

Formed in Darkness, Born into the Light: Peter Wayne Lewis talks about his New Paintings, "Fields" with David Carrier

Peter Wayne Lewis is a lyrical painterly painter who extends the grand tradition of American Abstract Expressionism. His painting is hot, emotional and personal. Recently New York painting has been a beleaguered art form and most of the prominent younger painters are ironical and distanced. Peter is not interested in irony or indirectness. His art, full of feeling, is very immediate. What gives a highly personal twist to his paintings is what he describes as the "language of my body in the generation of these images." These descriptions of Peter may make him sound like an outsider. His sensibility, it is true, is unlike that dominant in painting right now. But as a teacher, and an active participant in the New York art world, he is very much an insider. Son of a jazz musician, he associates the rhythms of his art with music as disparate as that of Beethoven, John Coltrane, and Duke Ellington. Widely exhibited and well traveled in Europe, Japan and America, he is a cosmopolitan personality. His highly distinctive art is an amalgam of American, Jamaican and European sources. As this interview shows, he reads widely. He knows his art history, and he takes a serious interest in physics. Out of this rich intellectual and visual culture, he creates something essentially his own.

One of the most rewarding tasks for the critic is getting to know a highly articulate first-rate painter. Talking with Peter was very exciting for me and that excitement is communicated in this interview. Our discussion provides a useful perspective on his concerns. But in the end, to understand Peter's achievement you must use our discussion as your starting point. I did that. After we talked, I went back to look again at his paintings. I had learned from him -- I saw more. Peter is a grandly ambitious artist. His new work is bold, deeply creative and highly original. His painting matters.

David Carrier: Commentators discuss your interest in jazz and they also mention your cultural heritage as a Jamaican-American. How do you use these influences?

Peter Wayne Lewis: I am from Jamaica, a Caribbean melting pot. For me, the business of race is a political construct. We all are human beings, ultimately; we've been interacting with each other throughout time. I came here when I was nine; and after thirty-seven years, I still have a sense of not being at home. The United States still doesn't feel like my place, even though I have become an American citizen. It's not where I was born. I'm still trying to find stasis, a balance. When I am making a painting, this becomes reflected in an uncomfortable formal balance, which forces the spectators to question their own belief systems. Being an immigrant is crucial because it determines how one thinks about stability.

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My father was a classically trained pianist who evolved into a jazz pianist. My grandparents were missionaries and had music in the church. So along with religion, which was always being discussed, we had music and singing. In the Caribbean, music is always being played. There is, to my knowledge, no history of anyone in my family painting. My family emigrated in 1962 from the Caribbean, so I am still discovering that history. I'm becoming acquainted with the art of Wilfredo Lam, and with the impact of African history in Cuba and also Jamaica. The people brought to Jamaica as slaves came from the region now called Ghana in Africa. Many were artisans, craftsmen interested in "art;" they didn't use that term; their objects had a ritual function perhaps. In some ways, I've locked into that part of my heritage. Making paintings is a ritual act; I'm trying to discover a link to the spiritual. I aim to transcend the flesh, and hopefully to discover things. The shaman bridges the realms of flesh and spirit to bring back knowledge that can be shared. My religious beliefs are akin to those of the shaman. I'm not devout, but I am devoted to making these pictures.

DC: I start to see the connections of your painting to music. There's repetition in your art, as in jazz.

PWL: A certain piece of music might be played in different ways; performed differently every night. As a jazz musician would with the blue note, I have a starting point for the pictorial structure. For this series, the rectangle within the rectangle functions as my blue note. There is repetition that happens, but I'm not certain exactly what form it's going to take how color is going to be modulated, how space will be affected.

DC: Many other painters are interested in music.

PWL: In conversations with Sean Scully, he talked about Irish blues, Neil Young and the power of rock and roll. As we know, Mondrian was interested in jazz. I listen to all kinds of music looking for the genuine -- when you hear it you know it. It helps me to find out what I am, what my life is all about, and to reveal that in paint.

DC: You have been painting seriously for more than two decades. How would you describe your development?

PWL: The beginnings of my drift from figurative painting into a more geometric structure came at first from jazz. There is a real structure in jazz, a hybrid based upon blues, Irish music, folk music; everything is based upon the blue note-- the beginning point. Here is a quote from Edek Bartz and Birgit Flus from the Documenta IX exhibition catalog that I like very much, "Jazz always happens in the absolute present. It cannot be repeated. It happens in an intense and unthinkable collectivity. Perhaps in a state of trance and at the same time with inexplicable concentration...It is always a matter of life and death. As serious as your life." There is always chance. Jazz provides a model for how I build a picture. The previous paintings were becoming, not necessarily too easy, but comfortable; I didn't want to be in that place. Right now I could very easily turn everything I'm doing back into concrete images, it's very natural to me. But in

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the making of these abstract pictures where the geometry comes into play, I'm trying to think in different ways.

DC: Now we're really talking about style.

PWL: Yes and no. There are signature gestures that permeate all of my work. With my paintings, the only thing I can acknowledge is certain lyrical linear gestures that seem to be a kind of scripting, a handwriting.

DC: You're using tensions, focusing on them, bringing them out?

PWL: It's the imbalance that creates the tension in the work. I have an understanding of imbalance, of not being in a comfortable situation. I'm trying to get there, but if I get there it would probably kill me. I have learned to perform within this arena. This adds psychological charge to the work, which makes it human.

DC: That's why you're a hot artist rather than a cool one.

PWL: That's not the entire story. I'm not keeping emotion out. I am more conscious of analytical dimensions, but not at expense of emotional concerns. They are related.

DC: Many people think that art is about harmony and unity. Not your art! It's about seeking discomfort.

PWL: Discomfort is one way of putting it. Another way to put it is that I seek to encourage an active participation by the viewer. I don't want my paintings to be passive objects. I want them to generate excitement, questioning, even intrigue. Some perceived imbalance or discord allows movement and rhythm. I'm very conscious of the formal attributes. This is what I teach -- certain structural things, formal balance, harmony, unity, all of those compositional elements. With my personal work, I'm trying to shake that up, I'm trying to find other ways of creating harmony, ways that generate some uneasiness.

DC: Isn't there a tension between your spiritual concerns and your interest in physics?

PWL: I think most people's beliefs involve some kind of contradiction. There are many things I'm interested in that play into how I see things. There is a symbiosis of ideas that may seem to be opposed.

DC: You love darkness and light coming through darkness.

PWL: We are formed in darkness and born into the light. There is a metaphorical structure in the work. I don't present things of the world, I do not present a mimetic structure. The undertone, experiences of the picture suggest images of the natural world, trees, sky, earth. I can't deny that. But I'm not consciously painting things I see. I'm interested in the phenomenon of the horizon that separates the opaque earth from the transparent sky. I do paint primarily at night; there is a different presence of light, the nocturnal energy -- a different kind of stillness.

DC: You use internal frames in your new work. The brushwork in the center has some connection to Kline's and the outer "frame" is akin to Rothko's abstract images. Are those associations relevant?

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PWL: Yes they are. But I'm more interested in graceful Chinese calligraphy and Japanese sumi ink painting. I'm not trying to paint like anyone, I'm trying to figure out what these marks mean for me, what the paintings do for me. I'm interested in transcendence. The rectangle within the rectangle refers to the window, a reflection of reality. I want this frame to be loose, even sly. I embrace pictorial illusion. These paintings thus involve a kind of corruption of the modernist canon according to Clement Greenberg. I'm absolutely interested in illusions and don't care about trying to collapse pictorial space into a flat plane.

DC: What other artists share these concerns?

PWL: Terry Winters is exploring this realm of illusion while Brice Marden works with the language of flatness. I feel closer to Winters. It's always interesting to find artists stumbling down the same road. But I'm not trying to paint in any particular camp.

DC: What other contemporary artists matter to you?

PWL: One of the artists most important to me right now is Thornton Dial, who is considered an "outsider." He had a one-man retrospective at the New Museum in NYC. His work is incredibly powerful. I believe the sublime exists in his work, but he doesn't think in these terms. Ritualistic African artists also have the capacity to take you to other places.

DC: You use both music and art in these ritual ways.

PWL: John Walker, while visiting the graduate painting program at Massachusetts College of Art where I teach, said to me that Rothko was not interested in color, but in death. I'm interested in death and what it is to be alive.

DC: Ritual means magic, it involves transcending rational bounds?

PWL: I take it in a literal way, ritual describes something greater than it is, it becomes a connection to things not tangible, the realm of the spiritual. For me a ritual act is a bridge to different sorts of experiences. Theoretical physics is a kind of magic also. It purports to be scientific, but at the same time they're not just theories but ideas about things. One can choose to buy into a belief system or not. A physicist might disagree, but that's how I look at it.

DC: What other visual influences have been important for you?

PWL: In 1982 I traveled with my wife, Catherine, to Europe. This was my first trip to France. We went to see the cave paintings in the belly of the earth, the pre-historic cave paintings at Lascaux. I think of these caves, demarcated by the stalagmites and stalactites, as earth's first gothic cathedrals. I had a pretty profound experience. I was overwhelmed. I started thinking about architecture, about ritual space, about the animals and things that threaten us. I cried. Those paintings altered what I was doing. I've always been interested in building images that move people in similar ways.

DC: What other painters influence how you think about ritual?

PWL: One of the great paintings for me is a Raphael in Vienna, the Madonna in the Meadow (1505). It is really one of the great paintings of the world. The luminosity, color and light really are akin to Rothko. Raphael was able to animate

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the painting, to breathe life into it. The Madonna's body hovers, it almost defies gravity. Seeing that painting also brought me into abstraction, believe it or not. I had an epiphany that took me outside of myself; I experienced how it shimmers, how the body moves, suspended in space even though it is anchored on the ground. How was he able to do this with paint? How did he make the painting? It took me nine months of germination to find the right color combinations. I actually hit it. The subject matter and divine inspiration has to be part of the answer.

DC: Raphael, what an extraordinary artist for you to mention. When I ask painters whom they care about, they cite contemporaries or modernists, not old masters!

PWL: But David, my painting is a bridge. It harkens back to the religiosity that's rooted in the image. I'm interested in divine inspiration. Painters working in church, praising God, that makes absolute sense to me. Remember what I told you about my missionary grandparents. Art involves private uses of religion; it's personal, aesthetic, subjective.

DC: Raphael's painting doesn't look like your work at all.

PWL: But look at what I find to use in Raphael. How does one capture light in paint? In my new paintings, I'm actually modulating the border, consciously moving the brushstrokes in particular ways. I paint in artificial light. I move to various positions to see how the light actually falls on the paint. When you move to different vantage points, you get the painting to come alive so that it's not just a static object. I manipulate the paint so that it becomes fluid and very much affected by light and gravity. I constantly change the orientation of the painting as I paint, so that you're not always sure what is the top or bottom or right or left.

DC: How did seeing that Raphael affect your work?

PWL: I discovered stasis; I produced something in balance that defies gravity. Finding those colors took me into the Blue Swan Suite where the blue becomes a metaphor for the vestment of the Madonna. That title refers to this experience--stasis is what keeps ships afloat, there is equal pressure from all sides. When you look at the rectangle, there is a formal balance. The dimensions are equal left to right, top to bottom, or just off a bit. They appear in balance, and they appear out of balance. I try to create stasis pictorially. I want compression. I seek light pressing through color. Color can be thought of as heat creating a kind of pressure. What's inside the window in my picture is being fueled by the weight of things imploding and exploding. Things are being born. I look at what's on the inside of those spaces. That's what the framing is about.

DC: So you are interested in the sublime?

PWL: Absolutely. I believe in limitless space, space that expands, with no beginning and no ending. I'm trying to represent it through the veiling of color and light; light being that fundamental property of human existence. I'm interested in something larger than we are.

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DC: You use science poetically, as an inspiration as a bridge between what we know and how we might imagine things.

PWL: I care about what is beyond all measure-- the immutable, the intangible. I want to get at what is embedded in the materials I use.

DC: You have mentioned that Michio Kaku's book *Hyperspace* is important for you.

PWL: *Hyperspace* is a theory of creation. I have a great interest in science-- in outer space, time travel, wormholes, and black holes. Kaku's book describes the whole history of theoretical physics, going back to the 1800s, in ways a non-scientist can begin to understand. Why are we here? What purpose do we have? Science is trying to answer these questions. The British scientist Michael Faraday introduced the universal mathematical language of theoretical physics.

DC: He was interested in fields?

PWL: Yes. Simply put, a field is a region or space in which a given effect (such as magnetism) exists. Fields help us discover the fundamental properties of light.

DC: Why do you need these theories?

PWL: I don't need them, but they inspire me, they make me think about what I am. I do not necessarily believe all of these things.

DC: They're like music in that way?

PWL: Yes, they are a field of inspiration.

DC: Painting for you becomes an act of questioning?

PWL: Yes! What is the painting? What does it represent? Is painting a language? Is it possible to describe events, things, and entities? I'm trying to discover the essence of things. Can a line function not just as a line but as a portal that links things to other things? The line can turn into a word, which has a different kind of meaning; it can turn into light, into space. Formally, that's how I am using it. There's an idea in string theory that we exist as strings. We're vibrating strings. This idea links physics to my great love, music. According to string theory, if we could magnify a point, we would actually see a vibrating string. Matter is a series of points, not unlike a strand of DNA. The vibration of the strings creates harmony. The laws of physics can be compared to the laws of harmony. The universe can be compared to countless vibrating strings. The universe is a symphony of color and light.

DC: Then what understanding do you expect or hope for from viewers?

PWL: I don't expect anything. But, this is a big question that I discuss with my students. I talk about being responsible for your images, which extend beyond you. A painting is an organic structure. It extends beyond the intention of the artist; it grows in an organic fashion by the multiplicity of interpretations, which I believe to be extremely important. How the painting affects the spectator, that's outside of me, that has to be outside of me. But the result has to be judged publicly, over which I have no control. My choice to paint the unknown hopefully leads to some sort of resonance, something of permanent value. I strive to present reflections of my collective inner world and share some time and space in which individuals find their own answers and inspiration. They are not meant

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to inform, but to transform. Ultimately, the paintings live and die in the eyes of the viewer.

DC: Many critics think that everything that can be said in paint has been said.

PWL: They are completely wrong. New ways of manipulating paint can open up new possibilities.

DC: I agree totally!

PWL: Why paint? What is crucial is the material. I have a great love for the materiality of paint; the tactile sensation, the scarification of the paint, the writhing dancing movement of the pigmented mud. My body feels it. It makes sense for me. I don't have the same feeling for wood or steel. There's a comfortable melding between my sensibility and paint.

DC: Does this discussion engage your working concerns?

PWL: It prepares people to do what really matters -- to look! I do read, I've read your books, and Greenberg, Gablik, Krauss, West, Hegel, Wollheim, Kierkegaard, Kundera, Lao Tzu, Orenstein, Dennett, Danto, Gombrich and Nietzsche.

DC: Do any writers speak to this concern?

PWL: In his book, *Painting As An Art*, Richard Wollheim says that painting has to do with "The conversion of the materials of painting into a medium and the way in which this medium could be so manipulated as to give rise to meaning." I absolutely believe that. I'm interested in animation, in breathing life into inert materials. How do you make them speak in a voice that seems to be alive? Paintings take on lifelike quality when they're good. They're ritual objects.

DC: Were these the right questions?

PWL: They were very hard questions. I do what I want to do, perhaps that's arrogance. The rhythm and tempo of this interview feels right to me. I think we've been able to maintain my voice. Painting involves trying to come up with answers. What drives us to make a mark? What excites me, confuses me, distresses me, challenges me? The moment I think I have an answer; there are more questions.

David Carrier

Professor of Philosophy at Carnegie Mellon University, DAVID CARRIER is a 1999-2000 Getty Scholar. He was Lecturer in the Council of the Humanities and Class of 1932, Fellow in Philosophy, Princeton University, Spring Semester, 1998. His books include: *Artwriting* (1987); *Principles of Art History Writing* (1991); *Poussain's Paintings: A Study in Art-Historical Methodology* (1993); *The Aesthete in the City: The Philosophy and Practice of American Abstract Painting in the 1980s* (1994); *Nicolas Poussain: Lettere sull'arte, with an introduction (in Italian)* (1995); *High Art: Charles Baudelaire and the Origins of Modernism* (1998); *England and its Aesthetes: Biography and Taste* (1997); *Garner Tullis: The Life Of Collaboration* (1998); and *The Aesthetics of the Comic Strip* (2000). He is working on a history of the art museum.