings.

Chapter four opens with the discussion of the relationship between the philosopher Alain Locke and Norman Lewis. I proceed to discuss the concept of Black aesthetics as conceptualized by Locke and understood by Lewis. Locke believed the media of literary, visual, and performing arts were the best means of communicating the

black experience to a wider public.²⁶ In as early as 1916, Locke was already writing on the idea of racial aesthetics, encouraging African American artists to look to their lost heritage as inspiration for their art.²⁷ Locke's ideas on race and culture, and of the universalism of art profoundly affected Lewis, who famously claimed he didn't want his art to be understood in terms of his blackness. Instead of "color-blindness," Locke and Lewis advocated a dynamic type of art that transcended the color barrier, one that drew on interracial diversity and would produce new stereotypes to replace the old.

In 1939, Locke published a short piece in *Opportunity* entitled "Advance on the Art Front," in which he singled out the arts as the most important arena of civil rights activism. He described the invigoration of African American at the end of the 1930s as "a courageous cavalry move over difficult ground in the face of obstacles worse than powder and shell – silence and uncertainty."²⁸ Locke profoundly influenced Lewis, who shared the belief that this advance on the art front proved the arts could be effective in arguing the case of black social, political, economic, and cultural equality. It is in this context that I discuss Lewis' role as a Social Abstractionist.

Finally in chapter five, I discuss in detail Lewis' involvement with Abstract Expressionism. American painter, Barnett Newman, who was regarded by many critics as a part of the Abstract Expressionists, once remarked that the artists of his generation, felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world devastated by a great depression and a fierce world war, and it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of paintings that we were doing--flowers, reclining nudes and people playing the cello . . . This was our moral crisis in relation to what to paint.²⁹

His statement reveals that the Abstract Expressionists, including Lewis, were aware of their avant-garde positions, and the movement on the whole prided itself as an innovative and thoughtful gathering of different styles that characterized postwar American art. However, what truly sets Lewis apart from the other artists during the postwar period is the added burden of racial prejudice he had to overcome. Contrary to the prevailing discourse of insisting on Lewis' rightful membership in the exclusive Abstract Expressionist club, I offer up the concept of Lewis as an Abstract Allusionist who used words and symbols to communicate with his viewers. Giving Lewis his own designations (Social Abstractionist as well as Abstract Allusionist) allows for a fuller, more accurate, and robust understanding of the work he was doing.

Notes

¹ Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 444.

² Susan Stedman, in discussion with the author, February 2012. In an oral interview with Susan Stedman, Lewis’ personal friend, she recounted to me that Lewis took great pride in his dressing and tailored several of his own suits. Lewis told interviewer Vivian Browne, “I like to dress well and look nice, so when I would win some money, I’d buy a couple of suits” See Norman Lewis, interview by Vivian Browne, August 29, 1974, transcript reprinted in *Artists and Influence* 18 (1999). The complete original interview is held in the Hatch-Billops Collections, New York City.

³ Lewis says “[Romare Bearden] calls me a loner because I always have been by myself. It is only because, I guess, I feel very inept so that I would rather make my mistakes alone.” See Norman Lewis, “Oral History Interview with Norman Lewis, 1968, July 14,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Available: <http://www.aaasi.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/lewis68.htm> [Accessed April 15, 2009].

⁴ For a list of selected one person and group exhibitions, see *Norman Lewis: Abstract Expressionist Drawings, 1945-1978*, exh. cat. (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2009), 40-41.

⁵ For a complete list of Norman Lewis’ “Selected One Person Exhibitions” see *Norman Lewis: Pulse*, exh. cat., (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2009), 66.

⁶ Bill Hodges, “Forward,” *Norman W. Lewis: The Second Transition, 1947-1951*, exh. cat., (New York: Bill Hodges Gallery, 1994).

⁷ Curator Corinne Jennings posits “It could be posed that his work was overlooked because of his active political involvement [on the left]; but in the final analysis, given the place and time in which he lived, there is the overwhelming fact that his race and the color of his skin took precedence and caused due recognition to be denied.” See Corinne Jennings, “Foreword,” *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, exh. cat. (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 8.

⁸ Ann E. Gibson, “Two Worlds: African American Abstraction in New York at Mid-Century,” in *The Search for Freedom: African American Abstract Painting, 1945-1975* (New York: Kenkeleba House, Inc. 1991).

⁹ Juliette Harris, “Norman Lewis—Tarin Fuller: A Stormy, Very Loving Relation,” *International Review of African American Art* 20.3 (2005): 12.

¹⁰ Elsa Honig Fine categorizes “mainstream” art as conforming to “acceptable international art styles,” and “non-objective” work. In contrast, “blackstream” characterizes the work of artists who respond “emotionally and intellectually to the political turmoil of which he is a part of the political statement painted in the styles and techniques of contemporary art.” She adds that such work “differs little from the art of white artists responding to the traumas of modern living.” See Elsa Honig Fine, “Mainstream, Blackstream and the Black Art Movement,” *Art Journal* 30.4 (Summer 1971), 374.

¹¹ Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), 31.

¹² David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹³ Stephen Polcari, “Abstract Expressionism: ‘New and Improved’,” *Art Journal* 47.3 (Autumn 1988): 176.

¹⁴ For more on the history of Abstract Expressionism, see Debra Bricker Balken, *Abstract Expressionism*, (London: Tate, 2005); Ellen Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); and Joan Marter and David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context*, (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *New Literary History* 3.1 (Autumn 1971): 78.

¹⁶ Harold Rosenberg, “Parable of American Painting,” in *The Tradition of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 17.

¹⁷ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* 51 (September 1952): 22-23, 48-50.

¹⁸ Dorothy Sieberling. “Jackson Pollock: Is He The Greatest Living Painter in the United States?” *Life* 27, no.6 (August 8, 1949): 42-45. Reprinted in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 63.

¹⁹ Bruce Glaser. “Jackson Pollock: An Interview with Lee Krasner,” *Arts Magazine* 41, no. 6 (April 1967): 36-39. Reprinted in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 29.

²⁰ Emily Genauer. “This Week in Art.” *New York World-Telegram* 81, no. 185 (February 7, 1949): 19. Reprinted in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 62.

²¹ Robert Motherwell, "Jackson Pollock: A Questionnaire," *Arts and Architecture* 61, no. 2 (February 1944): 14. Reprinted in *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles and Reviews*, ed. Pepe Karmel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999).

²² Quoted in Jeremy Lewison, "Jackson Pollock and the Americanization of Europe," in *Jackson Pollock: New Approaches*, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999), 219. This is part of an excerpt from Lewison's conversation with Pierre Restany on November 5, 1997.

²³ Robert Motherwell, "Jackson Pollock: A Questionnaire," 14.

²⁴ Norman Lewis, "Thesis 1946," in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, ed. Corinne Jennings, exh. cat., (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 63.

²⁵ Jeanne Siegel, "Why Spiral?" *ArtNews* 65:5 (September 1966): 48-49.

²⁶ Jeffrey Stewart, *The Critical Temper of Alain Locke: A Selection of His Essays on Art and Culture* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), xvii-xviii.

²⁷ Alain Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," *The New Negro* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

²⁸ Alain Locke, "Advance on the Art Front," *Opportunity* 17 (May, 1939): 132-36.

²⁹ Barnett Newman, quoted in H. H. Arnason, Marla F. Prather and Daniel Wheeler, "Abstract Expressionism and the New American Sculpture," *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Photography* (New York: Prentice Hall Inc., 1998), 437.

CHAPTER TWO
BIOGRAPHY AND AESTHETIC TRAJECTORIES

It's like you are not like everyone else. You look different, so you bring something of yourself. Or you try to do things to yourself that evoke that kind of curiosity. I think a painting has the same basis of existence.

-- Norman Lewis¹

Norman Wilfred Lewis died unexpectedly on August 27, 1979. At the time of his death, he was seventy and a well-accomplished artist, having exhibited both nationally and internationally, participated in several distinguished group shows at museums, received numerous honorable mentions for his art, and multiple awards for his paintings.² In addition, to all his accolades, he was a part of the prestigious Willard Gallery in New York from 1946 to 1964, a feat that was rare for African American artists in the post-war era. Marian Willard, founder and director of the gallery, was much respected for her “independent eye and her resistance to art world trends and fashions.”³ According to Dorothy C. Miller, Willard “just showed the work of artists she like, and those she liked turned out to be important.”⁴ During Lewis’ time at the Willard Gallery, he had a total of eight solo shows that were favorably reviewed in major art publications.⁵ In the later part of his life, Lewis also received an Individual Artist Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (1972) and a fellowship from the John Solomon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (1975).⁶ Yet despite these trailblazing accomplishments and critical recognition, today, he is mostly remembered for being the “forgotten” member of the white-identified American Abstract Expressionist canon, absent from the art movement he helped establish.

Lewis was born in Harlem on July 23, 1909. He was the middle child, the second of three sons. His parents were both immigrants from Bermuda, and, for a while, Lewis and his brothers would consider themselves more Caribbean-American than African American.⁷ As a child, Lewis’ interest in art was always discouraged by his father who thought art was “a white man’s profession” as well as a “starving profession.”⁸ In an interview with Henri Ghent, Lewis said “Art was something extremely foreign” in his

household while he was growing up.⁹ His parents were more invested in their eldest son, Saul's, interest in music because it paid well.¹⁰ Lewis' exposure to art came in the form of commercial design and architecture classes he took in high school.¹¹ After high school, Lewis worked at a series of jobs as a page boy, elevator operator, a presser, tailor, and dressmaker and traveled through much of South America as a seaman. Of these jobs, Lewis said, "I have sustained myself in whatever the moment and has been necessary to just exist."¹²

In 1933, Lewis met artist Augusta Savage. She was one the leading sculptors in New York during the 1930s and 1940s, a leader of the Harlem art community most of her life, and a well-known community organizer.¹³ Lewis became one of her first students when he started working with Savage at her basement studio known then as the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts.¹⁴ Even though he also attended Columbia University and the John Reed Club Art School, Lewis referred to his collection of art books as his "real education."¹⁵ In many of his interviews, Lewis often insisted that he was a self-taught artist.¹⁶ He read voraciously and learned from books that he bought with the money he won from gambling.¹⁷ In Joan Murray Weissman's catalogue of the books Lewis owned in 1950 were titles that varied from books on other artists (such as Matisse, Paul Klee, Paul Gauguin, Salvador Dali, Van Gogh, and Picasso), to exhibition catalogues for shows such as *American Realists and Magic Realists*, *19th Century Painting—American and European*, and *Watercolors American*. Lewis also read books by James Weldon Johnson, Anais Nin, Alain Locke, Ralph Ellison, and Albert C. Barnes.¹⁸

Lewis did not always get along with Savage.¹⁹ He would often exasperate Savage by challenging her teaching and criticizing her work, telling her "she was a modeler and

not a sculptor” in spite of her reputation as a renowned and well-respected artist.²⁰ Yet even though their relationship was oftentimes turbulent, they worked together to have the Works Progress Administration extend its arts project to Harlem.²¹ Under Savage’s mentorship, Lewis joined the Artists Union, the Harlem Artists Guild, and also helped found the Harlem Community Art Center.

In the course of his lifelong art career, Lewis was a colleague of many well-known creative intellectuals. At the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts, he met Roland Hayes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Carl Van Vechten.²² He became acquainted with Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, Franz Kline, the eventual “leaders” of the Abstract Expressionist movement, through his involvement in the Federal Art Program (FAP) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s.²³ In 1934, as a part of the “306 Group,” an artists’ salon that met in the studio of artists Charles Alston and Henry Bannarn and dancer Ad Bates, Lewis met Romare Bearden, Ralph Ellison, Jacob Lawrence, Orson Welles, Alain Locke, and Richard Wright. Lewis became friends with Mark Tobey, Lyonel Feininger, Richard Lippold, and David Smith when he was a stable artist at the Willard Gallery. During his travels to Europe, Lewis met José Sert, Joan Miró, and Pablo Picasso. Yet according to his friend Julian Euell, Lewis was never one to name drop.²⁴

From the beginning of his career to the early 1940s, Lewis, like most of his American contemporaries, painted in a Social Realist manner, choosing to capture “the exploitation of blacks in New York City and America. . . . people being dispossessed, lynchings, and later fascism.”²⁵ In 1934, Lewis’ received an honorable mention for his 1933 painting, *Johnny The Wanderer* (figure 2.0), which represented the Savage Studio

of Arts and Crafts in the “Exhibition of Free Adult Art Schools of New York City” show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Of the show, a reviewer in the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote,

An exhibition of Negro painting, sculpture and wood carving opened last night in the auditorium of the Y.W.C.A. at 144 West 138th Street, displaying 150 items by art students in the Augusta Savage Studio . . . The artists have confined themselves to subjects connected with their own race and have not attempted to ape the schools of their white colleagues. There are pictures of dice players, women dancers doing the “Lindy Hop” and a multitude of other Harlem scenes with which the artists obviously are intimately acquainted . . .²⁶

In Lewis’ painting, he depicts urban poverty and homelessness as a man whose face is obscured by his hat, attempting to keep warm in the snow by a small tin can fire. Other paintings with similar themes of daily life include *Washerwoman* (1936; figure 2.1) and *Dispossessed* (1940; figure 2.2). In *Washerwoman*, Lewis depicts a woman hunched over a washtub, with an extreme perspective into the foreground. Completed around the same time as *Yellow Hat* (figure 2.5), Lewis makes some of the same allusions to Diego Rivera, a fellow WPA artist, in formal approach and color palette. In many of this series of paintings, Lewis positions his figures so their gazes are obscured, acknowledging the subservient role of blacks in American society; likewise, deliberately increasing the physical and psychic distance between subject and the viewer.

Through his extensive collection of art books, Lewis familiarized himself with the work of European painters such as Paul Cézanne, and El Greco. Cézanne, a forerunner of

modern art influenced not only Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, but was also important to the Fauvists painters and the Abstract Expressionists. His influence on Lewis is evident in two watercolor landscape paintings that Lewis completed while teaching, as part of the WPA, in Greensboro, North Carolina. Lewis channels Cézanne in *Untitled* (1936; figure 2.3) and *Two Barns* (1937; figure 2.4), by structuring a pictorial scene composed of shapes such as cylinders, cones and spheres. Like Cézanne, Lewis used parallel, hatched brushstrokes to build up masses of different shapes and sizes that come together to form a landscape.

Lewis also studied the paintings of the European modernist painters who were influenced by African art. Though he was not interested in using African motifs in his own work, he was curious to see how it had influenced the work of artists such as Pablo Picasso and Amedeo Modigliani.²⁷ Lewis' 1936 painting, *The Yellow Hat* (figure 2.5) is the result of his study of the European artists and personal interest in issues relating to racial oppression and exploitation. In this painting, Lewis depicts a seated woman with her face obscured by her hat. Using a theme similar to his earlier work, *Johnny the Wonderer*, her identity is effaced, but rather than a real environment, the background is nondescript shaded shapes. The focus of the painting is on the individual shapes that both create the figure and flatten the overall image.

During the war years, Lewis worked as a shipfitter at Kaiser Shipyard in Vancouver, British Columbia. There, he was given “useless, demoralizing tasks” and treated with disrespect from white welders who were unwilling to work with him.²⁸ After receiving the threat of physical violence, Lewis returned to New York City in 1943 and

began working as a teacher at the George Washington Carver School. He would later comment on his experience at the shipyard saying,

I quit that job because I couldn't stand the discrimination. Negroes couldn't get into the union and 300 were fired because they were not members. Then there were too many accidents, strange accidents where Negroes got hurt and there was too much intimidation and it was hard for a Negro to be anything except a laborer.²⁹

Lewis' experience with racial discrimination while working in Washington deeply affected him and altered his thinking about protest painting. As a result, he started to distance himself from Social Realist themes in his work.

By 1946, Lewis was starting to question the validity of protest paintings and "the limitations which come under the names 'African Idiom,' 'Negro Idiom' or 'Social Painting.'" ³⁰ In his artistic pursuits, Lewis wanted to "be publicly first an artist and incidentally, a Negro," because "the excellence of his work will be the most effective blow against stereotype and the most irrefutable proof of the artificiality of stereotype in general."³¹ Later, in his 1949 Guggenheim Fellowship application, Lewis further explains,

I, too, struggled single-mindedly to express social conflict through my painting. However gradually I came to realize that certain things are true: the development of one's aesthetic abilities suffers by such an emphasis; the content of truly creative work must be inherently aesthetic or the work becomes merely another form of illustration; therefore the goal of the artist must be aesthetic development and, in a universal sense, to make in

his own way some contribution to culture. Further, I realized that my own greatest effectiveness would not come by painting racial difficulties but by excelling as an artist first of all.³²

In his quest to be a more effective artist, Lewis was determined to leave Social Realism behind. However, he did not find much support when he transitioned from Social Realist painting to abstraction. According to Bearden and Henderson, “Part of Lewis’s inner conflict stemmed from the fact that nearly all his friends continued to think and work in terms of social protest painting,” while Lewis became increasingly convinced that

a painting is made up of shapes whether they are recognizable or not. The whole composition can be very beautiful—not even knowing what you are doing—if you dare. You suddenly become aware, after years of painting, that . . . if you arrange those shapes in any interesting fashion that might be visually stimulating, it doesn’t have to be a form that you know.³³

Lewis, at this stage of his career, was drawn to abstraction as a way to assert his own creativity and individuality. Bearden and Henderson suggest, “As a socially conscious individual, he had been under heavy pressure to paint pictures that expressed a sociopolitical viewpoint,” and that way of painting “left no room for him to express his own feelings and concerns that were not part of the message of the moment.”³⁴ Lewis’ insistence on painting in an abstract style ended up isolating him from most of his old artist friends and young black students who perceived “an involvement with Abstract Expressionism was a desertion of black people.”³⁵

Music, jazz in particular, became a constant source of inspiration, a frequently recurring subject matter, and a strong influence on Lewis' work during his transition from Social Realism to Abstract Expressionism. Art historian Richard Powell introduced the term, "blues aesthetic" to describe the art produced by black artists that does not specifically address black experience, but nonetheless originates from a shared experience of being black in America.³⁶ For Powell, "blues aesthetic" places black music and culture at the heart of the African American experience of which black art is a product of.³⁷ Lewis both embodied and performed Powell's "blues aesthetics." Lewis' older brother, Saul, is an accomplished musician who performed with Count Basie and Chick Webb, but beyond that, Lewis also visited many live music venues that were within walking distance of his studio in Harlem.³⁸ Speaking of Lewis and his love for music, Julian Euell said

His library and record collection was substantial as well as impressive. His taste in music ran from blues to jazz to symphonies. He often played the blues on the piano for me. Although he listened to a wide range of music, his heart and soul were in the blues and jazz.³⁹

In many paintings from the period, Lewis used multiple continuous lines to replicate and reimagine the exhilarating experience of a jazz performance. An earlier work from the period, *Jazz Club* (1945; figure 2.6), shows him experimenting with ideas of color and shape by intermingling musicians, instruments, dancers, drinks and lights of a jazz club. When he began developing his signature calligraphic approach, he moved from abstracting the scene and began painting like the musicians perform with layers of lines moving through the performance. In 1947's *Twilight Sounds* (figure 2.7), meandering

lines across the canvas mimic a saxophone climbing through a scale. Another soloing instrument weaves through in red. There are dark spaces that feel like bass drum kicks and bright color spaces like horn announcements in the background. Lewis is not necessarily painting jazz music; he is more a jazz composer, improvising and riffing off of what he has already put on the canvas in the same way musicians play off of what each other is doing.

The music-inspired work by Lewis also inspired a new approach and overall scheme for his paintings. In *Street Musicians* (1945; figure 2.8), *Bassist* (1946; figure 2.9), and other musically themed paintings from the period, Lewis experiments with cubism, merging the musician and the instrument until they become segmenting, abstracted shapes of movement and sound on canvas. Similarly *Jazz Band* (1948; figure 2.10) and *Street Music* (1950; figure 2.11) are jazz-infused, energetic paintings that introduce Lewis' brand of characters. The lines and shapes in both paintings suggest a gathering of musicians, merging with their instruments and intersecting with each other. Lewis creates a jazz melody of his own with the vibrant lines and deep rhythmic black shapes.

Lewis' use of lines took on a calligraphic resonance the more he experimented with abstraction. In *Roller Coaster* (1946; figure 2.12) Lewis' black, red and yellow ink lines meander up, down and through the paper, with cross hatching scattering throughout to indicate the tracks of the roller coaster. He balances his composition by filling in shapes created by the intersecting lines with color washes. Correspondingly, in *Metropolitan Crowd* (1946; figure 2.13) Lewis layers together repeating lines of reds blues, yellows and whites on a washed out black background. The lines are all a similar

thickness indicating the use of a single brush to lay down multiple layers and blend together colors that imply the blur of moving people, cars, and lights of New York city. These same lyrical lines would metamorphosize into Lewis' trademark "little figures," and employed in a group of work art historian Ann Eden Gibson calls the "Ritual paintings."⁴⁰ In a 1973 interview with Harry Henderson, Lewis mentioned his fascination with crowds of people, and the nature of human behavior, saying

Human beings are almost like ants, you know, and you notice them going into Macy's, everybody goes in the same goddamn doorway waiting for the revolving door yet nobody takes the initiative to open the other door which exists there. . . . And I used to paint pictures like this about how people followed each other and the movement of people and yet it was always the individual that was against the masses. I started that way just trying to convey this movement of people.⁴¹

Lewis' "little figures," which he explained as "humanity in terms of the space in which you live in," were present in his paintings from the late 1940s, to the 1970s.⁴²

Referencing the Flemish Renaissance painters the Brueghel brothers, Lewis called this method of painting the masses "meticulous."⁴³ *Ring Around the Rosie* (1948; figure 2.14) is an early example of Lewis' use of the "little figures" motif. In this painting the loosely drawn calligraphic figures are arranged in a circle emerging from a washed out center of the painting. The layers of wash, painted in and then wiped out, create an ethereal context for the fragile black lines of his figures. Other "Ritual" works in which Lewis uses these "little figures" explore the idea of a procession include many paintings from his Civil Rights series, *Congregation* (1950; figure 2.15), *Marching* (1959; figure 2.16),

Promenade (1961; figure 2.17), and *Abstract Procession* (1978; figure 2.18). As evidenced in the “Ritual” series, these “little figures” eventually became “less and less realistically human looking ... Instead of individual masses and showing a lot of heads it was just a blob of black paint or white paint ...”⁴⁴ In paintings such as *Boccio* (1957; figure 2.19) and *Playtime* (1966; figure 2.20), abstract forms are created from basic color shapes and brushstrokes, suggesting crowds of people in colorful clothes. The line work that exemplified this motif in his early works has transformed into layers of thicker paint and punchier strokes of color, but the original technique is still evident in the layout of the shapes and the method by which they all intersect and overlay.

In addition to music, Lewis often turned to nature as a recurring theme in his oeuvre. He writes,

Nature plays an integral role in the life of an artist. It is both conscious and subconscious, but creativity is not a concept. It is a very active state of being, lying somewhere in the labyrinth of memory and insight. Nature is left more to accident and not controlled, nature in itself is beautiful. An artist is a person with highly visual perceptions. His mind’s eye orders rather than takes orders. The painter express his visual feelings rather than his emotions. The result is a visual mood experience, a compulsion to express the pulse and spirit of the time in which he lives.⁴⁵

He “constantly sought out, studied, enjoyed, and probed relationships in nature in the midst of Harlem. Large tanks of goldfish crowded his studio along with exotic, often huge plants from all over the world.”⁴⁶ Bearden and Henderson also mention the allure of “deep feelings of wonder at the lyric beauty and rhythm of nature – the rising and falling

of the sea, the sun's great arch, the mysterious comings and goings of night" as an influence on Lewis' paintings.⁴⁷ Early on, Lewis took an interest in the work of J. M. W. Turner and Claude Monet "because he thought that while their work was based on nature, it expressed their feelings rather than literal observations."⁴⁸ Utilizing this same concept, Lewis filled his 1950 solo show at the Willard Gallery with a majority of nature-inspired paintings. Some of those works included *Winter Branches* (1946; figure 2.21), and *Fire Flower* (1949; figure 2.22) where Lewis's brush techniques and paint layering mimic the way a plant would grow by building on each previous branch or petal.

Another frequent subject that Lewis explored on canvas was night. Lewis' partner Joan Murray Weissman (1945-56 to 1952) recalled that Lewis "really loved night; he loved going out at night, and he loved walking at night, and he loved the sky with stars in it, and he loved lights. He was a night kind of guy."⁴⁹ Night, and the solar system were common themes in Lewis' paintings. Colored forms in the painting *Tenement* (1948; figure 2.23) emerge from the black background referencing the lighted windows of tenement buildings. The perspective in the colored shapes point to viewing from a tenement window as opposed to viewing from the ground. He also painted the *Arctic Night*, once in 1949 (figure 2.24), and then again in 1951-1952 (figure 2.25). The moon, in particular, occupied a special place in his night paintings. To that end, he painted *Moon Madness* (figure 2.26), *By Moonlight* (figure 2.27), and *Night Vision* (figure 2.28) in 1952. In the mid-1950s, Lewis started to use a more impressionistic brushstroke to capture the appearance of light in darkness. This style of painting can be seen in 1956's compositions of *Nightlight* (figure 2.29), *Night Walk* (figure 2.30), *Night Walker #2* (figure 2.31), and *Nocturne* (figure 2.32), and 1959's *New Moon* (figure 2.33). In these

paintings, Lewis' paint is very thin, layered and rhythmic. His dry brush technique builds translucent layers of black to produce an array of tonality within his repeating shapes.

Though he has been largely excluded from the cultural legacy of Abstract Expressionism, Lewis believed himself to be a “contributing force of the movement.”⁵⁰ In fact, in 1950, he was the only African American artist invited to participate in a three-day long roundtable discussions at Studio 35 to help define the Abstract Expressionist movement.⁵¹ Most of the artists present were ready and eager to distance themselves from a modernist European aesthetic and forge for themselves a language of universality and a new type of “aesthetic purity.”⁵² Many of them wanted to focus on the medium, the autonomy of the artist, and the act of creating. Public reception and acceptance, according to most of the artists present, were inconsequential. Lewis was drawn to the idea of the freedom to express, but, unlike many of his colleagues, he thought it was important to maintain the continuity of the relationship between the artist, the artwork, and the audience.⁵³ Bearden and Henderson suggest that it was Lewis' concern of “what relationship their art should have to the outside world—to people, the public,” that set him apart from the other artists.⁵⁴ Later, when asked about Lewis' involvement with the Abstract Expressionists, Lewis' partner (from 1946 to 1952), Joan Murray Weissman, said “they [the abstract expressionists] liked Norman; they were glad he was there. But it was a strange attitude: what was he doing there? He should be painting lynchings.”⁵⁵

Lewis' shared the Abstract Expressionists' interest in color and paint. He was a master colorist. In an interview, he told fellow artist Vivian Browne: “I think I learned about color from reading.”⁵⁶ When she asked if there was one particular artist who

influenced his knowledge of color, Lewis mentioned Van Gogh, Modigliani, Picasso, and Matisse.⁵⁷

In his description of his 1953 painting *Migrating Birds* (figure 2.34), Lewis said, “It was painted very thin and I made a special ground for it so that it would dry quickly. I played dots over dots, only partially covering, so that there was a third white—a more intense white.”⁵⁸ This painting beat works by Picasso, Matisse, Chagall, Roberto Matta, and Andrew Wythe to win the prestigious Popularity Prize at the Carnegie Institute International Exhibition in Pittsburg. Many in the art world considered the award to be “an indication that American people accepted Abstract Expressionism.”⁵⁹ Lewis had thought that his win would translate into a higher demand for his work. Yet in spite of this success, Lewis could not rely on painting alone to survive. In 1957, he filed an application for a taxi driver license. In a supporting affidavit, Lewis admitted “During the last year I have found it impossible to get odd jobs and the sales of my paintings have fallen off so I have no income and I am jobless.”⁶⁰ In a 1974 interview with Vivian Browne, Lewis described his experience at the Willard Gallery this way:

This was a good gallery. For the white artists there it was financially successful, but not for me. There is a hell of a lot of discrimination because black artists don’t have this intercourse of meeting people. . . . I don’t enjoy half the success of people like de Kooning. I’ve been in shows with Picasso, but I don’t have that intercourse.⁶¹

In another interview, he told Henri Ghent

She [Marian Willard] very innocently, I think, thought like I did. Art is devoid of prejudice and then some fifteen years later she says to me, “I

know I have failed you.” What that implied was it was something lacking in promotion or my physical presence to certain environments, you know, rather than being an artist, I am an oddity.⁶²

The lack of opportunities to be around art patrons was just one aspect of Lewis failure to sell his work. He was, at that time, also unaware that many of his colleagues were more successful because they were actively pursuing critics to write about their art and dealers to represent their work. Lewis thought “all that was necessary was hard work,” so he “worked like a fool” and waited for things to happen for him.⁶³ Lewis would later also tell Henri Ghent: “I don’t think any black artist makes a living. Despite his prominence or what he contributes to American culture it is always sort of second class.”⁶⁴

Lewis produced steadily throughout the 1950s. His painting *Cathedral* (1950; figure 2.35) was chosen to be included in the exhibition “American Artists Paint the City” at the Art Institute of Chicago, which represented the United States at the Venice Biennale. Other artists who participated in this show included Jackson Pollock, Mark Tobey, Franz Kline, Edward Hopper, Jacob Lawrence, and Georgia O’Keefe. This show, revisionist art historians argue, was essential in solidifying American’s dominance in the art world in the mid-1950s.⁶⁵

In the decade that followed, Lewis’ paintings reveal an increasingly agitated attitude towards the racial tension bubbling up around the country. As a direct response to the sit-in that happened at Alabama State University in 1960, Lewis produced *Alabama* (1960; figure 2.36) and *Alabama II* (1969; figure 2.37). Regardless of the common practice for Abstract Expressionists to leave their work untitled or to vaguely title them with numbers, Lewis titled most of his work from this period. For him, non-

representation did not also have to mean non-referential; titles were a way to conduct a creative dialogue with his audience. Other significant paintings with politically-charged titles that were also produced during this time include *Post Mortem* (1964; figure 2.38) and *American Totem* (figure 2.39). In this series of paintings, Lewis moves away from the flimsy thin calligraphic black lines of his “little figures” and uses a thicker, punchier brushstroke to create interlocking shapes that emerge from or recede into the bold solid background color. Groups of interlocking shapes and brushstrokes in tones of white are set in a black space. The contrast allows the viewer to make out figures and faces, and, along with the suggestive titles, this approach blurred the line between subject matter and pure abstraction, reference and representation.

In 1963, Lewis became the first president of the Spiral, an art group that consisted of fourteen other black painters: Charles Alston, Emma Amos, Romare Bearden, Calvin Douglass, Perry Ferguson, Reginald Gammon, Alvin Hollingsworth, Felrath Hines, William Majors, Richard Mayhew, Earl Miller, Merton Simpson, Hale Woodruff, and James Yeargens who had all gathered to discuss the role and responsibility of black artists in the struggle for Civil Rights, and the place of black artists in the art world at large.⁶⁶ The name “Spiral” was chosen by Woodruff for the Archimedian Spiral “an emblem of progression, onward and upward forever” and a metaphor for the turbulent social environment.⁶⁷ It also signified the coming together of different artistic styles to achieve one common goal. Regarding Spiral, Lewis told interviewer Henri Ghent that

there was a tremendous need for this kind of group. A lot of things had

been happening to me which I didn’t quite understand. Why such a

reception from the public that my projection on the American scene wasn't similar to people like de Kooning, Barry Newman, and even the lesser ones. And I noticed that people like Hale Woodruff, Romi Bearden, Charles White, Ernie Crichtlow, Jacob Lawrence, these people who have been painting for a long time and have tremendous things to say and yet they were always being sidetracked. And a group of us got together to discuss the problems, the fact that we had existed for quite a while and that one of things always constant was the economic thing. Despite the fact that while their work was no worse than anybody else, that even the worst white artist got along better. . . . there is a need for this kind of organization and Romie, Crichtlow and myself have tried to keep it going to pressure the white press and black cats to give us the necessary publicity that we need to enhance ourselves.⁶⁸

For the one and only group show that Spiral organized, *Spiral: Works in Black and White*, Lewis contributed the painting *Processional* (1964; figure 2.40), a work to commemorate the March on Washington and other Civil Rights demonstrations. According to Thomas Lawson, this painting “carries the most directly political statement he has made in paint since the early forties.”⁶⁹

Regarding the fight for Civil Rights, Lewis told Henri Ghent, 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 I just hope that I can materialize something out of all this frustration as a black artist in America.⁷⁰

Though *Spiral* only lasted three years, its impact in the black arts community was significant. After *Spiral* dissolved, Lewis, Bearden, and Crichtlow acquired a thirty thousand dollar grant to start Cinque Gallery in 1968 as a space for younger black artist to show.⁷¹

For much of the 1960s, Lewis' paintings were spirited and intense. His work from the mid-1970s, were contrastingly serene and mystical. Art historian, Ann Eden Gibson, has taken to calling this particular group of paintings the "Atmospherics."⁷² Gibson further divides "Atmospherics" into four subcategories: 1) Atmospheric, 2) Dark Vistas, 3) Black series, and 4) Seachange series. Many paintings from this period feature obscured, foggy space and ethereal forms painted very thinly using masking techniques. Inspired by a fishing excursion off Long Island, Lewis recalls "it was foggy, and the sky and water catalyzed so that you could not see the point where they fell together. Fog, this ethereal filter, fascinated me. It became the dominant undertone in much of my painting then."⁷³ *Green Envy* (1975; figure 2.41), for example, is a darkened space with series elliptical forms emerging from what seems like a distant point of light. Similarly, *Seachange XIV* (1976; figure 2.42) and *Ebb Tide* (1975; figure 2.43) are composed with ethereal swirls of bluish-white orbs emerging from a dark background. The edges of the shapes do not consist of lines, Lewis, rather, creates the spiraling forms using masking and dry brush fades. This allows the highly contrasting forms to seemingly emerge from the space.

Lewis painted for nearly fifty years. When he died at the age of seventy, he had amassed a huge number of paintings and “thousands of sketches, drawings, and delicate oils on paper.”⁷⁴ Lewis may not have made it into many mainstream accounts of American postwar art history, but his memory is kept well and alive by African American art historians.⁷⁵ In 1976, Thomas Lawson organized the only retrospective of Lewis’ works while he was still alive. The exhibit, *Norman Lewis: A Retrospective*, included sixty-three works spanning the years 1933-76 and was shown at the Graduate School and University Center of the City College of New York. More than a decade later, Corrine Jennings and Joe Overstreet organized an extensive exhibition of Lewis’ work at Kenkeleba House. Since then, Lewis’ paintings have been shown regularly throughout the United States. The Jewish Museum in New York City is the latest host of some fifty works of Lewis, in a show titled *From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945-1952*.⁷⁶ In 2015, Lewis’ works will be featured in at least four exhibitions, including a traveling large-scale solo show, *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* that will open at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in November.⁷⁷

Notes

¹ Norman Lewis, interview by Vivian Browne, August 29, 1974, transcript reprinted in *Artists and Influence* 18 (1999). The complete original interview is held in the Hatch-Billops Collections, New York City.

² Kellie Jones, "Norman Lewis Chronology," in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, ed. Corinne Jennings, exh. cat., (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 58-62.

³ Grace Glueck, "Marian Willard Johnson, 81, Dealer in Contemporary Art," *The New York Times*, November 7, 1985, <http://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/07/arts/marian-willard-johnson-81-dealer-in-contemporary-art.html> (Accessed December 29, 2009).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lewis work was the feature of eight solo shows at Willard Gallery in 1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1954, 1957, 1961, and 1964. See Kellie Jones, "Norman Lewis Chronology," 58-62.

⁶ Jones, 58.

⁷ Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African American Artists* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 316. Lewis told the authors, "there was a great deal of envy of West Indians, and so the three of us considered ourselves lucky."

⁸ Harry Henderson, "Norman Lewis: The Making of a Black Abstract Expressionist, His Achievements and His Neglect," *International Review of African American Art* 13.3 (1996): 59.

⁹ Norman Lewis, "Oral History Interview with Norman Lewis, 1968, July 14," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Available: <http://www.aaaisi.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/lewis68.htm> [Accessed April 15, 2009].

¹⁰ Bearden and Henderson, 316.

¹¹ Norman Lewis, interview by Vivian Browne.

¹² Norman Lewis, "Oral History."

¹³ According to Bearden and Henderson, Augusta Savage was “one of the first black American artist to challenge the art establishment head-on” when they denied her application for a scholarship to attend a summer school session of the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts in France. W.E.B DuBois and Franz Boas both protested the decision of the American selection committee on her behalf to no avail. This incident would thrust Savage into the national spotlight and keep her fighting for the rights of black artists for most of her life. See Bearden and Henderson, 169-170.

¹⁴ Bearden and Henderson, 316.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Norman Lewis, interview by Vivian Browne.

¹⁷ Ibid. Lewis told interviewer Vivian Browne, “Gambling is a job that requires time and paying attention. And there is a little luck involved.” He added, “when I would win some money I’d buy a couple of suits and the rest of the money went towards books, paints and canvas and enough money to pay the rent, which was extremely cheap.”

¹⁸ “Books Owned by Norman Lewis in 1950,” in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, ed. Corinne Jennings, exh. cat. (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 67-70.

¹⁹ Lewis would ultimately “thank heaven” for Savage, because she gave him “the opportunity to get started.” See Bearden and Henderson, *History*, 317. He also told interviewer Henri Ghent, “It was great, just meeting [Augusta Savage] and seeing a black woman create.” See Norman Lewis, “Oral History Interview.”

²⁰ Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

²¹ Henderson, 59. Lewis worked for the WPA as an art teacher.

²² Norman Lewis, “Oral History.”

²³ See Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne. Of his friendship with the other artists who later became known as the Abstract Expressionists, Lewis said: “After the WPA projects were over I continued my friendships with de Kooning, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. Jackson Pollock was a beautiful person and easy to talk to.”

²⁴ Julian Euell, “Thoughts About Norman Lewis,” in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, ed. Corinne Jennings, exh. cat. (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 51.

²⁵ Henderson, 61.

²⁶ Quoted in Jeff Donaldson, "Generation '306'—Harlem, New York," Ph.D. dissertation, (Northwestern University, 1974), 106-107. Originally published "Exhibition of Negro Art at Adult Education Project in Harlem Y.W.C.A.," *The New York Herald Tribune* (February 15, 1935), 22.

²⁷ Bearden and Henderson, *History*, 318.

²⁸ Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African American Artists*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 506.

²⁹ New York Post, October 6, 1943; clipping in the *Norman Lewis Papers*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., roll 92, frame 96 (hereafter abbreviated AAA).

³⁰ Norman Lewis, "Thesis 1946," in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, ed. Corinne Jennings, exh. cat. (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 63.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Norman Lewis, "Application for Guggenheim Fellowship, 1949," in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, ed. Corinne Jennings, exh. cat. (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 65.

³³ Norman Lewis, quoted in Bearden and Henderson, 320-21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

³⁶ Richard Powell, "The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism," in *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism* (Washington, D. C.: Washington Project for the Arts, 1989). Powell's exhibition, *The Blues Aesthetic*, included both black and white artists whose work expressed or was derived from the "blues aesthetic."

³⁷ For more on jazz and black art, see Eric Porter, *What is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Saul Scott, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), and Graham Lock and David Murray, eds. *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³⁸ Norman Lewis, "Oral History."

³⁹ Euell, 52.

⁴⁰ Ann Eden Gibson, “Black is a Color: Norman Lewis and Modernism in New York,” in Stephanie Saloman, ed. *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977*, exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1998), 20.

⁴¹ Norman Lewis, “Oral History.”

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

⁴⁴ Norman Lewis, “Oral History.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Bearden and Henderson, 324.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 318.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 322.

⁴⁹ Gibson, 18.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁵¹ Robert Goodnough, ed., *Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35 (1950)*. (Chicago, IL: Sobercove Press, 2009).

⁵² Bearden and Henderson, 321.

⁵³ Lewis touches on this point again in his interview with Henri Ghent, where he insists on diminishing the romanticizing of the artist, and suggested that it was good for the public to “see where an artist works and see what the hell he is doing” and “not removing him so remotely from society”. See Norman Lewis, “Oral History.”

⁵⁴ Bearden and Henderson, 323. David Hare, for example, responded: “I see no need for a community We shouldn’t be accepted by the public. As soon as we are accepted, we are no longer artists but decorators.” See transcript from the April 21, 1950 “Artists Sessions at Studio 35,” in Robert Goodnough, ed., *Artists’ Sessions at Studio 35 (1950)* (Chicago, IL: Sobercove Press, 2009), 13.

⁵⁵ Ann Eden Gibson, interview with Joan Murray Weissman (5 October 1991).

⁵⁶ Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Norman Lewis, quoted in Bearden and Henderson, 324.

⁵⁹ Henderson, 59.

⁶⁰ Norman Lewis, written statement, *Norman Lewis Papers, 1919-1971*, microfilm roll 91, frame 619, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

⁶¹ Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

⁶² Norman Lewis, "Oral History." Art historian Ann Gibson supports Lewis' reflection, writing "Abstract Expressionism was an art in which making and meaning were seen as interdependent to an unprecedented degree. . . . the work and the artist were inseparable." See Ann Gibson, "Recasting the Canon," in *Modern Art and Society: An Anthology of Social and Multicultural Readings*, ed. Maurice Berger (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 228.

⁶³ Henderson, 63.

⁶⁴ Norman Lewis, "Oral History."

⁶⁵ Mary Caroline Simpson, "American Artists Paint the City: Katharine Kuh, the 1956 Venice Biennale, and New York's Place in the Cold War Art World," *American Studies* 48.4 (Winter 2007): 31-32.

⁶⁶ Floyd Coleman, "The Changing Same: Spiral, the Sixties, and African-American Art," in William E. Taylor and Harriet G. Warkel, eds. *A Shared Heritage: Art By Four African Americans* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1996).

⁶⁷ Mary Schmidt Campbell, "Hale Woodruff: 50 Years of His Art," in *Hale Woodruff: 50 Years of His Art* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979): 36.

⁶⁸ Norman Lewis, "Oral History."

⁶⁹ Quoted in Thomas Lawson, *Norman Lewis: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: The Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York, 1976), n. p.

⁷⁰ Norman Lewis, "Oral History."

⁷¹ Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

⁷² Gibson, 24.

⁷³ Bearden and Henderson, 322.

⁷⁴ Tarin M. Fuller, “Foreword,” *Norman W. Lewis: Works on Paper 1935-1979* (New York: Bill Hodges Gallery, 1998), n.p.

⁷⁵ Some examples include Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art (Oxford History of Art)* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Samella S. Lewis, *African American Art and Artists* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

⁷⁶ For more information on the show *From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945-1952*, see Norman L. Kleeblatt and Stephen Brown, *From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945-1952*, exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 2014).

⁷⁷ The paintings of Norman Lewis will be featured in *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* at the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX; *Night Vision: Nocturnes in American Art, 1860 – 1960* at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, ME; *I Got Rhythm: Art and Jazz since 1920* at the Stiftung Kunstmuseum, Stuttgart, Germany; *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis* at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA in 2015.

CHAPTER THREE
RACE AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

White America is so goddamn aggressive that it destroys anything that gets in its way.

-- Norman Lewis¹

Though Norman Lewis traveled widely and worked in several different states, he remained, for a large part of his life, a true Harlemiter.² As a young boy, Lewis recalled Harlem being a predominantly white neighborhood where most of his artistically inclined friends at school were white.³ He was only a teenager during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, but Lewis would have both seen and experienced the flourishing production of the visual arts, music, and literature by his fellow black men and women during this period of distinct cultural community. Though he did not formally contribute to the movement, he shared the same passion for African art as philosopher Alain Locke who urged “Negro artist, like all good artists, must and will eventually come home to the materials he sees most and understands best.”⁴ This influence is particularly evident in his early works such as *Musicians* (1938; figure 3.0), and *Comrades* (1943; figure 3.1), where faces are elongated and stylized to resemble African masks.

At the onset of the Great Depression, Lewis left home to travel South America as a seaman. His trips through Bolivia, the Caribbean islands of St. Thomas and Jamaica opened his eyes to the effects of racism on the global level.⁵ Lewis encountered racism on a more personal level when he arrived in New Orleans after sailing for a couple of years. Of this incident, he tells interviewer Henri Ghent,

I remember making certain errors of my physical being. Like New York City, if there is a seat in the subway you sit down, and regardless of who you are sitting next to. And I remember getting my ticket, I even bought a ticket at the wrong box because there was a box for colored and a box for whites. . . . I sat there for about fifteen minutes, and it was next to a white woman . . . and a Negro porter came over to me and said – he whispered

in my ear – this room is for white. And it was almost as somebody says “attention” and I suddenly became aware of where I was and I got up as if it were a command and I went into the Negro section of this station. You know, you suddenly become aware of where the hell you are. You are back in America.⁶

Lewis encountered more Southern racism when the WPA sent him to teach in Greensboro, NC. He returned to New York City after just one year of teaching at A&T College and Bennett College.⁷

Back in New York, one of the many organizations that Lewis joined, was the Artists Union, formed primarily to promote the interests of those working on WPA projects. Lewis also joined the American Artists’ Congress, whose sole purpose was to combat the spread of fascism.⁸ Speaking of his involvement with the organization, Lewis said: “I felt very flattered to belong to it. There weren’t that many blacks involved in it. In fact, you couldn’t get many blacks to join a union . . . So many black artists felt that these organizations were communistic.”⁹ In addition, Lewis was a founding member of the Harlem Artists Guild, a group comprising strictly of minority artists.¹⁰ Early members included Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, Charles Alston, Augusta Savage, and Ernest Crichlow, who had all come together to explore issues faced by black artists working on the WPA. The Guild, formed in 1935, described themselves as “concerned primarily with problems peculiar to Negro artists by virtue of their bond of color and persecution.”¹¹ Over fifty artists attended the first meeting at the 137th Street YWCA and elected Douglas to be the first chairman of the guild. By the time Augusta Savage assumed his position the following year, the guild had expanded to eighty members. For Lewis and his

compatriots, participation in such organizations identified them as activists who were not afraid to demand for themselves their rights as black artists in the community.

In “The Negro Art Hokum,” George Schuyler identifies “The contributions of the American Negro to art are representative because they come from the hearts of the masses of a people held together by like yearnings and stirred by the same causes. It is a sound art because it comes from a primitive nature upon which a white man’s education has never been harnessed. It is a great art because it embodies the Negro’s individual traits and reflects their suffering, aspirations and joys during a long period of acute oppression and distress.”¹² As a black artist, Lewis explains, “their [white artists’] problems and my own never coincided despite the fact that we were fighting for, say, a better world,” adding “I was constantly being investigated by the FBI and being harassed by the police ... their [white artists’] harassment and being bothered by the police was entirely different from the black cat being beaten by the police.”¹³ In a 1935 untitled sketch (figure 3.2), Lewis transcribes in brush and ink the image of a police officer beating a man with a baton while a non-descript figure in the background carries a boulder on its back. This topic of police brutality to black men was so serious to Lewis that he reimagines this sketch into a painting in 1943 (figure 3.3).

Whether he was working in the representational, figurative, or abstract style, aesthetically and thematically, Lewis’ art works perform a kind of visual activism that he used indirectly to address the lack of social, political, and racial equality for African Americans. Some of Lewis’ early social realist works included paintings that emphasized street scenes that showed urban black life. Paintings such as *The Soup Kitchen* (1937; figure 3.4), *Meeting Place* (1941; figure 3.5), and *Fish Eaters* (1944; figure 3.6) illustrate

the struggle of black people against different facets of social, economic, and political oppression.

Responding to the strategic model espoused by Alain Locke to be self-expressive, Lewis eventually gave up representational paintings for a more abstracted figure, while still maintaining much of the same concept of racial uplift. For Locke, as for Lewis, this race-consciousness “denotes not simply the individual’s awareness of his ethnicity, but a concern on his part to promote the well-being of his race such that advantages may be maximized and disadvantages minimized, at the very least, if not eradicated.”¹⁴ Race pride remains, for Lewis, as a replacement for “exclusive and oppressive racist policies by offering alternative grounds on which to conduct cultural exchanges between groups.”¹⁵ Looking back, Lewis said

I used to paint Negroes being disposed, discrimination, and slowly I became aware of the fact that this didn’t move anybody, it didn’t make things better and that if I had the guts to, which I did periodically in those days, it was to picket. And this made things better for Negroes in Harlem. Negroes were employed and they had jobs and stuff like that but it still didn’t make my art any better. But I felt that political things had one thing or at least kind of protest paintings that I was trying to do never solved any situation. I found the only way to solve anything was to go out and take some kind of physical action.¹⁶

It can be said that the more abstract his work became, the more physically involved Lewis became in fighting for African American causes.

Lewis had expressed in 1946 that he was moving on from both the use of tradition and propaganda for a new aesthetic direction that “treats art ... as the production of experiences which combine intellectual and emotional activities.”¹⁷ Hinting at the new levels of experimentation that would characterize his new work, he adds,

It [making art] comes to be an activity of discovery in that it seeks to find hitherto ignored or unknown combinations of forms, colors, and textures and even psychological phenomena, and perhaps to cause new types of experience in the artist as well as the viewer.¹⁸

For Lewis, giving up Social Realism allowed him to be “as free from public pressures and faddish demands as possible.”¹⁹ To that end, he produced a thoughtful and intriguing series of paintings based solely on the struggle for Civil Rights between the 1960s through the 1970s. These works tellingly reveal his struggles with the limits of abstraction, racial art, and his commitment to the fight for equal rights. Some paintings with revealing titles from this period include *Sinister Doings by Gaslight* (1952; figure 3.7), *Processional in Yellow* (1955; figure 3.8), and *Bonfire* (1962; figure 3.9). Although abstract, these paintings feature repeated use of different form and composition of Lewis’ “little figures.” The paintings all possess some forms of allusion to stereotypically racial activities.

Lewis was able to present abstract paintings that are racially informed by presenting a renewed attentiveness to the deconstruction of the concept of race by breaking down rigid, dependable categorizations and stereotypes. He distorted the legibility of race by rejecting the use of the racialized subject to construct group identity formations, and, in the process, deconstruct the concept of race as a system of

stereotypical representations. In Lewis' understanding, "racial art," though racially informed, is a universal quality that is not reducible to mere Negro reality. To quote Alain Locke, Lewis' goal was to "create unity out of diversity," and capture the "common consciousness; a problem in common rather than a life in common."²⁰ It is in this sense that Lewis' expression of blackness can be read as the expression of a collective experience and overcome the dichotomy between art and propaganda, and an attempt to produce art that does not carry the burden of representing and interpreting "the Negro" to a white world. In Locke's assumption of an inherently aesthetic life in which individual expression is always simultaneously group expression, the distinctions between artist, subject, and audience are broken down.

Lewis did not see abstraction as a solution through which his white and black audiences could transcend their differences, but as a way of thinking that dissolved such differences. Lewis' Civil Rights series illuminate rather than illustrate current events. In these paintings, blackness is a purposeful theme as well as a strategy through which he attempts to solve the dilemma of Abstract Expressionism's political paralysis while retaining its insistence that its meaning, its subject matter, was metaphorically manifest in its handling of media. Such an approach reconciles Lewis' aesthetic and political concerns.

In a 1985 exhibition of Lewis' black paintings, curator Kellie Jones commented that Lewis used "the color black both as a dominant compositional element in his abstract paintings, and as a social comment."²¹ Another exhibition with a similar focus, the *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977* at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1998 showcased an extensive collection of Lewis' black paintings. Co-curators Ann Eden

Gibson and Jorge Daniel Veneciano assembled over forty paintings and works on paper to represent the different ways Lewis engaged the color black to fashion his own metaphorical and symbolic language. Lewis, a recognized master colorist uses a wide range of colors in his work, so why did they feel the color black was deserving of the spotlight? Both Gibson and Veneciano link, however sparingly, Lewis' use of black to an attempt to portray race on canvas. According to Gibson, Lewis' use of the color black "provided an entry to a cosmos . . . in which modernism and African-American identity can coexist."²² Admitting that Lewis' "black paintings from 1946 to 1977 are "seldom entirely black," she notes that he used the color as "metaphors for experiences of nature in both town and country."²³ Veneciano, on the other hand, explains Lewis' choice of black paint as a means to denote the concept of absence and invisibility.²⁴ According to him, the color black allowed Lewis to symbolically paint racial content while simultaneously veiling any attempts to read his paintings as political works. He writes,

Therefore it is not necessary to argue ... [whether] the subject matter of the black paintings involves social comment or protest. One can say that their subject matter concerns form, color, line and gesture. These formal qualities, however, are not devoid of the capacity to signify relevancies of human-cum-social experience. If they were, they would be inexplicable, and would risk going unnoticed or unremarked.²⁵

In Lewis' own words, his usage of the color black was purely formal and experimental.

Pointing to the painting *Blending* (1951; figure 3.10) as an example, Lewis said,

The picture ... is a black picture. It has no social connotation to me. I wanted to see if I could get out of black the suggestion of other nuances of

color, using it in such a way as to arouse other colors . . . using color in such a way it could become other things.²⁶

Lewis also mentions his interest in the color black “started with some rhododendrons . . . which I painted. I used just black—to convey the form—and I liked that and I went on to try to do other things. Just manipulating the paint was exciting to me.”²⁷ And perhaps most revealing of all, Lewis tells Harry Henderson, in response to his question: “Why black?”, “I don’t know or remember at this moment. There are a lot of funny things that happen when you paint. It could have been blue if I had blue, or it could have been red.”²⁸

Besides black, two other colors, white and red, stand out in Lewis’ Civil Rights paintings. White (or off white), commonly perceived to be the opposite of the black, is oftentimes used by Lewis to make deliberate references to the Caucasian race. In works such as *America the Beautiful* (c. 1960; figure 3.11) and *Klu Klux* (1963; figure 3.12), Lewis paints his signature “little figures” in white with pointy heads that allude to the white hoods of the klansmen. In *Harlem Turns White* (1955; figure 3.13) and *Procession in White* (c. 1953; figure 3.14), Lewis also uses white “little figures” perhaps to suggest the commodification of black culture by white Americans. Red, the color that generally connotes danger, appears in multiple works in the Civil Rights series as well with paintings such as *Rednecks* (1960; figure 3.16), *Redneck Birth* (1961; figure 3.17), *Alabama II* (1969; figure 1.43), *New World Acoming* (1971; figure 3.18), and *Triumphal* (1972; figure 3.19). In these paintings, red is used to symbolize both hope and despair. Though Lewis makes no special mention of his choice and usage of red, he mentioned to interviewer Vivian Browne,

you get tired seeing a certain color used, despite the fact that it's accepted and that maybe different nuances of color can be so exciting. It's like different forms and shapes. I feel that color can evoke a great deal of visual excitement, to see colors that you don't ordinarily see, that you take for granted.²⁹

Lewis continued his commitment to the Civil Rights movement and to the fight for racial equality by taking his political dissension to the streets as well. Lewis was not convinced that art alone could change black lives for the better, telling Vivian Browne,

I don't see how any politically involved pictures help any black situation.

Stuart Davis and Raphael Soyer were social painters, but conditions haven't changed for people. There was Philip Evergood who painted black people. Robert Gwathmy, who is white, also painted black people.

Shostakovich, whose symphony hasn't stopped any wars. Goya's paintings are in the Prado to look at and people are still shooting. All that we've become is more mechanized.³⁰

Yet in spite of that statement, Lewis served alongside many other leading Abstract Expressionists artists on the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.³¹

Lewis was involved with two Civil Rights groups in particular—the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) founded in 1942 by James Farmer, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was founded in the early 1960s by a group of social activists including H. Rap Brown. According to the official letterhead for SNCC, Norman Lewis (along with Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Ad Reinhardt) was a leading member of the Artists' Committee for Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee, which organized a benefit exhibition of works by artists to help raise funds to support SNCC's activism. A 1963 SNCC letter of solicitation by Lewis reads

Dear Fellow Artist:

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a national organization led by young Negro and white men and women, through freedom rides, sit-ins and other forms of nonviolent action, has helped to inspire a dramatic and awesome resurgence in the Negro's drive for complete freedom and equality. We, the initiating artists, have pledged our support and sponsorship to their Southern voter drive, as well as the support of all other artists we are able to contact . . .

As tangible evidence of our support, we plan an exhibition and sale, to be held in New York city in November (1st, 2nd, 3rd). We ask artists to become contributing sponsors by contributing paintings, drawings, watercolors, prints, and other graphics. The proceeds of the sale will be used to continue the work of SNCC in its voter registration drive

...³²

For CORE, a benefit exhibition and sale was organized in the same year by artists at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York. Many accomplished artists including Lewis, Ad Reinhardt, and Mark Rothko donated works. A letter of appeal from 1963 by CORE's national director, James Farmer, stated:

Two years ago, when CORE was organizing its first Freedom Rides, it lacked money for bus tickets. An Art Exhibition and Sale at the time provided the necessary funds. The wonderful generosity of the

contributing artists helped to make out Freedom Rides possible. The results of those rides, I think, are well known. Bus terminals in more than 120 Southern communities have been integrated. More than that, the courage and restraint of the Freedom Riders, in the face of the most dreadful violence and abuse, gave an immense forward thrust to the whole civil rights movement. It confirmed our faith in the value of nonviolent resistance to segregation. The second Art Exhibition and Sale will greatly assist CORE's steadily expanding program of activism in the north as well as in the south . . .³³

In 1963, Lewis co-founded the Spiral group with fourteen other African American artists: Charles Alston, Emma Amos, Romare Bearden, Calvin Douglass, Perry Ferguson, Reginald Gammon, Alvin Hollingsworth, Felrath Hines, William Majors, Richard Mayhew, Earl Miller, Merton Simpson, Hale Woodruff, and James Yeargens. He was also the first president of the organization. In the beginning, the goal of Spiral was for the artists to collectively explore "what their attitudes and commitments should be as Negro artists in the struggle for civil rights."³⁴ "The story of Spiral," according to Courtney Martin, is "a search for a utopia where an ideal of artistic praxis would merge with, but not be conflated with, their lived experiences as black people."³⁵ Some of the questions the group attempted to deal with include:

Should you participate directly in the activities of the [Civil Rights] movement? Do you have special qualities to express as a Negro artist? What is your value as an artist who is both an American and a Negro?

What do you have in common with other Negro painters? What should your role be in the mainstream of art?³⁶

Art critic Jeanne Siegel suggests the group “felt an urge to say something, but they didn’t know what, how, or where to say it.”³⁷ As a whole, the members of Spiral agreed that they were against overtly political or “protest” art. Lewis, in particular, told Siegel “Our group should always point to a broader purpose and never be led down an alley of frustration. Political and social aspects should not be the primary concern; aesthetic ideas should have preference.”³⁸

Floyd Coleman characterized Spiral’s program as “an insistence on separating the aesthetic from the political.”³⁹ As black artists, Spiral members were split on the issue of the “Negro Image” and who gets to paint it. Lewis stuck to the teachings of Alain Locke who advised “what is distinctively ‘Negro’ is not a matter of authorship, i.e., whether or not the author is black, but theme, idiom, and style—most often produced as a function of African American life, but not necessarily produced by a black author.”⁴⁰ Members either agreed with Lewis who said “I feel that Franz Kline, in his paintings with large contrasts of black against white, and Ad Reinhardt, in his all-black painting, might represent something more Negroid than work done by Negro painters,” thus suggesting the prioritizing of content over experience, or, they agreed with Romare Bearden, who insist “You can’t speak as a Negro if you haven’t had the experience.”⁴¹ Bearden and Lewis were split on other matters as well. Lewis was a committed abstractionist who adhered strictly to abstract painting after 1946. Bearden worked in both figurative and

abstract modes in a range of media. Their antinomy was captured in a caricature of Bearden and Lewis in a suggestively combative stance (figure 3.20).

The initial theme for Spiral's first and only show was *Mississippi 64* or *Mississippi USA*, an explicit reference to the Civil Rights movement and the plight of Southern blacks. Lewis told interviewer Vivian Browne, "This was the height of King's involvement in the South and we wanted to do something,"⁴² But disagreements and concerns ensued regarding whether the title was too political and/or prohibitive. In the end, the group settled on the theme of black and white "which, they felt, carried symbolic overtones" and the show was eventually titled *First Group Showing: Works in Black and White*.⁴³ The exhibition catalogue states:

We, as Negroes, could not fail to be touched by the outrage of segregation, or fail to relate to the self-reliance, hope, and courage of those persons who were marching in the interest of man's dignity ... If possible, in these times, we hoped with our art to justify life ... to use only black and white and sechew other coloration. This consideration, or limitation, was conceived from technical concerns; although deeper motivations may have been involved. . . What is more important now, and what has great portent for the future, is that Negro artists, of divergent backgrounds and interests, have come together on terms of mutual respect. It is to their credit that they were able to fashion art works lit by beauty, and of such diversity.⁴⁴

For the show, Lewis painted *Processional* (1964; figure 1.47), a response to the march on Washington and Selma. “There was a movement at that time of black and white togetherness,” he said, “of Blacks and Whites trying to understand each other.”⁴⁵ His painting was an emanation of “white and black people who feel a togetherness so that you can’t tell who is white and who is black.”⁴⁶ Spiral folded in 1966 when the group could no longer afford the lease to their Christopher Street meeting place. Lewis lamented “We couldn’t get these guys to give ten dollars a month. They’d go out and spend fifty dollars on booze, and you couldn’t get ten dollars for rent.”⁴⁷

In spite of his disappointment and frustration, Lewis continued to fight tirelessly for him and his fellow black artists to be included in exhibitions and for equal representation the art world after Spiral ended. To that end, he once again partnered with Bearden and Ernest Crichlow to open Cinque Gallery. The space, named after Cinque, the leader of the Amistad slave ship uprising in 1839, was founded with the purpose of providing help to young black artists who might not otherwise stand a chance in a white-identified art world. The gallery opened at a space at the Papp Theater in December 1969 with the bequest of a \$30,000 grant that Bearden obtained from the Urban Center at Columbia University.⁴⁸ The mission of the gallery, according to an early membership brochure, was to “compensate for de facto segregation that minority artists faced in the art world, arguing that: ‘economic, racial and educational factors have effected a closing off of access to the practice of art, exposure as artists to the art-buying public and the acquisition of arts-related skills.’”⁴⁹ The objective of the gallery was to “exhibit young artists, train arts administrators, disseminate information about the history of art and

minority artists; and bring together minority artists with the “total cultural community.”⁵⁰

In addition to establishing Cinque Gallery to help young black artists get a footing in the art world, Lewis also took his activism onto the streets to protest bad curatorial practices by museums. In the late 1960s through the 1970s, there was an increased interest in putting on large-scale black-themed exhibits at large museums across the country. Black artists denounced several of these shows because they were against the marginalization of their art.⁵¹ Many artists, like Lewis, were also troubled that these shows were mounted without input from black curators. In 1966, Lewis withdrew his work from consideration for the First World Festival of Negro Art in Dakar, Senegal. Lewis’ work would have represented the United States in this month-long celebration of visual and performing arts, music, film, and literature from the African Diaspora, but he dropped out when the U.S. committee chose not to provide travel honoraria to artists.⁵² In 1968, Lewis’ painting, *Historic Evening*, was included in the “In Honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. All sales from that show went towards the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1969, Lewis joined his fellow artists Romare Bearden, Robert Carter, Benny Andrews, Reginald Gammon, and many others to picket the Metropolitan Museum of Art and protest the *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition. They were upset that the show organizers who claim to be presenting the cultural talents of the predominantly black community of Harlem excluded the participation of black, Harlem-based artists and scholars in the exhibition planning and galleries.⁵³ Thomas Hoving, director of the Metropolitan Museum of art, claimed that the multimedia exhibition would “plumb the secret of Harlem” and present “a cultural and

historical experience, a total environment—one particular world, in fact, which has been known intimately only to the Black people of New York City—Harlem.”⁵⁴ Hoving added the exhibition “doesn’t interpret or explain. It sticks to the facts.”⁵⁵ But black artists contested the origin of Hoving’s “facts.” A similar situation in 1971 led Lewis to withdraw his work from consideration for the *Contemporary Black Artists in America* exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art.⁵⁶

Lewis’ activism also extended to his teaching. Throughout his lifetime, Lewis taught for the WPA, at the Savage Studio, in New York city public schools, alternative schools such as the George Washington Carver School and the Thomas Jefferson School of Social Science, HARYOU-ACT, Inc. (Harlem Youth in Action), and the Arts Student League.⁵⁷ Of his experience at the left-wing Thomas Jefferson School of Social Science, Lewis said,

the majority of the people who came there were white. In fact, the six years I was there it was all white students. And this was a tremendous lift to me because I was black, and they were white, and yet I had something to give them that they didn’t get from their own. Slowly this is another avenue of finding that you have something to offer which is your own—black people don’t even see—that you have.⁵⁸

At HARYOU-ACT, Inc., an antipoverty program that encouraged youth to stay in school, Lewis worked mostly with black students. In addition to teaching them art, he also tried to impart to his students the value of working and instill in them a work ethic and a general sense of independence and self-worth. Lewis told interviewer Henri Ghent,

I feel a great sense of achievement about having gotten several scholarships for really talented kids. I am hoping that they are arising to a lot of beautiful things around them that they don't see, and that they have an experience which is entirely very worth exploiting in America and that is a Negro experience which hasn't been exploited. And I have gotten kids into the Julliard Music School, several different fashion schools, School of Music, Music and Design someplace. But I felt very good about this, even if I helped one kid. I feel that this is a great reward.⁵⁹

Some of Lewis' successful students include artists Dindga McCannon and Beverly Buchanan.⁶⁰

Notes

¹ Norman Lewis, “Oral History Interview with Norman Lewis, 1968, July 14,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Available: <http://www.aaaisi.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/lewis68.htm> [Accessed April 15, 2009].

² Lewis’ friend, Julian Euell, wrote that Lewis was “a true native of Harlem and he never lost his sense of caring for that community.” See Julian Euell, “Thoughts about Norman Lewis,” in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, exh. cat. (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 51. When asked by interviewer Henri Ghent if he could choose whether to reside in “Europe or Africa or any other country other than this one,” Lewis replied “No, I am an American.” See Norman Lewis, “Oral interview.”

³ Norman Lewis, “Oral interview.” Lewis told interviewer Henri Ghent that his best friend was in fact “a Swedish fellow.”

⁴ Alain Locke, “Foreword,” *Contemporary Negro Art* (Baltimore, MD: Baltimore Museum of Art, Feb. 3-19, 1939), n.p.

⁵ Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African American Artists* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 317. Of his trips to South America, Lewis said: “I came to realize that it wasn’t just black people who were exploited.”

⁶ Norman Lewis, “Oral interview.”

⁷ Bearden and Henderson, 318. “It upset me because I’d never been south in such intimate circumstances,” Lewis said.

⁸ The American Artists’ Congress, an organization that existed from 1935 to 1942 and numbered about 900 members at its peak in 1939, sponsored exhibitions and lobbied for artists’ rights, jobs, and economic security. See Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds., “The American Artists’ Congress, Its Context and History,” in *Artists Against War and Fascism, Papers of the First American Artists’ Congress* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 2-44.

⁹ Norman Lewis, interview by Vivian Browne, August 29, 1974, transcript reprinted in *Artists and Influence* 18 (1999). The complete original interview is held in the Hatch-Billops Collections, New York City.

¹⁰ Ibid. Lewis commented that apart from the one Japanese artist, the Guild was all black. He added, “The Harlem Artists Guild, because it was a black organization, found itself faced with certain problems that affected black artists and didn’t affect white ones. This is why we existed.”

¹¹ Gwendolyn Bennett, “The Harlem Artists Guild,” *Art Front* 2 (May, 1937): 20.

¹² George Schuyler, “The Negro Art Hokum,” in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), 96.

¹³ Norman Lewis, “Oral interview.”

¹⁴ Yvonne Ochillo, “The Race-Consciousness of Alain Locke,” *Phylon* 47.3 (Fall 1986), 173.

¹⁵ Robert Danisch, “Cosmopolitanism and Epideictic Rhetoric,” in *Philosophic Values and World Citizenship: Locke to Obama and Beyond*, eds. Jacoby Adeshei Carter and Leonard Harris (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 157.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Norman Lewis, “Thesis 1946,” in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, ed. Corinne Jennings, exh. cat. (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 63.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Atheneum Books, 1992), 7.

²¹ Kellie Jones, “Norman Lewis: The Black Paintings,” in *Norman Lewis: The Black Paintings*, exh. cat. (Newark, NJ: Robeson Center Gallery, State University of New Jersey, Rutgers Campus, 1985), 2.

²² Ann Eden Gibson, “Black is a Color: Norman Lewis and Modernism in New York,” in Stephanie Saloman, ed. *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977*, exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1998), 11.

²³ Ibid., 16-17.

²⁴ Jorge Daniel Veneciano, “The Quality of Absence in the Black Paintings of Norman Lewis,” in Stephanie Saloman, ed. *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977*, exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1998), 33.

²⁵ Ibid., 32.

²⁶ Bearden and Henderson, 321.

²⁷ Harry Henderson, "Norman Lewis: The Making of a Black Abstract Expressionist, His Achievements and His Neglect," *International Review of African American Art* 13.3 (1996): 62.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See David Craven, "Norman Lewis as Political Activist and Post-Colonial Artist," in Stephanie Saloman, ed. *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977*, exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1998), 51-60.

³² Jacob Lawrence, et. al., Letter to "Fellow Artists" on behalf of the Artists' Committee of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1963, in Ad Reinhardt Papers, roll N-69-100: 736-737. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

³³ James Farmer, "Artists for CORE," Open Letter of Appeal, Spring 1963. Ad Reinhardt Papers, Archives of American Art, Roll N-69-100: 687-689.

³⁴ Jeanne Siegel, "Why Spiral?" *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 29 (Fall 2011): 79. Originally published in *ArtNews* 65 (September 1966): 48-51.

³⁵ Courtney Martin, "From the Center: The Spiral Group 1963-1966," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 29 (Fall 2011): 87.

³⁶ Siegel, 79.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 80.

³⁹ Floyd Coleman, "The Changing Same: Spiral, the Sixties, and African-American Art," in *A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African Americans*, eds. William E. Taylor and Harriet G. Warkel (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, with Indiana University Press, 1996), 149.

⁴⁰ Leonard Harris, "The Great Debate: W. E. B. Du Bois vs. Alain Locke on the Aesthetic," *Philosophia Africana* 7.1 (March 2004): 24.

⁴¹ Siegel, 80.

⁴² Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

⁴³ Siegel., 82.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁵ Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

⁴⁶ Norman Lewis, "Oral interview."

⁴⁷ Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

⁴⁸ According to Lewis, the space on Lafayette Street was donated. See Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

⁴⁹ See Jeff Donaldson, "Generation '306'—Harlem, New York," PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1974.)

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Black curators, such as Charles Gaines and Lowery Sims, have argued that singling out minority artists merely valorizes the center. Charles Gaines, "The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism," in Catherine Lord, ed., *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (Irvine: Fine Arts Gallery, University of California, Irvine, 1993). Lowery Stokes Sims, "The Mirror The Other The Politics of Esthetics," *Artforum* 28 (Mar. 1990): 113. Kirsten Buick and Andrea Barnwell have recognized the dual purpose of black artist exhibitions to celebrate achievement and simultaneously fix or define notions about race. Their essay negotiates problems of categorizing black artists' work, which as a category has more to do with race than with the work. See Kirsten Buick and Andrea Barnwell, "A Portfolio of Works by African American Artists: Continuing the Dialogue: A Work in Progress," *Museum Studies* 24.2 (1999): 181-87.

⁵² Kellie Jones, "Norman Lewis Chronology," in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, ed. Corinne Jennings, exh. cat., (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 58.

⁵³ Bridget R. Cooks, "Black Artists and Activism: *Harlem on My Mind* (1969), *American Studies* 48.1 (Spring 2007): 5.

⁵⁴ Thomas Hoving, "Director's Introduction," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 27.5 (Jan. 1969): 243.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Jones, 62.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 58-62.

⁵⁸ Norman Lewis, "Oral interview."

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Jones, 62.

CHAPTER FOUR

NORMAN LEWIS, SOCIAL ABSTRACTIONIST

What is abstract art? The question will be answered differently by each artist to whom the question is put. This is so because the idea of abstract art is alive. It changes, moves and grows like any other living organism.

-- Stuart Davis¹

Recent critiques of authorship suggest pure intentionality is never fully revealed as it presupposes a coherent and static authorial individual.² Since the self is constituted through the continuities offered by the individual or collective memory, Norman Lewis' paintings are contiguously composed of his past (memory and experiences) and the present (self-reflection); joining aspects of "art" and "life" in a reciprocal relationship to express different facets of his identity. As an artist whose work belonged to two distinct artistic milieux—black art and Abstract Expressionism, Norman Lewis' oeuvre reveals his lifelong battle to juggle between his responsibility as a black artist and his attraction to abstraction as a way to create explore new and experimental modes of communication. The outcome of Lewis' endeavor features important works of art that are at once radical and compelling.

Much of Lewis' career followed the trajectory of philosopher Alain Locke's aesthetics. Alain Locke was an influential spokesperson for the black art produced from the 1920s onwards. In 1925's *The New Negro*, Locke wrote:

for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being — a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. The thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem. His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality.³

With this in mind, Locke started advocating for new Negro forms of art and creative new images that would uplift the black population and allow to be accepted as “possessing, or capable of possessing, character and moral virtues.”⁴

Locke remarked, “until recently, lacking self-understanding, we have been almost as much of a problem to ourselves as we still are to others,” suffering from “self-pity to condescension.”⁵ In *The New Negro* and *The Negro Takes His Place in American Art*, Locke envisioned a “stepping out from the old to the new” psyche for all artists of the black community in America. He thought,

The Old Negro had long become more of a myth than a man. The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism.⁶

His ideas of the “New Negro” comprised of a new positive image for the African Americans—one that is devoid of the stereotypical associations made so common by literature and plays by white Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁷

As Astrid Franke points out, “the struggle against stereotypes as outmoded and offending forms of representation partly consisted in revealing their repetitive nature in literature.”⁸ Locke realized that the world was destined to remain culturally diverse but insisted that diversity need not be negative. Holding fast to the constructivist view that facts about the human world are dependent on contingent cultural or social ideas, Locke saw race as a social construct that did not contain any biological or genetic predispositions. Instead of believing in the objectivist conception that races exist apart

from cultural or social ideas, he understood races to be social groups that are defined as biological groups in the minds of people.⁹ “If,” he says,

Instead of the anthropological, the ethnic characters had been more in the focus of scientific attention ... race would have been regarded as primarily a matter of social heredity, and its distinctions due to the selective psychological “set” of established cultural reactions. There is a social determination involved in this which quite more rationally interprets and explains the relative stability or so-called permanency that the old theorists were trying to account for on the basis of fixed anthropological characters and factors.¹⁰

Locke’s idea of new stereotypes in art hinges on the concept of “universalized power and insight.”¹¹ For the perception of blackness to change, the black artist must “consider life as his proper milieu, yet treat race . . . from the universal point of view, shunning the cultural-isolation that results from racial preoccupation and Jim Crow aesthetics;” prove not the similarities he/she may share with white Americans, but attest instead, the “third dimension of universalized common-denominator humanity.”¹² So despite the fact that blacks had been marginalized in public perception, official acknowledgement and the mass media by the time of the Harlem Renaissance, Locke refused to campaign for “Race fusion” which he thought was “too tainted with the assumptions of White dominance and aggression, too associated with the stigma of inferiority rather than equality.”¹³ He wanted instead a new image that was rich in race pride and self-expression, and contended that counter-stereotypes are desirable for the purpose of uplift because it is universal in “relevance and appeal.”¹⁴

In the article “The Legacy of Ancestral Arts” that appeared in the publication of *The New Negro* in 1925, Locke writes that although African visual traditions were lost as a consequence of slavery, the black artist retained an aesthetic connection to the continent.¹⁵ He adds,

What [African art] is as a thing of beauty ranges it with the absolute standards of art and makes it a pure art form capable of universal appreciation and comparison; what it is as an expression of African life and thought makes it an equally precious cultural document, perhaps the ultimate key for the interpretation of the African mind.¹⁶

If African Americans could follow the lead of Europe and incorporate into their visual language the “lesson of a classic background, the lesson of discipline, of style, of technical control pushed to the limits of technical mastery,” that made African art so special into the context of their American life and experience “then the Negro may well become what some of predicted, the artist of American life.”¹⁷ By focusing on the “folk oriented” idiom that African sculpture represents, African Americans could create their own vernacular tradition. Locke writes “The Negro physiognomy must be freshly and objectively conceived on its own patterns if it is ever to be seriously and importantly interpreted . . . we ought and must have a school of Negro art, a local and racially representative tradition.”¹⁸ To do this, he encouraged black artists to turn to Negro themes, idioms, and styles that embodied universal values to produce alternative, authentic images of blackness.

In all of Locke’s writing from the period, he defines the following general characteristics of African art as basis for a genuinely new form of African American

visual art expression: (1) concern for surface ornamentation; (2) rhythmic sequence; (3) sense of mass and relief; (4) emphasis on the essential; and (5) stylization and distortion.¹⁹ Lewis' early artistic efforts responded to Locke's direction. He, like many of his black colleagues, engaged in the search for a psychological and artistic connection with African art that they could apply in their work.²⁰ In the 1930s, Lewis took his inspiration from African conventions known to him both through his knowledge of European modernist art and through direct observation.²¹ Lewis produced a series of drawings of objects included in the 1935 exhibition *African Negro Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. *Dan Mask* (1935; figure 4.0) is an example of a pastel drawing of an African mask. The striations on a Songhe mask on display also made its way into many of his sketches and paintings such as *Folks Like Us* (1944; figure 4.1).

Lewis was not only familiar with Locke's writings. He also knew Locke from their mutual visits to "306," a salon-style gathering that took place in the studio of artists Charles Alston and Henry Bannarn and dancer Ad Bates. Locke wrote reference letters for Lewis' application for a Julian Rosenwald fellowship in 1942 and for Guggenheim fellowship in 1949.²² Two of Norman Lewis' paintings, *Yellow Hat* (1936; figure 2.5) and *Dispossessed* (1940; figure 2.2) were included as examples of "vigorous, intimate and original documentation of Negro life" in Alain Locke's *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art*.²³ This was an important aspect of Locke's philosophy because

For generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be

worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. . . . By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation. . . . With this renewed self-respect and self-dependency, the life of the Negro community is bound to enter a new dynamic phase.²⁴

Locke encouraged experimentation with African art and its abstract qualities but he ultimately prioritized the role of the African American artists as one that addressed the needs of his/her community. As such, “the New Negro is a project and a projection, not a fixed image.”²⁵ Locke advocated for the right of black artists to keep producing art in ways they saw fit, “even if they are not instrumental for the purpose of creating appropriate motivations for racial uplift.”²⁶ It is within this rubric that Lewis would frame his departure from Social Realism.

For Locke, the effectiveness of a work of art depends on whether it contains universal properties such as “proportionality, form, or structure, affect feelings and are subject to evaluation, reformation, and transformation.”²⁷ Locke also pushed for a vibrant concept of cultural relativism that promotes “mutual respect for differences, an emphasis on the worth of many ways of life, and the affirmation of values in each culture in order to understand and harmonize their various goals.”²⁸ To that end, he condemned propagandistic works for being “limited in its ability to make positive contributions to the way people think since it cannot provide perceptions completely free of the terms of the debate.”²⁹ Black artists are urged to avoid making propagandistic works. Propaganda is antagonistic to the pursuit of racial uplift as “it speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens, or supplicates.”³⁰ Locke believed that

propaganda ultimately fails to achieve its objective; that new and enriching perspectives are possible through art for its' own sake; that it is through the agency of art that we have a great hope for enlarging human freedoms; and that the search for absolute Truth, the Good and Beauty should be abandoned. Lewis echoes this sentiments, writing in his Thesis of 1946 that he was after a concept that

treats art not as a reproduction or as convenient but entirely secondary medium for propaganda but as the production of experiences which combine intellectual and emotional activities in a way that may conceivably add not only to the pleasure of the viewer and the satisfaction of the artist but to a universal knowledge of aesthetics and the creative faculty which I feel exists for one form of expression or another in all men.³¹

In 1939, Locke expressed his conviction that “after a pardonable and often profitable wandering afield for experience and freedom’s sake . . . the Negro artist, like all good artists, would eventually come home to the material he sees most and understands best.”³² While Locke does not specially equate an interest in abstraction or the need for black artists to assimilate with the larger American art scene, his tone strongly suggests a circumscribing of what were considered appropriate choices on the part of black artists. In 1939, Locke published a short article in *Opportunity* entitled “Advance on the Art Front,” in which he singled out the arts as the most important arena of civil rights activism. He described the invigoration of black culture at the end of the 1930s as “a courageous cavalry move over difficult ground in the face of obstacles worse than powder and shell – silence and uncertainty.”³³

At the very same time, Balcomb Greene, chairman of the American Abstract Artists, wrote that the universality of the “amorphous and geometric forms” that characterized the work of the members of the association made it impossible to the artists “to play on national or class prejudices.”³⁴ Greene’s concept of “Abstract universalism” “stressed humanity’s common condition rather than its differences.”³⁵ Earlier in 1936, Greene had also discussed the new language in art, writing,

Without denying that [the artist’s] ultimate aim is to touch the crowd, he sees the futility of addressing it in the language commonly used by the crowd. He must employ his own language ... in order to move, dominate and direct the crowd, which is his especial way of being understood. ...

The point in abstractionism, actually, is that the function of art and the means of achieving this function have been for the first time made inseparable.³⁶

The Abstract Expressionist abandonment of Eurocentric cultural values and marginalized cultural practices provided Lewis an outlet to develop an individual aesthetic theory.³⁷ Lewis combined the ideas from both Locke and Greene in his very first foray into abstraction. By sticking to a figurative abstractionist method, Lewis was still able to attend to the purpose of racial uplift without painting explicitly racial subjects. In this sense, he was developing his own unique method of Social Abstraction; where personal experience and social responsibility are juxtaposed, leaving behind just enough clues and connections for the astute viewer.

In Locke's essay "The Negro as Artist," he made plain the fact that, We must not expect the work of the Negro artist to be too different from that of his fellow-artists. Product of the same social and cultural soil, our art has an equal right an obligation to be typically American at the same time that it strives to be typical and representative of the Negro.³⁸

Echoing a similar sentiment, Lewis tells art critic Jeanne Siegel: "I am not interested in an illustrative statement that merely mirrors some of the social conditions, but in my work I am looking for something of deeper artistic and philosophical content."³⁹

Notes

¹ Stuart Davis, *Introduction to Abstract Painting in America* (New York: Whitney Museum of Modern Art, 1935): n.p.

² Some of these include Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-148; and Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-138. See also Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73, no. 2 (June 1991): 174-208.

³ Alain Locke, "The New Negro" in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 3.

⁴ Leonard Harris, "The Great Debate: W. E. B. Du Bois vs. Alain Locke on the Aesthetic," *Philosophia Africana* 7.1 (March 2004), 15-16.

⁵ Locke, *The New Negro*, 4,8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ An example of such racist stereotype is the blackface minstrel shows of the nineteenth-century. For a fascinating study on the subject, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). In this book, Lott confronts the process through which blackface minstrelsy was formed, maintained, "destroyed," and reformed through acts of appropriation and expropriation. The intricate relationship between the elements that construct the formation of minstrel culture, i.e., myth, power relations, class, gender, etc., are explicated in a manner that reinterprets the relationship between black Americans and white Americans in antebellum societies, as well as the relationship of racist assumptions and class formation.

⁸ Astrid Franke, "Struggling with Stereotypes," in *The Critical Pragmatism of Alain Locke: A Reader on Value Theory, Aesthetics, Community, Culture, Race, and Education*, ed. Leonard Harris (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), 22.

⁹ Leonard Harris, *Racism* (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), 18-19.

¹⁰ Alain Locke, "The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture," *Howard Review* I (June 1924): 293.

- ¹¹ Alain Locke, "Self-Criticism, The Third Dimension in Culture," *Phylon* 11.4 (December 1950): 392.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 393.
- ¹³ Alain Locke, "The High Cost of Prejudice," *Forum* 78 (December 1927): 505.
- ¹⁴ Yvonne Ochillo, "The Race-Consciousness of Alain Locke," *Phylon* 47.3 (Fall 1986): 176
- ¹⁵ Alain Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts" in *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 254.
- ¹⁶ Alain Locke, "A Note on African Art," *Opportunity* 2 (May 1924): 134.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 256, 258.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Locke, *The New Negro*, 100.
- ²⁰ For Locke's influence on the black arts community, see also Rebecca T. Cureau, "Toward and Aesthetic of Black Folk Expression," and James B. Barnes, "Alain Locke and the Sense of the African Legacy," in *Alain Locke, Reflections on a Modern Renaissance Man*, ed. Russell J. Linnemann (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).
- ²¹ Ann Eden Gibson, "Norman Lewis in the Forties," in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, ed. Corinne Jennings, exh. cat., (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 36.
- ²² In his letter, Locke wrote that Lewis was a "keen, sensitive observer." Julius Rosenwald Fund Archives, Fiske University Library, Nashville, Tennessee.
- ²³ Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1979), 9.
- ²⁴ Locke, *The New Negro*, 3-4.
- ²⁵ Robert Danisch, "Cosmopolitanism and Epideictic Rhetoric," in *Philosophic Values and World Citizenship: Locke to Obama and Beyond*, eds. Jacoby Adeshei Carter and Leonard Harris (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 157.
- ²⁶ Harris, "The Great Debate," 22.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Melville Herskovits, "Cultural Relativism and Cultural Values," in *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism* (New York: Random House, 1973), 11.

²⁹ Harris, "The Great Debate," 25.

³⁰ Alain Locke, "Art or Propaganda?" *Harlem* 1 (November 1928): 12-13.

³¹ Norman Lewis, "Thesis 1946," in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, ed. Corinne Jennings, exh. cat., (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989), 63.

³² *Contemporary Negro Art*, foreword by Alain Locke, exh. cat. (Baltimore, MD: s

³³ Alain Locke, "Advance on the Art Front," *Opportunity* 17 (May, 1939): 132-36.

³⁴ Balcomb Greene, "In Defense of Abstract Art,," quoted in Ann E. Gibson, "Norman Lewis in the Forties," *Norman Lewis: From Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, 13. Lewis exhibited with the American Abstract Artists, but he was not a formal member of the group.

³⁵ Gibson, 17.

³⁶ Balcomb Greene, "Abstract Art at the Modern Museum," *Art Front* 2. 5 (April 1936): 8.

³⁷ David Craven, "Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art: A Post-Colonial Approach to American Art," *Oxford Art Journal* 14.1 (1991): 60.

³⁸ Alain Locke, "The Negro as Artist," in *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* ed., Alain Locke (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1979),10.

³⁹ Siegel, 79.

CHAPTER FIVE

NORMAN LEWIS, ABSTRACT ALLUSIONIST

Works of art are complex events; their true complexity is revealed in criticism and its attempt to circumscribe the boundaries of art. Criticism idealizes representation and consequently distances the viewer from actuality. This is evident in the way marginalized discourse has been used to reduce complex experiences to overarching themes that relieve us of the responsibility of having to deal with the works themselves.

-- Charles Gaines¹

Abstract Expressionism is one of the most recognizable art movements in American art. Exemplary works on the movement include Micahel Leja's *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), and Dore Ashton's *The New York School: A Cultural Reckoning* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), as well as edited volumes such as Francis Frascina's *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (Routledge, 2000); Ellen Landau's *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); and Joan Marter and David Anfam's *Abstract Expressionism: The International Context* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007). These particular works offer an expansive study of the movement by recounting revisionist histories that include transnational and/or political understandings of post-World War II American art. However, for many others, Abstract Expressionism is still treated as a monolithic unit that fails to engage with issues such as identity, self-definition, racism, and ethnic traditions. As a result, Norman Lewis' involvement with the movement is seldom a focus for many of these authors.

Much of the recent scholarship on Lewis have insisted on his place in the American Abstract Expressionist canon even though he was not the only African American abstractionist to emerge in the postwar period.¹ Other African American artists, such as Hale Woodruff, Beauford Delaney, Rose Piper, Romare Bearden, and Thelma Johnson Streat were also working in the abstract mode during this time. But the tendency has been to argue for Lewis' inclusion based on his affinity with the movement and his presence at the invitation-only, closed-door sessions at "Studio 35" (figure 5.1).² His connections to the other Abstract Expressionist artists and the evolution of his style, Ann

Gibson offers, place him “geographically, socially, and formally” within the movement.³ In her book *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, Gibson identifies a select group of eight artists who make up the core of the Abstract Expressionist movement: Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, and Clyfford Still. These “essential eight,” according to Gibson, represent exclusively the white, male, heterosexual embodiment of the violent, aggressive, self-contained, romanticized American hero of post World War II.⁴ Lewis did not fit this mold, and is therefore unfairly excluded. Charles Gaines calls this marginalization of black artists “the theater of refusal,” where the perceived racialism of the art by African Americans makes it resistant to alternative modes of historical analysis, and therefore “punishes the work of black artists by making it immune to history and by immunizing history against it.”⁵

Several other reasons can also be used to explain Lewis’ exclusion. The Abstract Expressionist canon was, very early on, already determined by the art critic Clement Greenberg.⁶ In Greenberg’s 1955 pivotal essay “‘American-Type’ Painting,” he heralded the work of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Hans Hoffman, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still as examples of the avant-garde, where “ungoverned spontaneity and haphazard effects,” characterized canvases that “appear to be largely devoid of pictorial incident.”⁷ According to Greenberg, an Abstract Expressionist work of art is identified by its pureness, a lack of subject matter, and its “new and greater emphasis upon form.”⁸ Lewis’ work did not satisfy Greenberg’s criteria. Curator Thomas Lawson, who organized the first retrospective show of Lewis’ works, also suggests Greenberg overlooked Lewis because his “painting appeared vastly economical of means in an era

which delighted in fat painting, while the pale, sensitive color and general lyricism of mood that it implied was too easily neglected amidst the large scale dramas of American abstraction.⁹ Lewis did not keep to the “action painting”/gesturalist style that Harold Rosenberg identified or to the color-field style of painting.¹⁰ Many of Lewis’ paintings, such as *Harlem Gate* (1949; figure 5.2), *Every Atom Glows: Electrons in Luminous Vibrations* (1951; figure 5.3), and *Carnevale* (1957; figure 5.4) were hybrids that encompassed both “action” and “color-field” painting techniques to express the resounding tensions of historical racial polarization and the effect on his life. His style may have been abstract, but his execution was neither “spontaneous” nor “haphazard.” On the contrary, Lewis was a very deliberate painter who paid much attention to his use of lines and color. Lewis’ mark makings are meticulous and calculated. The abstractions Lewis utilizes do not necessarily negate or exclude the figure or narrative. By maintaining links to narration through the use of his trademark “little figures,” abbreviations, and stylization, Lewis uses the method of figurative abstraction to connect viewers to the subject of his canvases.

Like Greenberg, Rosenberg similarly characterizes the new style of postwar painting as an “event,” that is “inseparable from the biography of the artist.”¹¹ The goal, is “just to PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value— political, esthetic, moral.”¹² For Lewis, painting is an extension of his social experience.

He explains,

Art is to me the expression of unconscious experiences common to all men, which have been strained through the artist’s own peculiar associations and use of his medium. In this sense, it becomes an activity of

discovery, emotional, intellectual and technical, not only for the artist but for those who view his work. Art is a language in itself, embodying purely visual symbols which cannot properly be translated into words, musical notes or, in the case of painting, three-dimensional objects, and to attempt such is to be unable to admit the unique function of art or understand its language.

The artist must have an idea with which to begin but it must be an aesthetic idea and it must be developed from the unconscious experience, through conscious associations and technical knowledge, to become a complete, aesthetic experience for both the artist and the viewer. Thus, the artist has a great responsibility, not only to use himself honestly and know his medium profoundly, but to realize that he must communicate unique experiences so that they become unquestionable possible for the viewer. These are not dependent upon inappropriate rationales but emerge in symbols clearly of his own time, and basic to the aesthetics of future times.¹³

Many Abstract Expressionists also chose to evade the use of language in a bid to ensure that their work remain “absolutely autonomous,” and cannot function as “vessels of communication.”¹⁴ Not only did artists leave their works untitled, many also antagonized any attempt to interpret their work by refusing to explain what their work “meant” so as to avoid influencing the viewing process.¹⁵ Sculptor David Smith, for example, said “There were no words in my mind when I made it [my sculpture] . . . and I am certain there are no words needed to understand it. As far as I’m concerned, after I’ve

made the work I've already said everything I have to say."¹⁶ Norman Lewis, on the hand, was not afraid to use words. Having always been concerned with the issue of accessibility, his abstract paintings were often titled to keep his work approachable for the viewing public.¹⁷

Lewis' involvement may have been left out of many accounts of Abstract Expressionism, but his work has always managed to remain relevant. Lewis exhibited extensively at many important museums both nationally and internationally during his lifetime and his paintings received favorable reviews in the mainstream press. Marion Willard recognized Lewis' talent early on. In addition to his eight solo shows at the prestigious Willard Gallery, she also included Lewis' work in group exhibitions alongside the work of important artists such as 19th-century French artist Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Amadeo Modigliani, and Paul Klee.¹⁸ Posthumously, there have been at least twenty exhibitions devoted to showing his work nationally.¹⁹ Reviewers unfailingly share the opinion that Lewis was a highly skilled, aesthetically sensitive painter. Lewis admits he has "never had a show that was bad" and he has "never been reviewed wrongly."²⁰ However, according to Susan E. Inniss, two reviews from his first show at Willard Gallery "seem to have haunted Lewis."²¹ Henry McBride, writer at *The Daily Worker*, suggested that Lewis style was too similar to Mark Tobey's, another artist represented at Willard. Another critic at the *New York Sun* commented that Lewis was "too close for comfort to the style employed by Mark Tobey. One Mark Tobey is enough."²² These sentiments were echoed by Parker Tyler, who wrote in *ARTnews* that *Migrating Birds* was "Tobey-like."²³ The unwarranted attention, the unnecessary burden of being compared to Mark Tobey, combined with Lewis' lack of

a definitive and identifiable style hindered his ascend in the “dog-eat-dog” artworld.²⁴ While several striking similarities such as the “all-over” composition and the lack of a central subject preside over the works of Tobey and Lewis, Tobey’s main interest was in blending the elements of Eastern and Western aesthetics merging harmoniously on the canvas. Lewis was seeking “indigenous symbolism” through subjectivity.²⁵ Tobey was searching for the “infinite” through “symbolism in his canvases.”²⁶

Despite the many “recovery” projects that try to include Lewis in the Abstract Expressionist canon, Lewis was more of an abstract allusionist. His work may appear abstract on first sight, but Lewis provides the viewer with a title and just enough visual clues that they can start deciphering the content on their own. An example of one such painting is *Games* (1965; figure 5.5), where human figures intermingle with birds.

Lewis likened Abstract Expressionist art to what he saw on the ground from his window seat on the plane on the way to Los Angeles. He told fellow artist Vivian Browne: “What crooks the Abstract Expressionists are, because I’m sure that this is where they got it from. When you are that high up there is hardly any possibility of detail. You can draw a straight line, but the only real thing is fusion.”²⁷ Of his own experiments in abstraction, Lewis explains,

You suddenly become aware after years of painting that that rectangle or square is composed basically of shapes. How if you arrange those shapes in any interesting fashion—that might be visually stimulating. You realize that it doesn’t have to be a form as you know a form.²⁸

He added,

That's the thing you have got to get used to. It's like smelling yourself ... After a while you find you can stand yourself. And visually these things are exciting. You don't even know at the moment what you have done. In retrospect, you say, 'Gee, I did that!' You feel excited about the thing and that's how it happened to me.²⁹

If Abstract Expressionism is about individualism, experimentation, and innovation, then the trivialization of the importance of Lewis' work based on the confines of race and identity reduces his quest for a universal visual language to mere random doodles. To propose that he was a victim of racial prejudice is just half-truth. Lewis did not enjoy the freedom that other white artists were afforded. He was not a part of the counterculture the way his peers were. Lewis also did not enjoy the same economic success as some of his colleagues.³⁰ But he was not unknown. While it is a novel, well-intentioned move to want to write him back into the mainstream accounts of Abstract Expressionism, it is perhaps more useful to discuss his contribution to the movement in terms of how he has navigated between the twin goals of personal freedom and social responsibility. Perhaps we have to understand Lewis' attempt to visualize the interior reality of the relationship between people and the ambient world as being different from the rest of the Abstract Expressionists so we can appreciate his art as a revelation of unique aesthetics and sensibility and thus, an excellent starting point for observing the dynamics of the various forces at play on a society. Art historian, David Craven, contends that "In according Lewis his rightful recognition, he comes a major force across aesthetic, as well as ethnic lines, rather than simply a minor, or minority, voice within the New

York art world.”³¹ In this sense, Lewis would be better served excluded from the Abstract Expressionist canon.

Art critic Peter Plagens labels Lewis “pretty good second-tier Abstract Expressionist.”³² He further explains that Lewis lacked the spontaneity of Pollock, or Motherwell because he enforced “an a priori order, a vague premeditated design, on a kind of painting that needs to run the risk of real disorder to hit the heights.”³³ Calling Lewis an Abstract Allusionist instead of an Abstract Expressionist thus focuses his creations as a site of interchange between history and subjectivity; his identity as an African American artist, and the aesthetic and social potential of his blackness. It also frees Lewis’ work from comparisons with his contemporaries since his concerns, unlike Pollock’s, were never fully about the spiritual. In comparison to Pollock’s wild drip paintings, Lewis’ paintings are “meticulous and completely developed and expressed.”³⁴ Lewis’ oeuvre demonstrates that he used different styles at different stages of his career to convey his vision. While some may find his lack of a definitive style to be bothersome, gallery owner, Bill Hodges, who has been collecting Lewis’ work for a long time compares Lewis to a “gifted child” who moved in search of new endeavors after mastering a set of skills.³⁵

Finally, it is also important to note that even though Lewis worked on the margins of the Abstract Expressionist movement, he was a fully committed participant in the black arts community. His life and work demonstrate the interdisciplinary complexity that extends beyond his subject and the canvas. “Much of what happens to those men and women of color who paint in America depends largely on the part of white America,” Lewis says, adding “The very nature of the fact is that unless you become white, as long

as there is still racism here, you are not getting your just dessert.”³⁶ In a 1971 interview with Esther Rolick, Lewis asked, “Are they looking for art or are they looking for blackness?”³⁷ Lewis believed that black art was as good and valid as any other kind of art and he devoted his life to the cause of making sure black artists and their work were given due recognition. In response to interviewer Vivian Browne who asked if “we [black artists] belong in the mainstream,” Lewis replied, “We are so much a part of the mainstream that if black people would suddenly go on strike for one day in America, it would shake the economy.”³⁸

Notes

¹ Charles Gaines, *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism* (Irvine, CA: Fine Arts Gallery of the University of California, 1993), 20.

² Some essays include Ann E. Gibson, "Recasting the Canon: Norman Lewis and Jackson Pollock," *Artforum* (March 1992): 66-73; Harry Henderson, "Norman Lewis, The Making of a Black Abstract Expressionist, His Achievements and His Neglect," *International Review of African American Art* 13.3 (1996): 58-64; and Sara Wood, "'Pure Eye Music': Norman Lewis, Abstract Expressionism, and Bebop," in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, eds. Graham Lock and David Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95-119.

³ Present in the photograph are: top section, left to right: Seymour Lipton, Norman Lewis, Jimmy Ernst, Peter Grippe, Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hoffman, Alfred Barr, Robert Motherwell, Richard Lippold, Willem de Kooning, Ibram Lassaw, James Brooks, Ad Reinhardt, Richard Pousette-Dart. Bottom section, left to right: James Brooks, Ad Reinhardt, Richard Pousette-Dart, Louise Bourgeois, Herbert Ferber, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Janice Biala, Robert Goodnough, Hedda Sterne, David Hare, Barnett Newman, Seymour Lipton, Norman Lewis, Jimmy Ernst.

⁴ Ann Eden Gibson, "Diaspora and Ritual: Norman Lewis's Civil Rights Paintings," *Third Text* 45 (1998-1999): 29.

⁵ Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), xx.

⁶ Gaines, 13.

⁷ Peter Plagens calls Greenberg "one of two quasi-official spokespersons," for the Abstract Expressionist; the other he refers to is Harold Rosenberg. See Peter Plagens, "Another Look at Clement Greenberg," *New England Review* 28.1 (2007): 51.

⁸ Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989), 210.

⁹ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review* 6 (Fall, 1940). Many scholars consider Greenberg's essays to be crucial to the early understanding of the Abstract Expressionist movement even if his formalist values are too simple and overlook the experimental ideas and social implications for this new art. For more information on Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg's role in Abstract Expressionism, see Daniel A. Siedell, "Contemporary Art Criticism and the Legacy of Clement Greenberg: Or, How Artwriting Earned Its Good Name," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36.4 (Winter 2002): 15-31.

¹⁰ Thomas Lawson, *Norman Lewis: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: City University of New York, 1976), n.p.

¹¹ See Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* 51 (September 1952): 22.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Norman Lewis in *Norman Lewis Papers*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., roll 92, frame 96 (hereafter abbreviated AAA).

¹⁵ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *Partisan Review* 6 (Fall, 1940).

¹⁶ Ann Eden Gibson, "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language," *Art Journal* 47.3 (Autumn 1988): 208.

¹⁷ David Smith, quoted in Ann Eden Gibson, "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language," *Art Journal* 47.3 (Autumn 1988): 208.

¹⁸ When the discussion shifted to the importance of titling (or untitling) paintings, the group at "Studio 35" was split. Many agreed that titles were important in helping the public identify the subject matter but acknowledged that they were also essentially inadequate and, possibly, misleading. Some lobbied for the use of numbers, for the convenience of identification. Then there were others who were against the use of titles because they were content to keep the subject of their work vague and open to public interpretation. See Robert Goodnough, ed. *Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 (1950)*. Chicago, IL: Sobercove Press, 2009.

¹⁹ Norman Lewis papers in the AAA, roll 69, frame 47. The show was entitled "A Group of Exceptional Drawings." Two 1952 drawings by Lewis were included.

²⁰ List of "Selected One Person Exhibitions" in *Norman Lewis: Pulse, A Centennial Exhibition*, exh. cat., (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2009), 66.

²¹ Norman Lewis, "Oral History Interview with Norman Lewis, 1968, July 14," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Available: <http://www.aaaisi.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/lewis68.htm> [Accessed April 15, 2009].

²² Susan E. Inniss, "Norman Lewis: Identity, Expression, and Cultural Difference in American Painting," in *Norman W. Lewis, 1909-1979: Linear Abstractions*, exh. cat. (New York: Bill Hodges Gallery, 2002), 19.

²³ "Willard Gallery," *New York Sun*, Friday, March 4, 1949. Willard Gallery Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., roll N/69, frame 114.

²⁴ AAA.

²⁵ Norman Lewis, interview by Vivian Browne, August 29, 1974, transcript reprinted in *Artists and Influence* 18 (1999). The complete original interview is held in the Hatch-Billops Collections, New York City.

²⁶ Norman Lewis, "Plan for Work, November 1951," in *Norman Lewis: Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, 65.

²⁷ Colette Roberts, *Mark Tobey* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1959), 13.

²⁸ Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

²⁹ Harry Henderson, "Norman Lewis, The Making of a Black Abstract Expressionist, His Achievements and His Neglect," *International Review of African American Art* 13.3 (1966): 62.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art's posthumous purchase of Jackson Pollock's painting, *Autumn Rhythm*, for \$30,000 in 1957 set a new precedent for Abstract Expressionist work. See A. Deirdre Robson, "The Market for Abstract Expressionism," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Francina (London: Routledge, 2000), 288-93.

³² David Craven, "Norman Lewis as Political Activist and Post-Colonial Artist," in Stephanie Saloman, ed. *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977*, exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1998), 51.

³³ Peter Plagens, "Norman Lewis," in *Artforum* (Summer 1998): 125.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Henderson, 62.

³⁶ Bill Hodges, "Forward," *Norman Lewis: The Second Transition: 1947-1951*, exh. cat. (New York: Bill Hodges Gallery, 2000), n.p.

³⁷ Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

³⁸ Esther G. Rolick, interview with Norman Lewis, 1970, audio tape, Esther G. Rolick Papers, AAA.

³⁹ Norman Lewis, interview with Vivian Browne.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1.0 Benny Andrews, *Portrait of Norman Lewis*, 1985. Oil and collage on canvas, 60 x 40 inches.



Figure 2.0 Norman Lewis, *Johnny The Wonderer*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 37 x 30¼ inches.



Figure 2.1 Norman Lewis, *Washerwoman*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 34 x 24 inches.



Figure 2.2 Norman Lewis, *Dispossessed*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 40 x 36 inches.

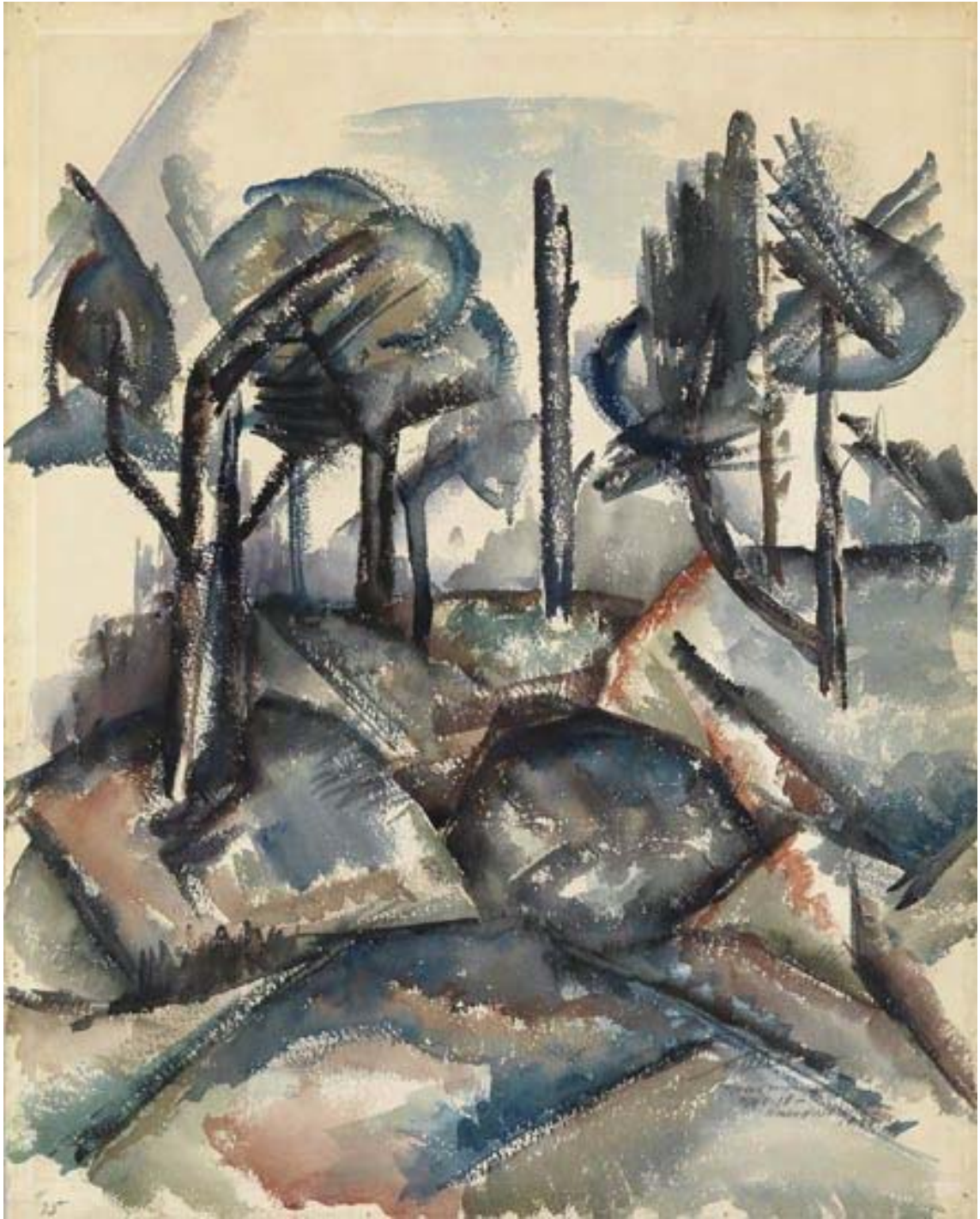


Figure 2.3 Norman Lewis, *Untitled*, 1936. Watercolor on cream wove paper, 22½ x 17⅞ inches.



Figure 2.4 Norman Lewis, *Two Barns*, 1937. Watercolor on cream wove paper, 17¾ x 22 inches.



Figure 2.4 Norman Lewis, *Two Barns*, 1937. Watercolor on cream wove paper, 17¾ x 22 inches.



Figure 2.6 Norman Lewis, *Jazz Club*, 1945. Oil and sand on canvas, 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 34 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.



Figure 2.7 Norman Lewis, *Twilight Sounds*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 23½ x 28 inches.



Figure 2.8 Norman Lewis, *Street Musicians*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches.



Figure 2.9 Norman Lewis, *Bassist*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 31 x 13½ inches.



Figure 2.6 Norman Lewis, *Jazz Club*, 1945. Oil and sand on canvas, 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 34 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.



Figure 2.11 Norman Lewis, *Street Music*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 25 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 24 inches.



Figure 2.12 Norman Lewis, *Roller Coaster*, 1946. Pen and ink on board, 12 x 16 inches.



Figure 2.13 Norman Lewis, *Metropolitan Crowd*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 18 x 40 inches.



Figure 2.14 Norman Lewis, *Ring Around the Rosie*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 27 x 32 inches.



Figure 2.15 Norman Lewis, *Congregation*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches.

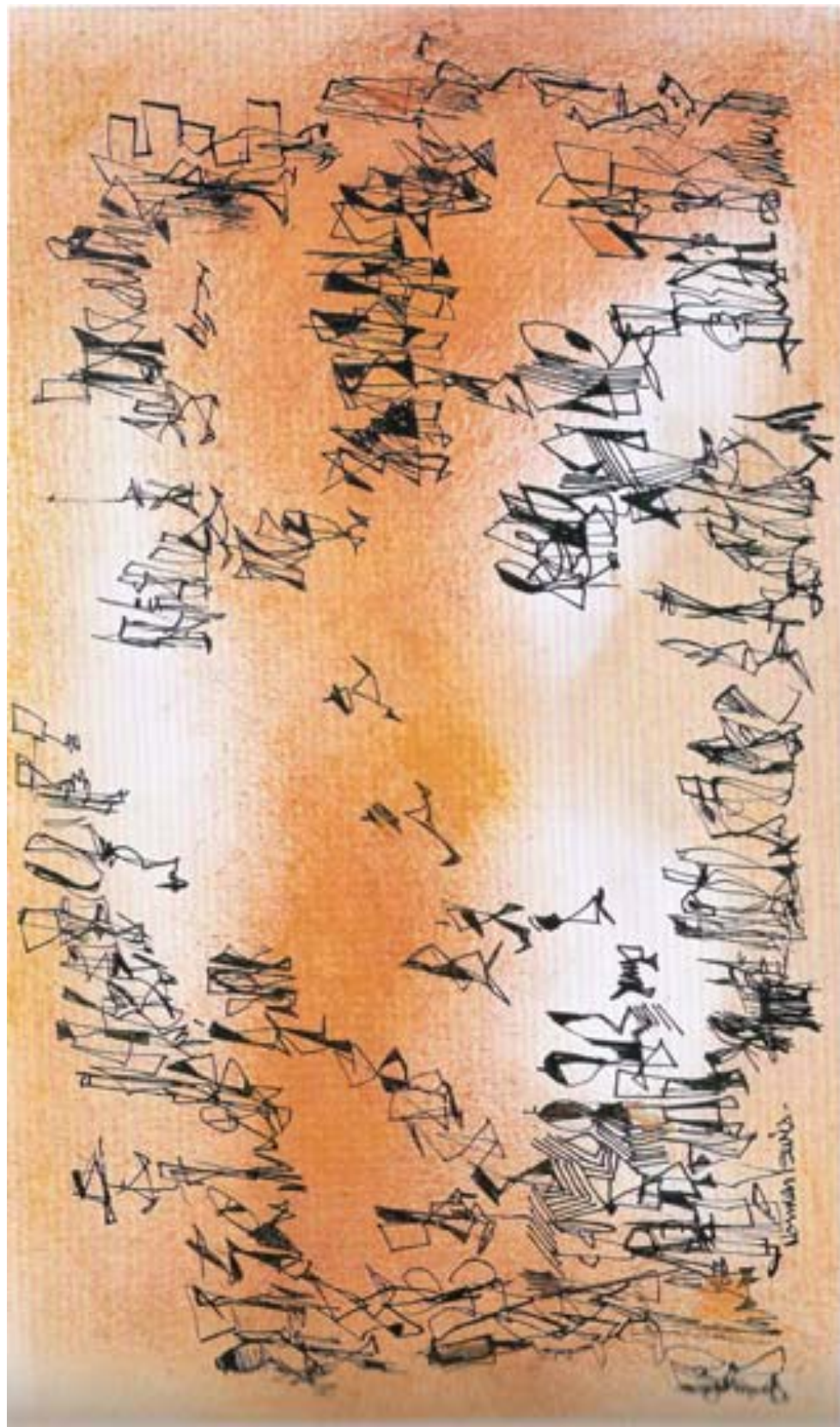


Figure 2.16 Norman Lewis, *Marching*, 1959. Ink and pastel on paper, 6½ x 11 inches.



Figure 2.17 Norman Lewis, *Promenade*, 1961. Oil on canvas, 41 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 64 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches.



Figure 2.18 Norman Lewis, *Abstract Procession*, 1978. Oil on paper, 29 x 41 inches.



Figure 2.19 Norman Lewis, *Boccio*, 1957. Oil on linen, 51 x 63¼ inches.



Figure 2.20 Norman Lewis, *Playtime*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 44 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 77 inches.



Figure 2.21 Norman Lewis, *Winter Branches*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 40 x 17 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches.



Figure 2.22 Norman Lewis, *Fire Flower*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 36 x 26 inches.



Figure 2.23 Norman Lewis, *Tenement*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 40 x 18 inches.



Figure 2.24 Norman Lewis, *Arctic Night*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 54 x 25½ inches.



Figure 2.25 Norman Lewis, *Arctic Night*, 1951-1952. Oil on canvas, 40 x 52 inches.



Figure 2.26 Norman Lewis, *Moon Madness*, 1952. Pen, ink, and oil on board, 42 x 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches.



Figure 2.27 Norman Lewis, *By Moonlight*, 1952. Pen, ink, and oil on board, 29½ x 25½ inches.



Figure 2.28 Norman Lewis, *Night Vision*, 1952. Oil on linen, 24 x 40 inches.

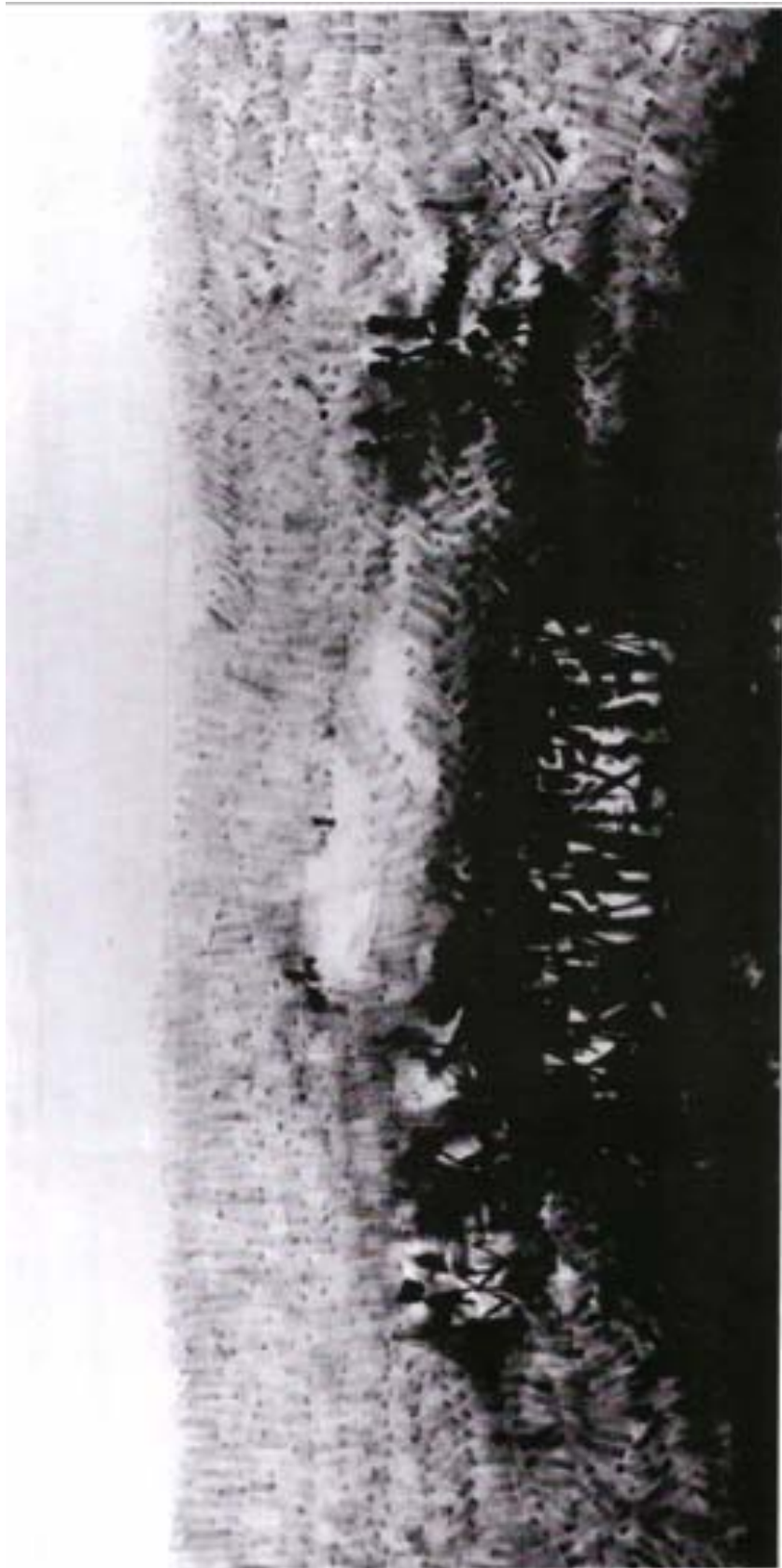


Figure 2.29 Norman Lewis, *Night Light*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 30 x 59 inches.



Figure 2.30 Norman Lewis, *Night Walk*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 66½ x 33½ inches.

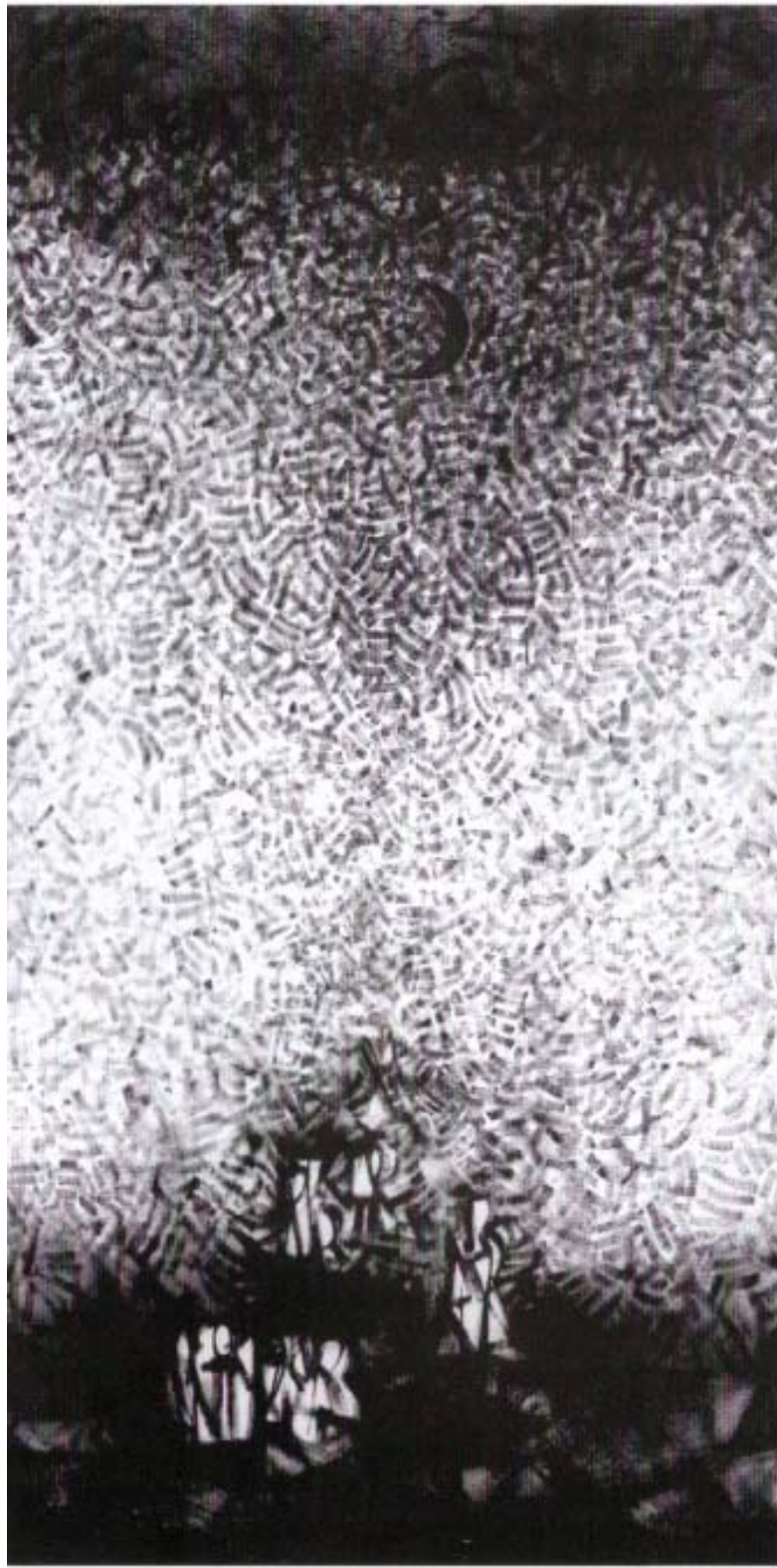


Figure 2.31 Norman Lewis, *Night Walker #2*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 66 x 34 inches.

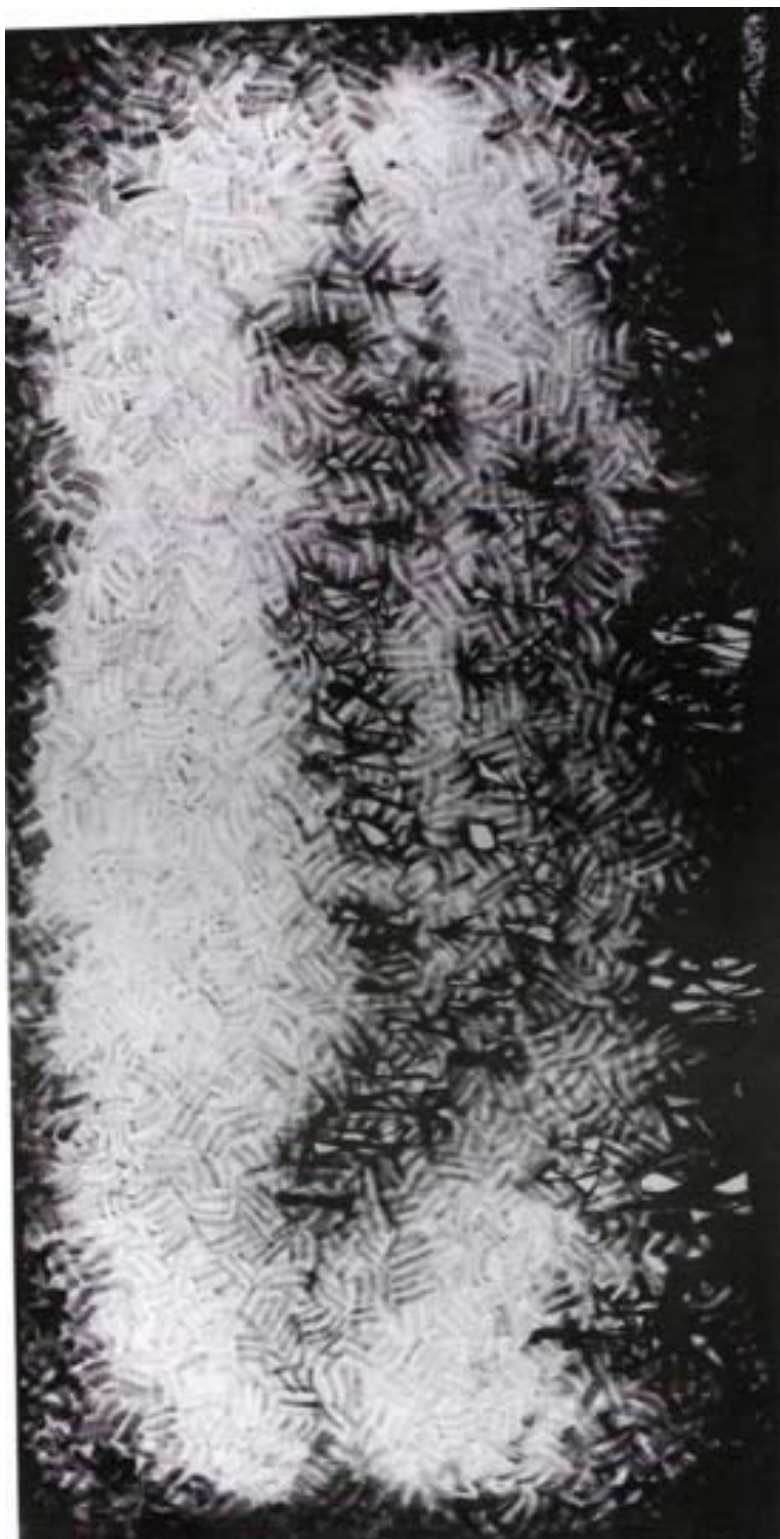


Figure 2.32 Norman Lewis, *Nocturne*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 24 x 48 inches.



Figure 2.33 Norman Lewis, *New Moon*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 43 x 71 inches.



Figure 2.34 Norman Lewis, *Migrating Birds*, 1953. Oil on linen, 40 x 60 inches.

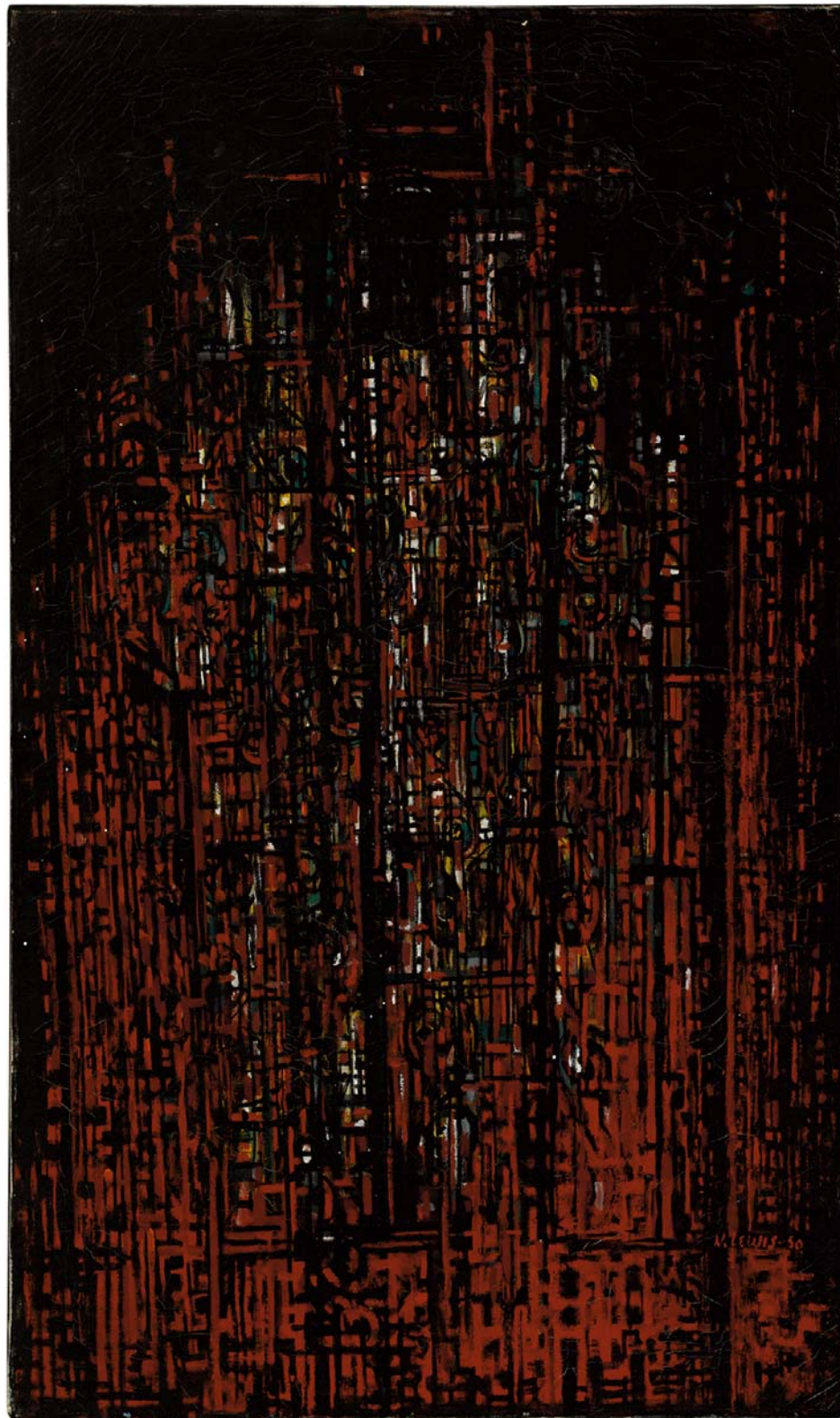


Figure 2.35 Norman Lewis, *Cathedral*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 42 x 25 inches.

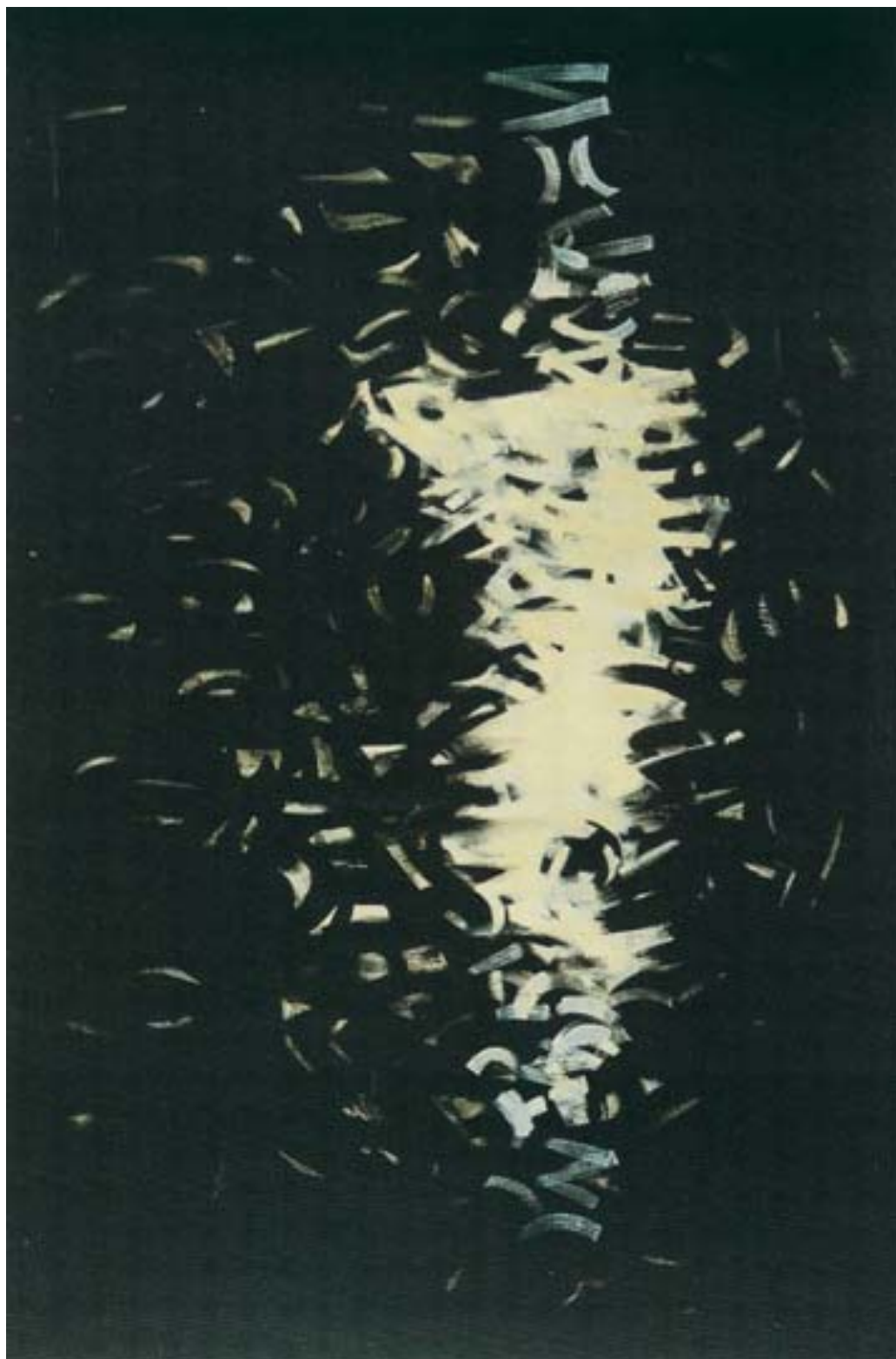


Figure 2.36 Norman Lewis, *Alabama*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 48 x 72¼ inches.



Figure 2.37 Norman Lewis, *Alabama II*, 1969. Oil on canvas, 48 x 71½ inches.



Figure 2.39 Norman Lewis, *American Totem*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 74 x 45 inches.



Figure 2.39 Norman Lewis, *American Totem*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 74 x 45 inches.



Figure 2.40 Norman Lewis, *Processional*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 57¼ x 38½ inches.



Figure 2.41 Norman Lewis, *Green Emy*, 1975. Oil on canvas. 54 x 64 inches.



Figure 2.42 Norman Lewis, *Seachange XIV*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 58 x 80 inches.



Figure 2.43 Norman Lewis, *Ebb Tide*, 1975. Oil on canvas. 47³/₄ x 80¹/₈ inches.



Figure 3.0 Norman Lewis, *Musicians*, c. 1938. Lithograph on cream wove paper, 14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.



Figure 3.1 Norman Lewis, *Comrades*, 1943. Lithograph on cream wove paper, 10⁵/₈ x 4⁵/₈ inches.

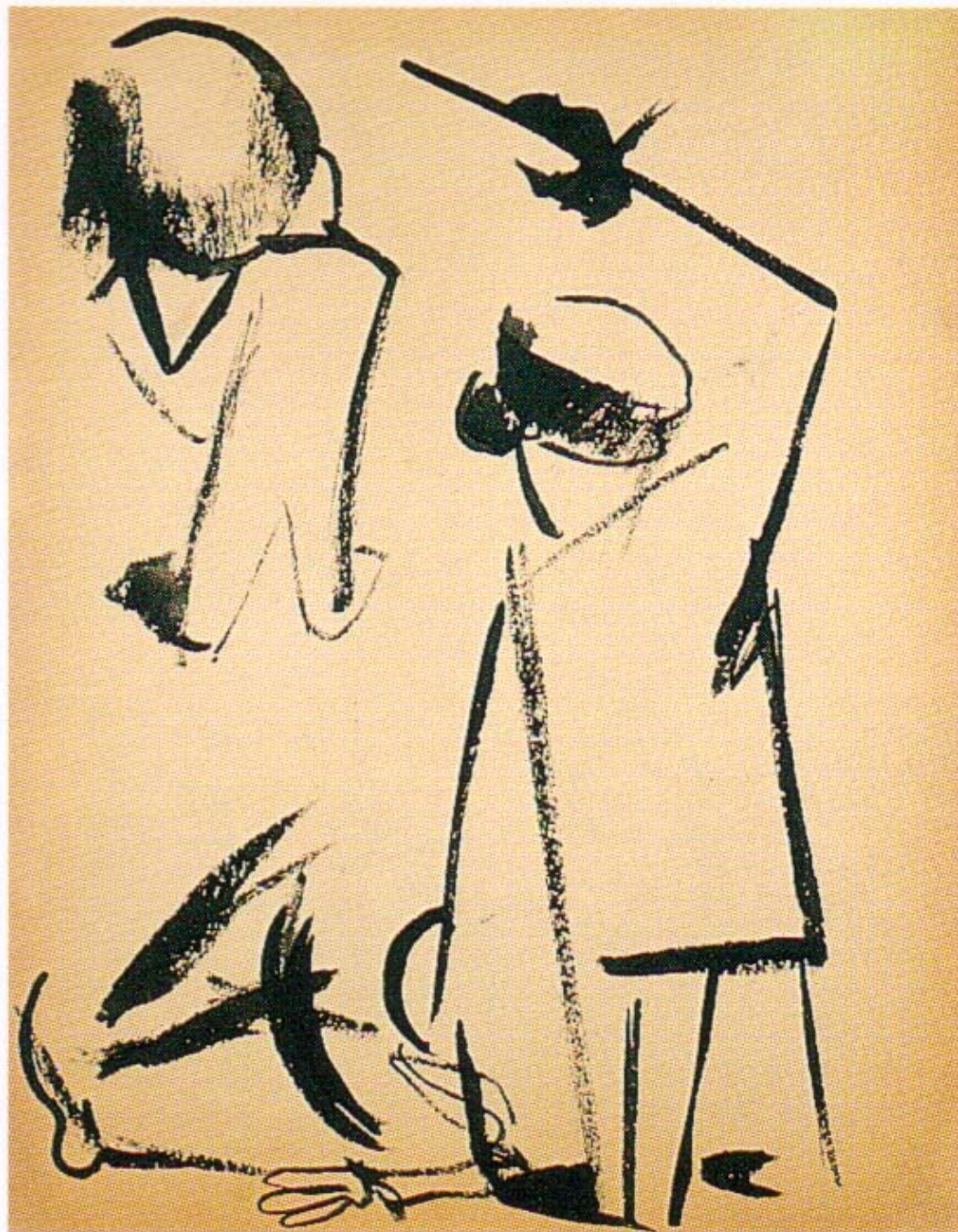


Figure 3.2 Norman Lewis, *Untitled*, c. 1935. Brush and ink on paper, 11½ x 9 inches.



Figure 3.3 Norman Lewis, *Untitled (Policeman Beating an African American Man)*, 1943. Gouache and watercolor on cream wove paper, 20 x 14 inches.



Figure 3.4 Norman Lewis, *The Soup Kitchen*, c.1937. Lithograph, 21½ x 17¼ inches.

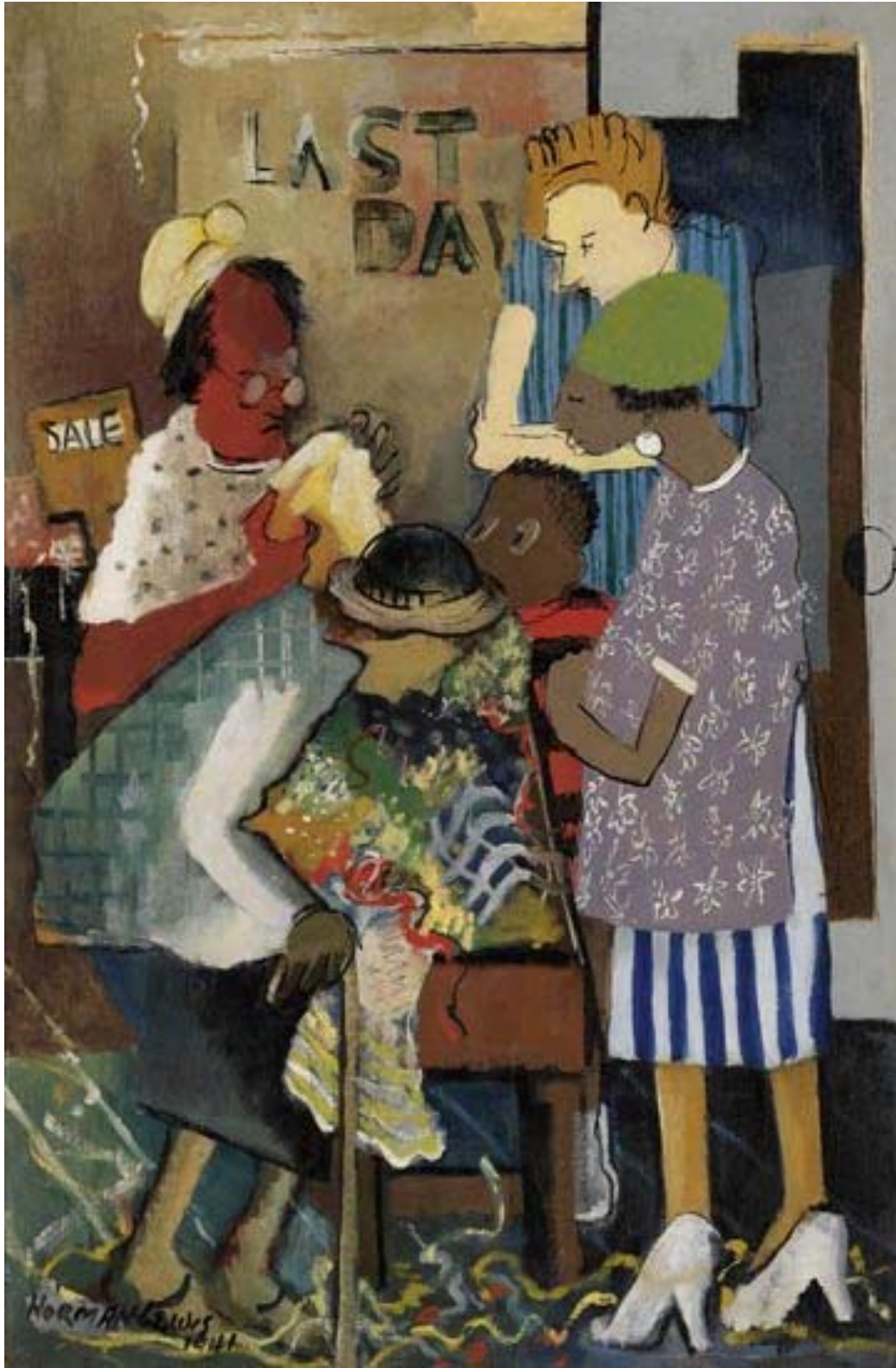


Figure 3.5 Norman Lewis, *Meeting Place*, 1941. Oil on canvas, 36 x 24¼ inches.



Figure 3.6 Norman Lewis, *Fish Eaters*, 1944. Gouache on paper, 19¾ x 13½ inches.



Figure 3.7 Norman Lewis, *Sinister Doings by Gaslight*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 40 x 52 inches.



Figure 3.8 Norman Lewis, *Procession in Yellow*, c. 1955. Oil on canvas, 27½ x 42½ inches.



Figure 3.9 Norman Lewis, *Bonfire*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 64 x 49 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches.



Figure 3.10 Norman Lewis, *Blending*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 54 x 41 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches.



Figure 3.9 Norman Lewis, *America the Beautiful*, c. 1960. Oil on canvas, 50 x 64 inches.



Figure 3.12 Norman Lewis, *Klu Klux*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 10 x 40 inches.



Figure 3.13 Norman Lewis, *Harlem Turns White*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 50 x 63³/₄ inches.



Figure 3.14 Norman Lewis, *Procession in White*, c. 1953. Oil on canvas, 25 x 59¾ inches.



Figure 3.15 Norman Lewis, *Rednecks*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 50½ x 70 inches.



Figure 3.16 Norman Lewis, *Redneck Birth*, 1961. Oil on canvas, 51½ x 72 inches.



Figure 3.18 Norman Lewis, *New World Acoming*, 1971. Oil on canvas, 72 x 87 inches.

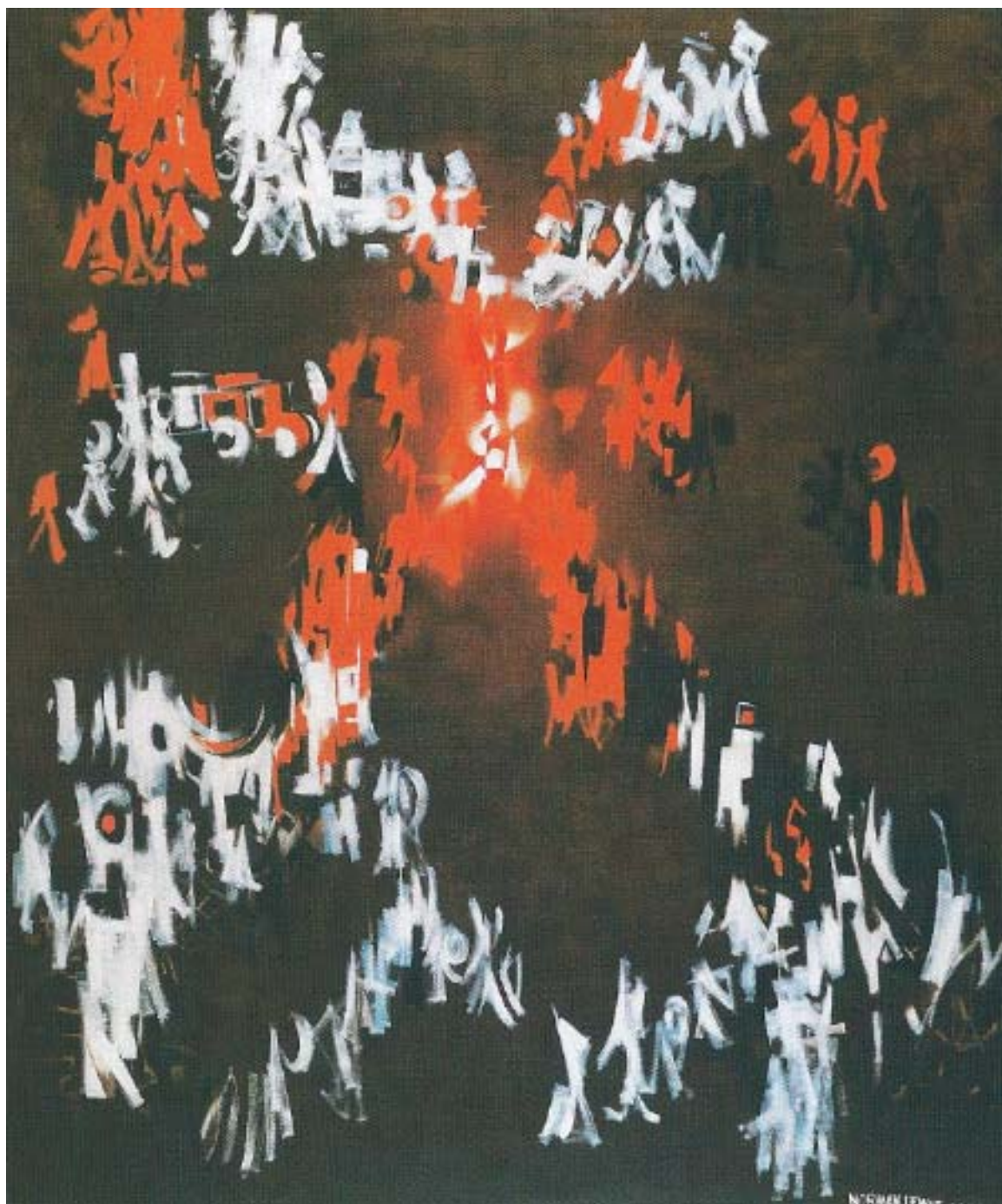


Figure 3.19 Norman Lewis, *Triumphal*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 87 x 73 inches.

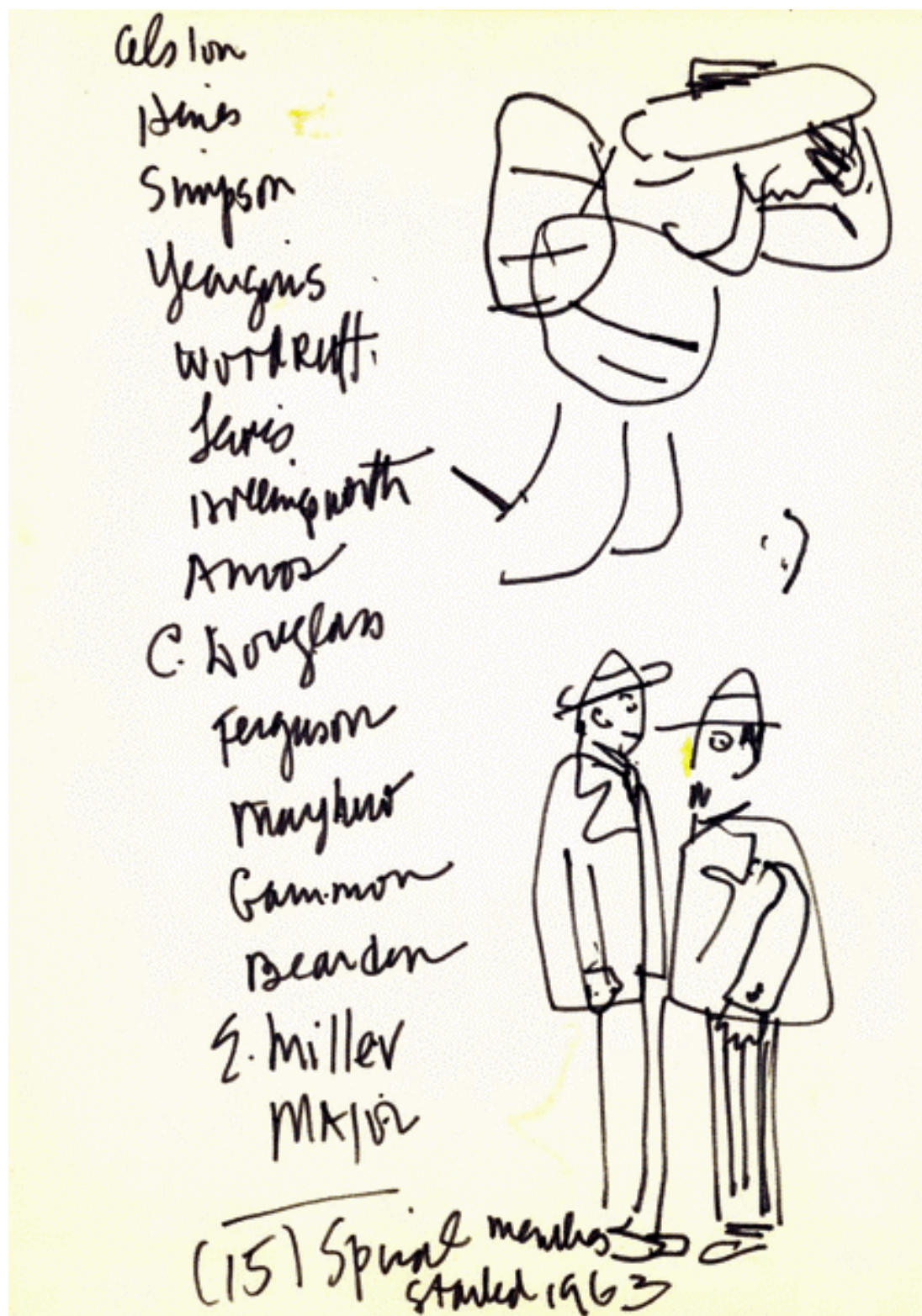


Figure 3.20 Romare Bearden, *Doodle*, undated.

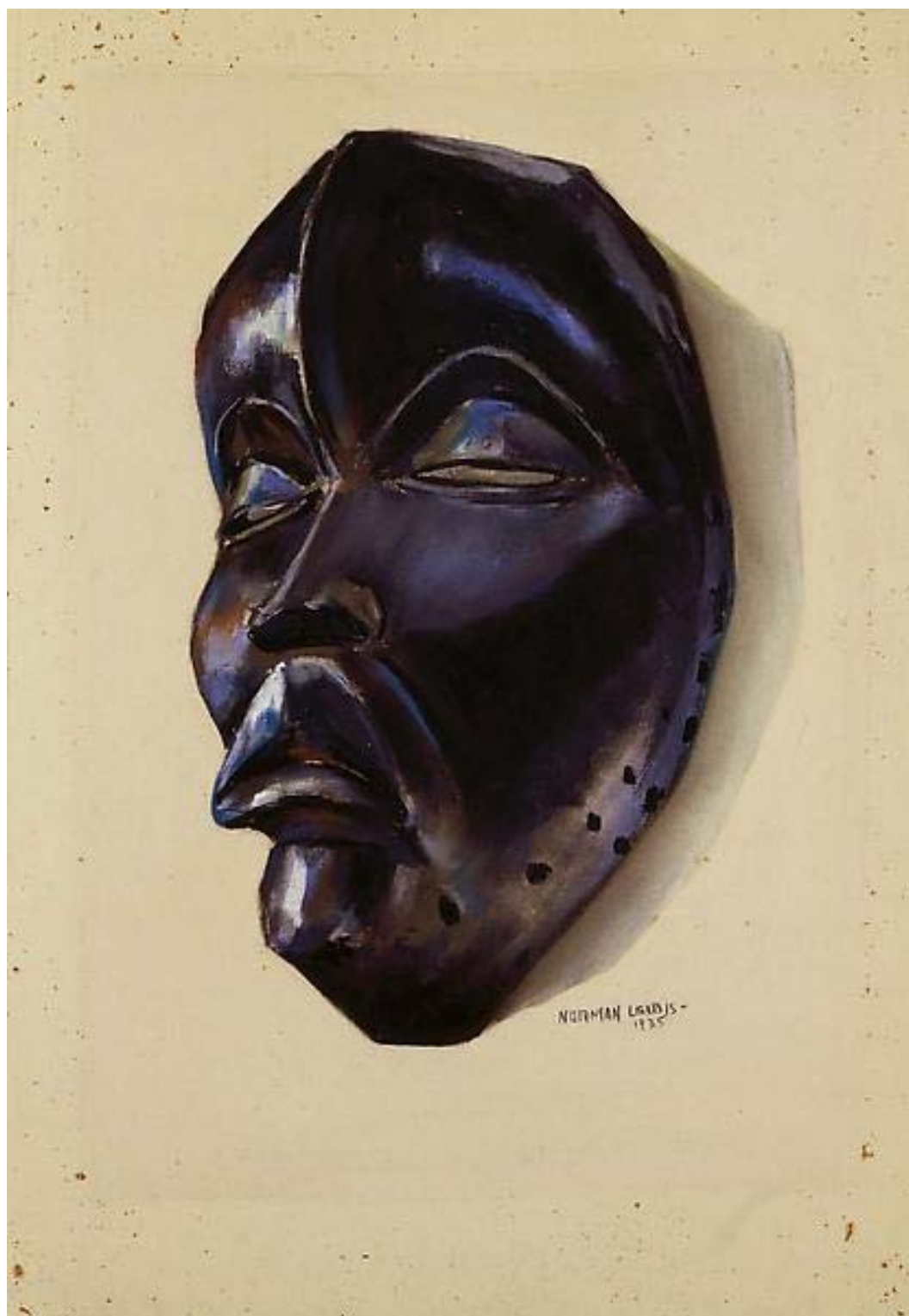


Figure 4.0 Norman Lewis, *Dan Mask*, 1935. Pastel on sandpaper, 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

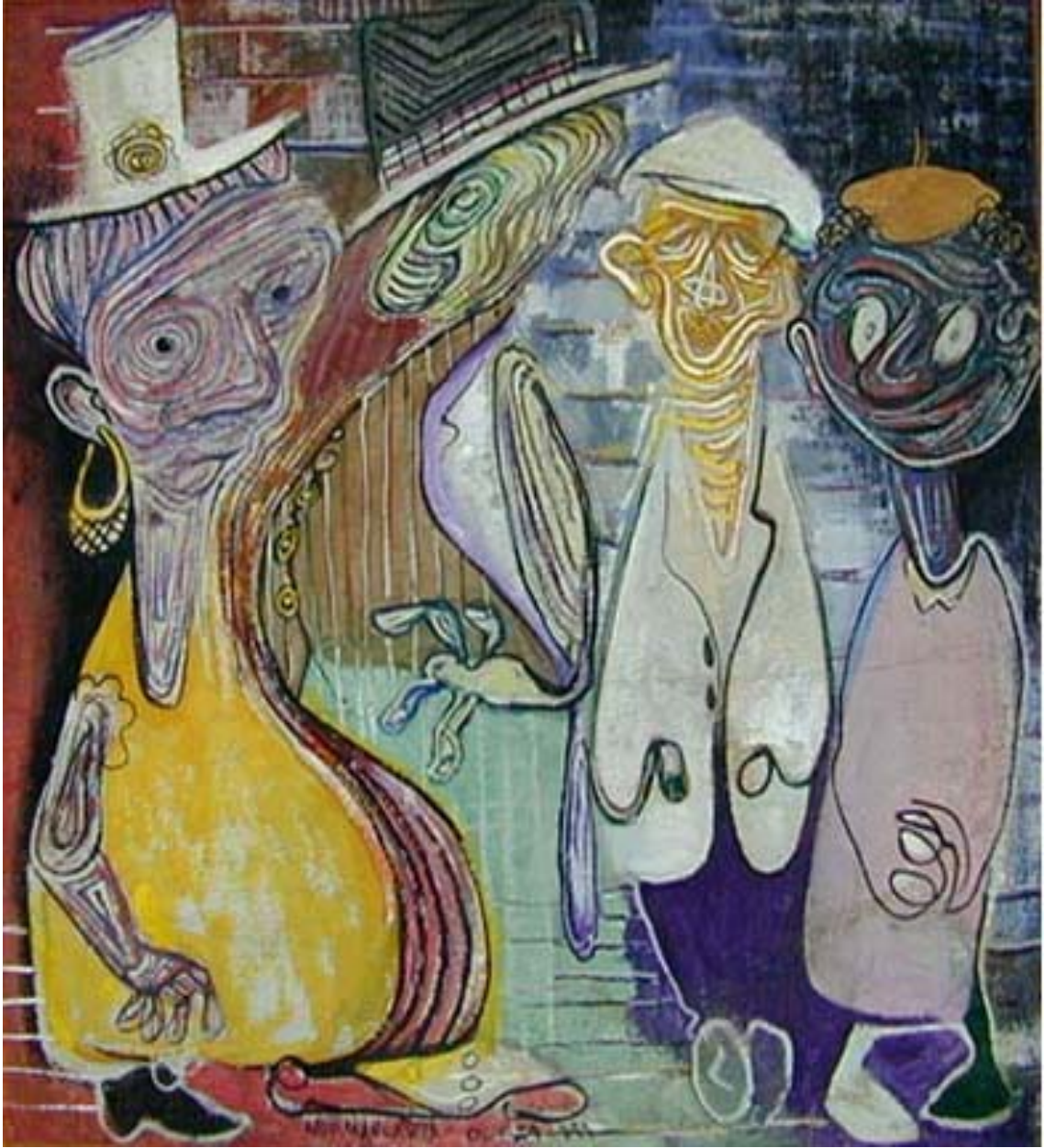


Figure 4.1 Norman Lewis, *Folks Like Us*, 1944. Oil on burlap, 30 x 26 inches.

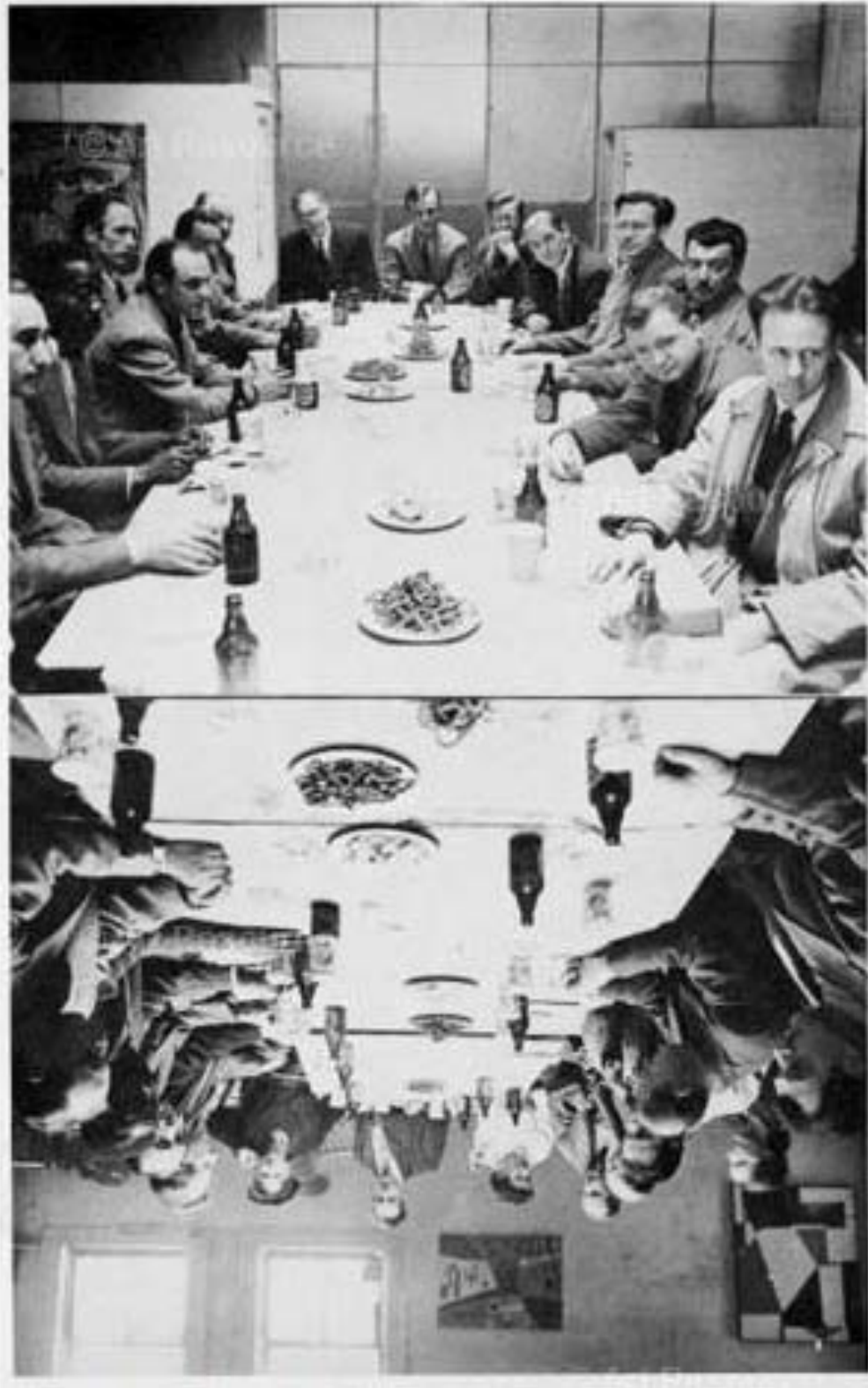


Figure 5.0 Max Yavno, *Artists' Sessions at Studio 35*, 1950. Photograph.

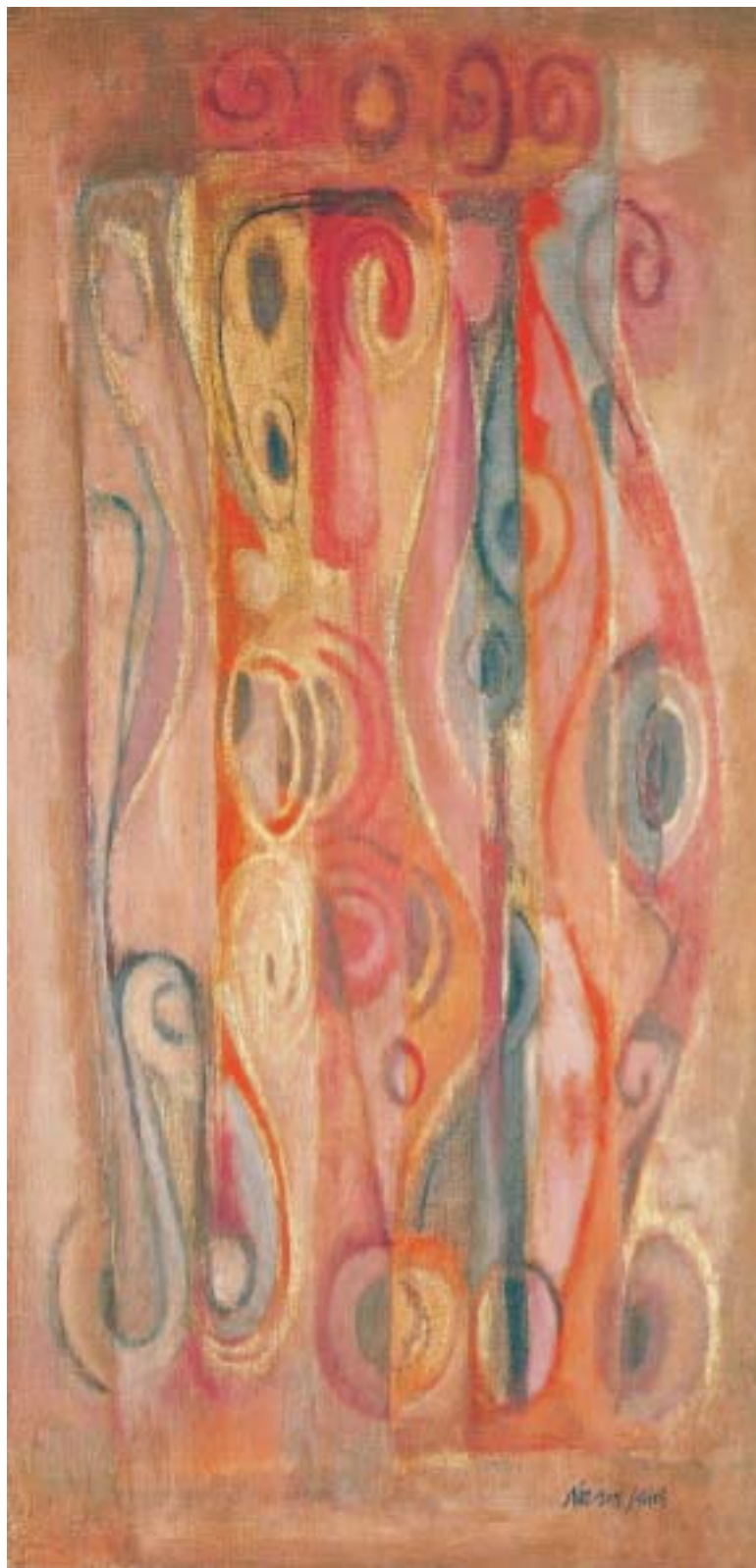


Figure 5.1 Norman Lewis, *Harlem Gate*, c. 1949. Oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 18 inches.



Figure 5.2 Norman Lewis, *Every Atom Glows: Electrons in Luminous Vibrations*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 54 x 35 inches.



Figure 5.3 Norman Lewis, *Carnevale*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 50 x 64½ inches.



Figure 5.4 Norman Lewis, *Games*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 61 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 36 inches.

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Purdue University – Graduate Instructor

Department of African American Studies: (AAS 473) African American Cinema, Spring 2010.

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies: (IDIS 271) Introduction to African American Studies,

Fall 2009, Spring 2008.

Purdue University – Teaching Assistant

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies: (IDIS 271) Introduction to African American Studies, Spring 2010, 2006.

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies: (IDIS 373B) Toni Morrison Novels, Spring 2007.

Department of Interdisciplinary Studies: (IDIS 491) African Americans in Hollywood Films, Fall 2007.

GRADUATE APPOINTMENTS:

Purdue University – Program Assistant, African American Studies and Research Center, Fall 2005–2007, Spring 2010.

INVITED LECTURES:

“African American Art Traditions” presentation for Purdue University African American Studies and Research Center course, AAS 277: African American Popular Culture. October 2010.

“Norman Lewis and the Art of Resistance” presentation for Purdue University Art History Society, March 2010.

“Africans in the Diaspora” presentation for Purdue University African American Studies and Research Center course, IDIS 271: Introduction to African American Studies. November 2009.

“The art of the Harlem Renaissance” presentation for Purdue University African American Studies and Research Center course, IDIS 271: Introduction to African American Studies. October 2009.

“African American Culture in Japan” presentation for the Purdue University African American Studies and Research Center course, IDIS 271: Introduction to African American Studies. November 2007.

INVITED WORKSHOPS:

Learning Cultural Diversity through the Arts, Lafayette Christian School, Lafayette, IN, May 2005.

Project on Asian Expressive Traditions, McCutcheon Residence Halls, Purdue University, April 2004.

SERVICE:

Program Assistant. Philosophy Born of Struggle Conference, Paine College, October 2014.

Program Assistant. Philosophy Born of Struggle Conference, Purdue University, October 2013.

Program Assistant. UNESCO Conference “Philosophical Dialogue Between Africa and the Americas,” Purdue University, April 2011.

Assistant Editor, *Nommo*, Purdue University, 2005-2007.

Symposium Committee, Harlem Renaissance: Aesthetics, Values, and Identity, 23rd Annual Symposium on African American Culture and Philosophy, Purdue University, 2007.

Designer, Black History Month Display for Office of the Dean, 2006-2010.

Program Assistant, Hip Hop in the African Diaspora, 21st Annual Symposium on African American Culture and Philosophy, Purdue University, 2005.

Program Assistant, "Reading Africa," Harriet A. Jacobs Lecture Series in the Humanities and the Arts, Fall 2005.

Co-Organizer, "Identifications: Faith, Theory and Identity-Making" Inaugural Graduate Student Conference in Philosophy and Literature, Purdue University, 2004.

Curatorial Intern, Purdue University Art Galleries, Fall 2000; Volunteer 1999-2001.

Curatorial Intern, Singapore Art Museum, Summer 1999.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE:

Purdue University Art Galleries: "Indigenous Hands" art exhibition, Spring 2001.

Purdue University Art Galleries: "Recent Acquisitions" art exhibition, Summer 2001.

Research Assistant for Dr. Aimee Surprenant, Department of Psychology, Purdue University, Fall 2000-Spring 2001.

Research Assistant for Dr. Daniela Corbetta, Department of Health and Kinesiology, Purdue University, Spring 1998-Summer 1998.

LANGUAGES:

Fluent in Chinese.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS:

American Studies Association

College Art Association

Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy

REFERENCES:

Leonard Harris, Professor of Philosophy and American Studies, Former Director of the Philosophy and Literature Ph.D. Program <lharris@purdue.edu>

Joseph Dorsey, Associate Professor of History and African American Studies
<jdorsey@purdue.edu>

Phoebe Farris, Professor of Art and Design and Women's Studies <phoebe@purdue.edu>