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A Pioneering Master of Abstraction and Social Observation

Norman Lewis: Shades of Blackness to open soon at the Bill Hodges Gallery



No.5, ca. 1970s, Oil on Canvas
78 ¼ x 54 ¾ in. (198.8 x 139.1 cm)

NEW YORK, NY, November 4, 2021 – Over the course of a remarkable artistic career, Norman Lewis mastered realism, abstract expressionism, and minimalism, drawing from each to create a body of work that remains extraordinarily relevant. His range of techniques and restless vision are finally given the celebration they deserve in a new exhibition, *Norman Lewis: Shades of Blackness*, which features 9 paintings representing a distillation of Lewis’s artistic legacy. The exhibition runs from November 18, 2021 to January 29, 2022 at Bill Hodges Gallery in Chelsea, New York.

Born in 1909 in Harlem, Lewis began his career as a social realist. Like many of his contemporaries, he depicted Black life with an eye toward genuine representation while commenting on the often-racist portrayals of Blackness by White cultural outlets. Using pastiche and caricature, common elements of the day’s artistic vernacular, Lewis honed his skill as a naturalistic painter while providing ironic perspectives on the ways in which Black culture was perceived by the dominant culture.

He continued in this mode throughout the early 1940s, culminating in a success with the WPA’s Federal Art Project. Soon after, Lewis had begun to grow impatient with what he considered a fatal compromise implied by his early approach to art. By centering his paintings on the question of perceptions of Blackness by others, he had ceded essential artistic ground to White culture. The Black artist, Lewis concluded, could only be liberated by a more direct mode of communication with the audience. He found that mode in abstraction.

What followed was a remarkable exploration of a sovereign artistic vision and the culture and times that shaped it. Lewis was present at the birth of Abstract Expressionism, befriended Ad Reinhardt, Jackson Pollack, Charles Seliger, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning. In 1950, he was the only black artist to participate in the famous closed-door sessions defining abstract expressionism held at Studio 35, organized by de Kooning and Kline and moderated by Museum of Modern Art Director, Alfred J. Barr. Later on, his works were featured in both MoMA’s *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America* (1951) and the Whitney’s *Nature in Abstraction* (1958). This period is also documented in *Norman Lewis: Shades of Blackness* with the work, *Untitled, Dancer* (1950), of the artist’s Atmospherics series.

But Lewis maintained an artistic conversation with the surrounding world that his more doctrinaire colleagues declined to observe. As Abstract Expressionism grew, its defining

tenets drifted farther away from Lewis's meditations on social reality and personal expression. For a time, his most vital work went largely overlooked: by the time scholarly textbooks began addressing Abstract Expressionism as a coherent movement, critics like Clement Greenberg omitted Lewis altogether.



Exodus, 1972, Oil on Canvas
72 x 88 ½ in. (182.9 x 224.8 cm)

Norman Lewis: Shades of Blackness includes a generous selection of the artist's work from his most important period, a series of meditations on the color black. Lewis had always made generous use of black—indeed, he credited his interest in the color to his early paintings of rhododendrons. The upcoming exhibition documents a crucial transition from Lewis's early interest in black as an element of figurative painting to his later use of black as a mode of abstraction. In *Exodus* (1972), black lines represent human figures, as they did in Lewis's earlier work, but no longer by virtue of clear

delineation. They now appear as thick, bold slashes of paint alongside others, of other colors, joining together in small groups that in turn combine to create a more elaborate form.

"I used just black - to convey the form," Lewis noted, "and I liked that and I went on to try to do other things."¹ Later on, his Black paintings represented one of the most significant, if overlooked, sequences in modern US art history. In his own words, Lewis "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...This was my becoming...using color in such a way that it could become other things."²

Similarly, Lewis's black paintings evoke form from an interplay of black and hints of other colors, creating a series of relationships from an extraordinarily limited palette. From a single color, Lewis evoked others. From those other colors, he evoked relationships among forms. And from those relationships, Lewis believed, he produced meaning.



Ighia Galini, ca. 1970, Oil on Canvas
54 ¾ x 78 in. (138.7 x 198.1 cm)

This approach is never more striking than in the works that resulted from Lewis's 1973 stay on the island of Crete, where he and his wife stayed with fellow artist Jack Whitten. Painting predominantly in black, Lewis evokes storms, landscapes, and the seaside near the village of Agia Galini, where he stayed. His Cretan drawings remain some of the most distinctive and evocative natural studies that later committed to canvas.

Since his death in 1979, Lewis' work has been celebrated in numerous exhibitions; significant solo exhibitions at museums include *Norman Lewis: Black Paintings, 1946-1977* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and most recently, in 2015, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) organized *Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis*, his first comprehensive museum overview. Lewis's works are on display in a number of major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of

¹ Gibson, Ann. "Recasting the Canon: Norman Lewis and Jackson Pollock." *Artforum International* 1992, March 1992. , 12.

² Gibson, 11.

American Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, among others.

Bill Hodges Gallery is located at 529 West 20th Street, 10E in New York. For inquiries about *Norman Lewis: Shades of Blackness*, please contact the gallery at 212.333.2640 or at info@billhodgesgallery.com.