



Carnivale II, by Norman Lewis, 1962. BELOW: The artist, circa 1975.

ACTIVISM THROUGH ART

THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS SHOWS FIVE DECADES OF WORKS BY **NORMAN LEWIS**, THE ARTIST'S LARGEST RETROSPECTIVE TO DATE. BY A.D. AMOROSI

In "Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis," the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts presents the first comprehensive look at Lewis's work and ideals. The Abstract Expressionist painter was a proponent of African American social consciousness and a champion of Harlem's burgeoning art community from the 1930s to the 1970s, when he passed away.

The traveling exhibition was curated by Ruth Fine, who recently retired from the National Gallery of Art in DC. "As soon as I became aware that Ruth was working on this project and that PAFA could possibly mount the exhibition, I moved forward," says PAFA Director Harry Philbrick. "It's perfect for us; we have a deep commitment to African American artists and a strong instinct to champion underrecognized artists."

There are so many avenues to travel when approaching Lewis's work: colorful, detailed narrative paintings that often went unnoticed in the shadow of contemporaries such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, Caucasian Abstract Expressionists whose exhibitions were welcomed into galleries with open arms and avid press. "It seems clear that limitations placed on artists of color impacted a general awareness of Lewis's contributions to Abstract



Expressionism and to the art of his period in general, since his contribution is larger than to Abstract Expressionism alone," says Fine, pointing to "Stone and Metal," a series of little-known lithographs and etchings. "We hope to expand appreciation of Lewis's art by including both paintings and a variety of works on paper that convey the breadth and quality of his vision."

Putting a finger on that vision is what gives the PAFA presentation its title, as Lewis explored the procession ritual as one of both celebration (parades and carnivals) and fear (Ku Klux Klan marches). While the catalog for "Procession" portrays that duality through modes of representation and abstraction, Lewis's aesthetic, Fine states, was about activism and how it got spelled out in his work and his life.

"Lewis's writings and archives make it clear he did not want to be pigeonholed," says Fine. "His art is composed of several motifs and manners of development, each with its own character. Together they create a fabric of incredible richness in which the city, nature, music, rituals, and civil rights are addressed over time." *Through April 3, 2016. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 118-128 N. Broad St., 215-972-7600; pafa.org* **PS**