

Abstract Art Online
Peter Wayne Lewis "Strings" @ Rosenberg + Kaufman
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by Joseph Walentini

Peter Wayne Lewis has a spectacular show of new work at Rosenberg + Kaufman that is a major departure from his last show in the same space. The new paintings serve up a brilliant blend of gesture and reductivism in which both conspire to support each other.



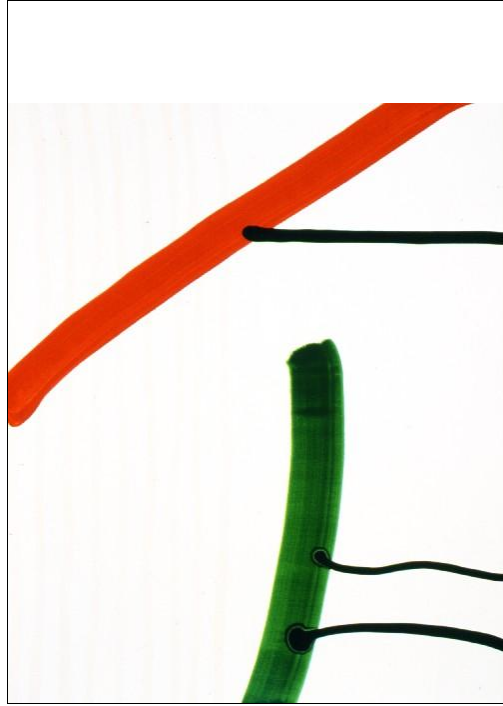
Peter Wayne Lewis - installation view

We reviewed this artist's last solo show at this gallery in April 2000. That work was concerned with presenting a dense traditional handling of space surrounded by a flat painted 'picture frame'. The result was a painting within a painting in which the interior portion presented a 3-dimensional spatial rendering and the outside 'frame' painting was an even high gloss and utterly reductive. The wide juxtaposition between the two is what gave impetus to the work. Even so, such a wide disparity was problematic in that the result was too much in the service of something more conceptual than visual.



Peter Wayne Lewis - installation view

The new work is a pleasant departure and takes Lewis' painting to an entirely new echelon. The artist has not abandoned his two earlier contrasting approaches but rather has put it in the service of a broadly congruent sensibility. These paintings offer an engaging mix of anarchy and order that is nevertheless not at odds with itself. The two primary drivers for this are a reductive esthetic (now exemplified by the background expanses of seemingly blank canvas) combined



Peter Wayne Lewis, *Strings 142*, 2003,
oil on canvas

with the quick gestural forms in the foreground. Color plays to both aspects. It flattens out in the ground, dispersing into variations of white with a nod to Minimalism. In the forms the hues can become bright and intense but they never stray too far from the earth tones. It is the wildly lyrical forms that grab the eye and steal the show. But that's mostly because the background gives them such a large stage on which to dance. Now, take a closer look at the ground and you'll see a sublime configuration of stripes in one form or another throughout the work.



Peter Wayne Lewis, *Strings 155*, 2003,
oil on canvas

Lewis' subject matter references a general sense of microscopic organic forms. The paintings suggest entire worlds, unseen by the naked eye that might exist all around us. This is but an entry point to understanding the work. What is really fascinating is how the artist takes just a handful of elements and arranges them in such a manner to achieve a magnificent quality of visual balance. It's not just the arrangement of the forms but again, how the color is articulated that is just as important for defining the spatial relationships. Next look at how each piece is painted. To achieve the authentic spontaneous quality of gesture expressed by the forms requires a Zen-like confidence in painting them. Without knowing how Lewis actually works, it is easy enough to imagine him employing a methodology related to Eastern painting. You wonder if he spends hours practicing painting the forms to build confidence and experience and then transfers that knowledge and energy, in a flash, to the canvas. Regardless of the method, the fact remains that, as with the watercolor medium, there is a very thin margin for error in these pieces. Yet in painting after painting Lewis manages to get it right.

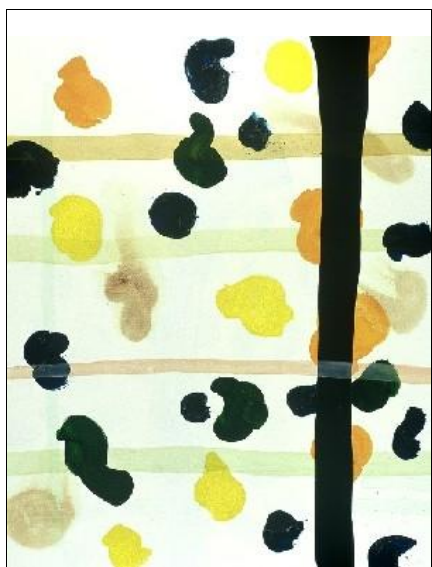


Peter Wayne Lewis - Detail View



Peter Wayne Lewis, *Strings 147*,
2003, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in

All of this leads into the content found in this work, which is that Lewis creates several levels of visual experience in his paintings. The overt forms relate to each other in placement, number and proportion. Then there is the way that the color of the background is never quite determined; in part due to the subtle addition of those stripes. Finally space is, on one hand defined, yet also indeterminate. Measured order combines neatly with a messy and impulsive organic sensibility. Gesture, tidiness, sensuousness, logic, presence, absence; all of it is pulled together and presented in paintings that make it look easy to do. In truth Lewis leaves himself exposed in this work - he takes a huge risk in attempting to extract so much out of such few elements. But the artist rises to the challenge and the razor-edge stance is what makes the work and permeates it with meaning.



Peter Wayne Lewis, *Strings 159*,
2003, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 in

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