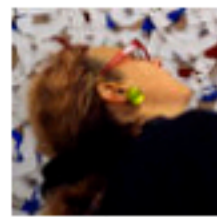
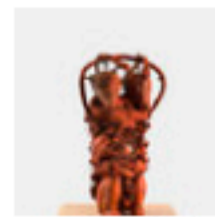


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By KEN JOHNSON DEC. 10, 2015

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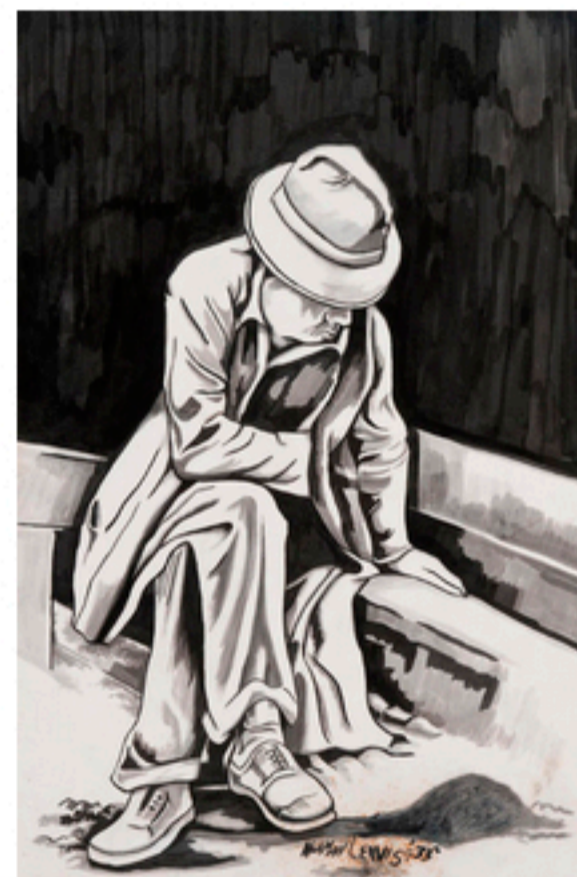
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PHILADELPHIA — Rarely is it a better time than now for a trip to Philadelphia, where four of the city's major art institutions are presenting exceptionally rewarding shows, each distinctively its own thing. The [Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts](#) offers a comprehensive retrospective of the career of Norman Lewis, the first such exhibition to be devoted to this African-American Modernist painter and one that invites viewers to consider Mr. Lewis's place in the history of the country's art. Dazzling the eyes and intriguing the mind, the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#) presents two centuries' worth of American still-life paintings and sculptures, from John James Audubon's images of birds and mammals to Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes. The [Barnes Foundation](#) has an astounding presentation of extravagantly ornamental antique works of wrought iron from a French museum, including door knockers with demonic faces and coffee grinders that look as if dreamed up by a steampunk artist. And the [Institute of Contemporary Art](#) at the University of Pennsylvania has a solo show of delightfully offbeat works by the self-taught New York artist Christopher Knowles.



"Untitled (Seated Man)," a work by Norman Lewis from 1933.

Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Collection of Raymond J. McGuire, New York, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY



“Part Vision” by Norman Lewis.

Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Collection of Raymond J. McGuire, New York, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

In 1971, Norman Lewis (1909–1979) created a painting called “Part Vision” that in many ways sums up his distinguished career. Made entirely in shades of blue on a canvas a little over seven feet wide, it pictures in the lower half a jumble of silhouetted semi-abstract shapes suggesting a crowd of demonstrators carrying placards. Hovering centrally above in an expansive, pale blue, mottled space is a mysterious form resembling a disembodied mouth, from which might issue a transcendental speech resolving all the conflicts represented by the agitated figures below.

Billed as the first comprehensive retrospective of Mr. Lewis’s work, “Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis” surveys the career of an African-American artist who believed in the power of spiritualized aesthetics — rather than didactic or propagandistic imagery — to elevate, expand and transform collective human consciousness.

The exhibition shows Mr. Lewis starting out as a Social Realist in the 1930s, but in that decade he already revealed a serious interest in abstraction with a painting called “Fantasy” (1936), which looks remarkably like an early work by Kandinsky. From the mid-1940s on, Mr. Lewis largely expunged from his work representational imagery. Drawing on Cubism, Expressionism and Surrealist automatism, he created suavely improvisational works that play with line and gestural brush marks in luminous, atmospheric spaces.

Outside the studio Mr. Lewis was acutely concerned with and actively involved in the politics of his time, especially as they pertained to the lives of American blacks. As a painter, however, he resisted pressure to produce overtly political art, an attitude he shared with the mostly white vanguard abstractionists in the post-World War II era.

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“American Totem”
(1960).

Estate of Norman W.
Lewis; Michael
Rosenfeld Gallery LLC,
New York, NY

In the 1960s, however, he produced some paintings alluding to racism in the American South, and they are among the exhibition's most imposing works. "American Totem" (1960) has white masklike images compressed into a columnar form coming to a conical top at the center of a black field. Evoking the Ku Klux Klan, it has a powerfully mythic resonance. In a painting from 1961, clouds of staccato red marks on a broad white field don't configure into a recognizable image, but its title makes a clear statement: It's called "Redneck Birth." But such direct references are the exception rather than the rule in Mr. Lewis's art. He sought reconciliation and salvation through mystical abstraction.



Norman Lewis's "Redneck Birth" (1961).

Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

It's debatable whether Mr. Lewis's oeuvre, viewed from the perspective strictly of 20th century painting, ranks with those of the most celebrated artists of his generation, like Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. He mixed and matched familiar conventions of Modernist painting with sophisticated lyricism but wasn't a stylistic groundbreaker.

Walid Raad

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Considered in terms of the social history of American art, however, he's an important figure, because, as the art historian David Driskell writes in the exhibition catalog, he was "among a small number of African-American painters in the nation working abstractly at the time, and he was among the few artists of color who were represented by a mainstream gallery in New York." By most standards he had a successful career, one that many artists of his time — and of today — might envy. He exhibited regularly at the prestigious Willard Gallery in New York from 1949 to 1965, and he was included in numerous museum exhibitions during his lifetime, among them the "Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting" (now called the "Carnegie "International") in 1955, and received the Popularity Prize for a 1953 painting called "Migrating Birds." In 1975 he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, and in 1976 the Graduate School and University Center, City College, New York mounted a retrospective exhibition.

Would he have been more successful had he not been black? Maybe. On the other hand, had he been white, he might have been as easily forgotten posthumously as most white artists of the post-WWII era have been. With [the push for recognizing heretofore undervalued black artists](#) animating museums these days, this exhibition — organized by Ruth Fine, a former curator at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington — offers an excellent occasion not only to assess the significance of Mr. Lewis and his art. It also could occasion conversation about the possibly contradictory dual roles of museums: As democratic institutions representing the broad spectrum of the American population, on the one hand, and as selective judges of what is worth saving and exhibiting on the other.

"Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis" runs through April 6 at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 128 Broad Street, Philadelphia, (215) 972-7600, pafa.org.