

PETER WAYNE LEWIS

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...I am not devout, but I am devoted to making these pictures....

PETER WAYNE LEWIS, educator, artist, and lecturer, created works with bold geometric forms that play off of pictorial space. One critic describes his work as having a “physical presence derived from merging expressionist painterly concerns with geometric abstraction.” Indeed, there is a formal quality to his body of work; yet, it does not negate the spiritual impact. There is always something more, if one keeps looking and searching.

Lewis was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1953. His parents emigrated from Jamaica to Panama in 1962. Later, they moved to Sacramento, California. The artist was always interested in drawing and sketching as a child. Lewis admits that he remembers no member of his family ever having painted. He became an American citizen in 1983, yet he still has a sense of being the “other” in a culture that he has embraced. He explains:

I came here when I was nine; and after thirty-eight 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 am still trying to find a stasis, a balance.¹

In 1971, Lewis attended San Jose State University, San Jose, California, receiving a B.A. degree in painting in 1976. He furthered his studies at San Jose State University, obtaining a M.A. in 1979. He is currently a tenured professor at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, in Boston. His academic credentials include professorships at the Pratt Institute, Syracuse University, the University of California at Berkeley, San Jose State University, and the San Francisco Art Institute.

Lewis comes from a musical and religious family. His father, Herman B. Lewis, was a musician who played the jazz piano and the Hammond B3 organ. His mother, Joyce A. Webster, was a nurse.

My father was a classically trained pianist who evolved into a jazz pianist. My grandparents were Christian 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.²

Because of his early departure from the Caribbean, he is only now becoming acquainted with the indigenous art and artists of his country. One particular artist is Wilfredo Lam, the Cuban abstract artist. In addition to that, the heritage of African slaves brought from Ghana to Jamaica interests him.

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 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.³

This spiritual awakening revealing the ritualistic and religious meaning of painting was illuminated when Lewis traveled extensively in England, France and Italy. However, his visit to the *Grotte Prehistorique*

¹ David Carrier, “Formed in Darkness, Born into the Light: Peter Wayne Lewis talks about his New Paintings ‘Fields’ with David Carrier”

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

du Peche Merle in central France had the most profound impact on the development of his work. The artist was moved by the Paleolithic cave paintings that he encountered in 1982.

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...⁴

Lewis sees his work as a spiritual calling, not making “art for art’s sake,” but a “ritual act,” a ceremony. The artist is connected to the spirit by this unselfish act of “creating,” of trying to communicate to another entity. Most artists are unsuccessful in this regard, but Lewis has gone to the “essence” of things to recover truth. Consequently, his work becomes a conduit to which we connect in many ways with an understanding of ourselves. The “holes” the “windows” in his abstract work become portals to the present, the past—to the spirit. Aesthetically, we are drawn to his color and form and respond to them in an elemental and primal sense. Surprisingly, another influence on his work is the Italian Renaissance artist, Raphael de Sanzio. Lewis admires the luminescent colors and the manipulation of form in space that made Raphael a master of renaissance techniques.

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. ...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...⁵

The artist is also influenced by the musical harmonies of jazz. For him it all begins with the “blues note,” which is the soulful cry of African America into the void.

The beginning 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 on blues, Irish music, folk music, everything is based upon the blues note—the beginning point....There is always chance. Jazz provides a model for how I build a picture.

The artist started the process of “becoming” in the 1980s, where his style shows evidence of the figure. *Exploder (1987), Energy (1987), and St. James (1989)* are works that embrace biomorphic forms.⁶ Curvilinear objects intertwine with color creating a shallow sense of space. This particular style evolved into an interest in pure color and form.

In the late 1990s, Lewis’ paintings become the source of pure abstraction. He like his fellow artists, Jacob Lawrence, Alonzo Davis and others has embraced the series. *Replicant (1997)*, signifies a beginning into reproducing a theme or an element repetitiously. Lewis’ variation on a theme engenders areas of science that include experiments with space, energy, time and matter. Also, post-modernist constructs questions ideas of the modern. Jean-Francois Lyotard, a French post-structuralist sees the postmodern condition as the breakdown of knowledge—*delegitimation*. The breakdown of the single or meta-narrative which has served to guarantee truth or one body of knowledge in history. Within postmodern culture this grand narrative has given way to many narratives—many points of view. The artist gives us his point of view. In a postmodernist sense, Lewis combines the illusionist structure of representational art with that of modernist self-referential determination. This sets up a visual tension of binary oppositions: painterly vs. non-painterly, illusionist space vs. flatness, form vs. disintegration of

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Donna Morgan, “Peter Wayne Lewis: The Evolution of an Abstract Artist” (Master’s Thesis, Howard University, 2002)

form and interiority vs. exteriority. These works are an art historical survey of the various schools of modernism. Lewis acknowledges his indebtedness to the “Suprematist, the New York School giants: Pollock, DeKooning, Kline, Rothko...”

These paintings become to me ruptures in the Modernist canon. Trying to have space to inhale and exhale, and also having the appearance of layers of space stacked like planes of glass. Repetition becomes a metaphor for the waves of an ocean, eroding as the passage of time continues...

Without a doubt, these paintings take on a hard-edge style of color field painting with the soft edges of pure color harmonies created by Mark Rothko. *Blue Swan Suites* resonate with saturated blues that engulf the eyes. Rich painted textures are created by impastos that form painterly strokes of rich creamy color. The painted edges of colors around the perimeter of the painting disintegrate into the void. Inside the blue section of the painting mechanical bars are painted like signs or ideographs. Lewis says these works are akin to a “visual symphony.” They sing and vibrate with intensity. The high-keyed oranges, low-keyed browns, provide visual harmonies that reach a crescendo in the saturated blues. Reductionism distills all the elements of these paintings into the “pure” form that Clement Greenberg eluded to in his writings.

Purity in the art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art....The purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work are the only ones that count...⁷

Perhaps, Lewis is not willing to accept limitations. In the *Field Series (1999)*, he continues to experiment with new forms and techniques. Color, texture, and form are tightly woven into rich surfaces that crackle across the canvas. He weaves the thread of his life from Jamaica to America in a combination of vivid memories that signify his dual relationship with each. The threads of life are inescapable; they draw us back to origins to genesis—like the blues note. Perhaps the cave paintings with their ritualistic presence at *Peche Merle* reminded the artist of that—time is infinite and finite. The moment that those cave paintings were drawn is distilled into the finite, but the infinite presence of the ritual still prevails. Maya Angelou says, “That spirit is an invisible force made visible in all life.” Peter Wayne Lewis in his beautiful work has woven this truth into the fabric of our lives with the eloquent mastery of his technique.

Eloise E. Johnson, PHD. 2003

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This article contains Dr. Johnson’s observations of Peter Wayne Lewis’ work that she observed in an exhibition at Stella Jones Gallery in New Orleans, LA in 2003.

⁷ Clement Greenberg, “Toward a Newer Laocoon,” Originally published in *Partisan Review*, VII, no. 1., New York, July-August 1940, pp 296-310. Reprinted: *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Editors: Charles Harris and Paul Woods. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1992, p. 558.