

Peter Wayne Lewis "Strings" at Rosenberg + Kaufman

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Should I start this review by mentioning that Peter Wayne Lewis is a Jamaican, who came to the USA many years ago after living in Panama? Doing so may impose a particular set of readings on his work, shaped by common – and usually very narrow – assumptions about the sort of work Caribbean (or African Diaspora) artists should produce. As an art historian specialized in the Caribbean, I know these assumptions all too well: artists of Caribbean origin are expected to be concerned with culturally specific subject matter and their work must be rooted in postcolonial racial and cultural politics. The only question that matters here, however, is whether such assumptions provide a useful lens to understand Peter Wayne Lewis's new *Strings* paintings and, clearly, that's not the case. The exhibition press release states that the paintings represent a new step in Peter's ongoing exploration of pictorial space and makes justifiable reference to his 'compositional mastery and superb drawing skills.' Does this formalist emphasis mean that Peter is a 'New York artist,' whatever that may mean today, who just happens to be from Jamaica? Not quite, either. The *Strings* paintings are deeply subjective works, which are therefore in some way linked to his Jamaicanness and personal history, but trying to explain the paintings exclusively in such terms would be reductive.

Surely, it must matter that Peter Wayne Lewis grew up in Jamaica, as part of a middle class which was especially in the years around Jamaican independence in 1962 strongly committed to a utopian multiculturalism with universalist aspirations – a marked contrast with the racial, cultural and political radicalism for which Jamaica is better known. It matters that his father was a jazz musician – jazz is still a constant presence in Peter's life – and that he is keenly interested in East Asian ink painting traditions and the legacy of abstract expressionism. The *String* paintings have a strong gestural, calligraphic quality and were, like jazz and East Indian ink paintings, created 'in the now,' as products of a mature improvisational confidence. It also matters that Peter is interested in the link between spirituality and science, especially physics'

ongoing search to explain the essence of life, to discover the hidden shaping forces of nature. The title of the exhibition in effect refers to the so-called *superstring* theory which, as Donna Jackson, a recent MA graduate of Howard University, has pointed out in her thesis on Peter's work, postulates that all matter consists of minute vibrating strings. Peter said in a 2000 interview with David Carrier that 'a painting is an organic structure' and in the *Strings* paintings this is taken to its essential, most basic conclusion, a visual parallel to the 'vibrating strings' basic building blocks of the *superstring* theory. Pared down and minimalist, the *Strings* paintings are living, active images that emerge from the interplay between surface and illusionary space and between color, light and paint application. While the simplicity of the bold, colorful dominant images commands immediate attention, complex under-layers of subtly shaded striped whites suddenly reveal themselves under different kinds of lighting and more intense viewing. The resulting imagery is often decidedly erotic, even visceral, but also deeply peaceful and harmonious, much more so than the more dramatic, conflicted imagery that appeared in Peter's earlier work.

I must admit that abstract art often leaves me indifferent, mainly because I usually work with art that powerfully engages me through its explicit political and social significance. I realize that this comes at a cost: I work in a context where aesthetic and sensory enjoyment have become politically suspect and where irony rules with an iron fist, but I nonetheless believe that there is much of value that needs to be recovered from the rubble of the recent culture wars. This includes appreciating the art of painting – and of creating other art objects – for what it still fundamentally is. Peter Wayne Lewis explained his sustained commitment to painting in the aforementioned interview: 'What is crucial is the material. I have great love for the materiality of paint; the tactile sensation, the scarification of the paint, the writhing dance movement of the pigmented mud. My body senses it and feels it [...] It prepares people to do what really matters – to look!' For the viewer, it thus involves reengaging with the art of intense, deliberate looking – dare I say it, the sort of aesthetic contemplation that is perhaps still best done in the much-

maligned environment of the 'white cube' art gallery? This is the active engagement the *Strings* exhibition demands from the viewer and from which diverse meanings can emerge that may or may not be tied to Peter's personal history and intellectual interests. It is this engagement – this complex, open-ended dialogue between painter, painting and viewer – that Peter was really talking about when he called a painting an organic structure.

I only rarely get to enjoy exhibitions in this manner and it is for this reason that I have found Peter Wayne Lewis' *Strings* exhibition more satisfying – intellectually and aesthetically – than most others I have seen since the start of the year here in New York. It represents a mature, compelling and carefully calibrated set of works and Peter and the Rosenberg + Kaufman team must be complemented for bringing that across by means of a thoughtful and effective installation.