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Thomas Lawson

That the Thirties was a desperate decade throughout the Western world is by now a well established historical cliché, yet it was a period which paradoxically saw the earliest heroic attempts of American painters to become more than provincial imitators of European modernist styles. Initially they did this by emphasizing their provincial separateness from the cosmopolitan art world in a move towards artistic nationalism and isolationism similar to the trend in Federal political and economic planning. Only gradually, as the decade advanced, did more artists feel the confidence or the necessity to build on the achievements of European artists rather than trying to ignore them. It was a time of intellectual questioning and daring, during which artists were forced into a recognition of their economic interdependence. As a result of simple physical need, artists began to cooperate professionally, and became increasingly political both in expression and in action. There was political art and there were political artists, in various unstable combinations; and at the start of his career, Norman Lewis was a political artist making political, though not propagandist, art.

As he developed, however, he began to separate political content from his aesthetic concerns. Like many black artists he was attracted to the idea of purely black art, but found himself instead being absorbed into the mainstream of modern art. As Hale Woodruff, the black painter who had created, at Atlanta University, one of the most vital centers of black learning, wrote for an exhibition entitled *Patterns of American Culture: Contributions of the Negro*, held at the University of Michigan in 1956:

"The 'Decade of the Depression' may be marked as the coming of age of the Negro artist. He became part of the new and vital currents that gave fresh meanings to American art. Any racial elements that might have identified his works were submerged in the mainstream of the general and specific qualities of all art produced in this period. His concerns were those of all artists and the concerns of all artists were his. He was now, as previously, simply an American artist. To expect him to have been otherwise would have been fruitless. His aspirations toward full integration in American life found expression in his art. This was, inevitably, how it should have been."

Lewis never lost his sense of political commitment, but rather came to believe that direct action was more useful than a so-called political art directed at a handful of friends

and connoisseurs with little or no political weight. Like his friend Ad Reinhardt, he sought to separate the aesthetic from the useful, seeing his paintings as contemplative rather than didactic images; they were designed to please, not to instruct. His mature work is sensual and sensitive in its evocation of an essentially emotional response to beauty. Charmed and fascinated by the effects of sparkling light, on city streets and in night clubs, or in the country, as it glints on water and rock, as it is diffracted through leaves, Lewis creates a body of work full of wonder and enjoyment.

Norman Wilfred Lewis was born in New York of parents who had moved to the city from Bermuda. The family had settled in Harlem, and Lewis' father worked as a longshoreman, eventually becoming a dock-forman. Lewis' early life was like that of any other black youth in the city, and he soon learned what it meant to be black and poor. With little likelihood of steady employment, he learned to make a living at poker and the pool table. It was only natural that he, along with many intelligent men of his generation, should be attracted to the politics of communism, with its promise of a better future through the cooperative action of the poor and oppressed. But if Lewis' introduction to radical politics was inevitable, his introduction to art was fortuitous. One day in 1933, on his way home from the pool room, he chanced by the studio of Augusta Savage, looked in the window, and was intrigued by what he saw. On impulse he stepped inside and was immediately entranced by the atmosphere of creative energy. He decided to stay and learn more, and so began his career as an artist.

At that time Savage's sculpture studio was fast becoming the center of a growing movement among artists in Harlem to create an art with a recognizably black identity. Between 1928 and 1933 five large-scale exhibitions of the work of black artists had been sponsored by the Harmon Foundation. These had helped present the major black artists like Savage, Aaron Douglas, James Porter and Hale Woodruff to a wider public and, at the same time, offered younger artists early exposure to an informed critical response. At that time, however, the Foundation, in its eagerness to present an impression of artistic vitality in Harlem, often came under attack for being too easily impressed with black subject matter, regardless of the quality of execution. Romare Bearden, among many younger painters, felt this only en-

couraged easy answers, poor echoes of styles that were not only European, but white. This debate, running parallel to a similar one within the larger context of American art as a whole, flavored much of Lewis' early training. His work through the Thirties and early Forties, while he was still seeking a mature style of his own, oscillates between the extremes of an international abstract style and a local, illustrative realism. Like the majority of American artists seeking a specifically American style, Lewis was initially attracted to a realism based on the indigenous tradition of the Ashcan school, a realism invigorated, in his case, by a knowledge of the work of the Mexican muralists, who were developing a simplified pictorial vocabulary suitable for making propagandist art. But at the same time a growing awareness of abstract styles in Europe and in America led him progressively towards a less representational, more experimental expression.

Despite its aesthetic limitations, the Harmon Foundation was primarily responsible for encouraging the tremendous growth of the plastic arts in Harlem in the early years of the Depression, providing financial support for artists before the Federal Arts Project went into operation. It helped create a sense of community among artists, which in turn helped foster a growing professionalism. Still, this proliferation of artistic activity was not without its drawbacks; and Aaron Douglas, the father figure of the Harlem Renaissance, rather scathingly described the situation in the following terms:

"Harlem was sifted. Neither streets, homes, nor public institutions escaped. When unsuspecting Negroes were found with a brush in their hands they were immediately hauled away and held for interpretation. They were given places of honor and bowed to with much ceremony. Every effort to protest their innocence was drowned out with big mouthed praise. A number escaped and returned to a more reasonable existence. Many fell in with the game and went along making meaningless and hollow gestures with brush and palette."

It was during this period of enthusiasm that Norman Lewis walked into the studio of Augusta Savage, and he never did escape.

Savage had returned to New York from Europe in 1932 with the idea of starting a community art school in Harlem.

With help from the Harmon Foundation, the Urban League, and the State University of New York, she organized an adult education project in her apartment on West 135th Street. Lewis initially attended as an unskilled assistant, sweeping floors and shifting clay. However, fired by the enthusiasm of the place, he began to teach himself to draw and paint, and discovered an unsuspected talent. His first models were the magazine illustrators and, to a lesser extent, fine art reproductions. Savage herself, though an important source of encouragement right through the Thirties, was never Lewis' teacher, primarily because he was never really interested in sculpture.

He soon sought out a formal painting class, attending the John Reed Club Art School on a scholarship offered by Robert and Lydia Gibson Minor. The Club had been founded in 1929, within days of the collapse of the Stock Market, to organize artists and writers in the creation of a revolutionary art which could be used as a weapon in a revolutionary struggle. It was a popular meeting place for left wing intellectuals during the early years of the Depression; and among its many educative projects, it sponsored a free art class for poor students. Lewis' teacher at the School was Raphael Soyer, but the superior abilities of the other students so intimidated the beginner that he soon stopped attending. However, he received his first chance to exhibit through this class, when the John Reed Club organized a group show on the theme of *Hunger, Fascism and War* in December of 1933. And the following April, the Metropolitan Museum sponsored an exhibition of the work of unemployed adult students who had been studying art for less than a year. Lewis received his first public recognition at this show when he won an honorable mention for an oil painting called *The Wanderer*. This picture, which depicted a destitute man seated in the corner of a fence in an open, snow covered field, attempting to warm himself before a small fire in an old oil can, was painted in a loose, slightly distorted style clearly reminiscent of that of Soyer.

Just as the art movement in Harlem was beginning to gather momentum in terms of wider access to professional galleries and exhibitions, the Depression threatened any possible gain. However, the activities sponsored by the Harmon Foundation and continued under the WPA not only allowed a certain level of stability but actually encouraged a

growth of interest in the arts. Black artists had traditionally suffered from a lack of significant private patronage, and this public funding allowed for an economic freedom hitherto unknown. For it was in poor areas like Harlem that the Roosevelt Administration's attempts to lessen the impact of unemployment by creating jobs for artists, musicians and actors had its most far-reaching impact, creating, in effect, a "golden age" of cultural activity, a local renaissance. Artists working in collaborative projects were encouraged by their peers to produce more work and to produce better work. And a larger, more informed public was created through the proliferation of performances, exhibitions, and educational opportunities. Art centers grew up in Harlem, in Chicago, in Memphis, and in New Orleans, and developed into important community centers. And in offering free access to the productions of the different arts, they not only stimulated the expansion of these arts but also created an effective program in public education.

One of the first of these centers grew up around Savage's studio in Harlem as a result of the energetic campaigning of both Savage and her chief assistant and eventual successor, Gwendolyn Bennett. In March 1935, an exhibition of Negro art was staged in the 138 Street YWCA in response to the question, "Does New York need an Art Center?"; and Lewis, who was now working at the studio as a teacher under the WPA, helped in its organization. As a result, more Federal funds became available and Savage was able to employ more teachers and enroll more students, leading her eventually to move her studio to larger premises on West 123rd Street. Lewis himself believed the studio/art center to be more useful as a community center than an art school, considering it a place where all manner of social problems might be attacked. And in a newspaper article covering the opening of the Harlem Community Art Center, the official name given the studio on its final move to the corner of 125th Street and Lenox Avenue in 1937, Lewis is reported as saying that he considered himself more a social welfare worker than an art teacher.

"Perhaps unconsciously, the children of Harlem paint little houses in big lawns and space between everything. Art is the key to understanding children and their problems."

Already, it seems, Lewis was beginning to question the efficacy of art as an agent of social reform, seeing it more as an indicator of the ills of society than as an active cure.

In February 1936 another exhibition was organized at the Harlem YWCA, once again concentrating on the issue of race. Exhibitors confined themselves to subjects connected directly with their own race and tended to avoid using abstract styles which might be understood as pale reflections of white art. As a result, the majority of artists exhibited work based on the most retardataire of modernist styles. Harlem genre scenes, crap shooters, colorful street life or portraits of local characters covered the walls, all too often demonstrating an acceptance of a white vision of black life. Lewis' work at this time still fitted the ultimately sentimental tradition of those painters of black life like Hale Woodruff and Aaron Douglas, who tentatively incorporated modernist elements in their basically traditional compositions. His paintings tended to be quiet and undemonstrative, usually with single figures or couples in introspective poses. Yet despite an understandable reluctance to abandon this regionalist tradition, with its easily accepted sense of social relevance, we find him now experimenting ever more boldly with a Cubist inspired structure, breaking his subject into planes of flat color. For while it is true that the simplification of form in a very early work like *Girl with a Yellow Hat*, 1933, would not have been possible without the Cubist precedent, the fragmentation of recognizable form in *Madonna*, 1934, is much more adventurous and prefigures Lewis' interest in a rhythmic, rather than architectonic, space.

This openmindedness to the, by then largely accepted, innovations of the School of Paris also allowed Lewis to key in more quickly than others to the important issue of African art as a formal and iconographic source. Several black painters sought authenticity in a return to African tribal culture, feeling that the legacy of ancestral arts offered a ready-made racial heritage. However in 1940, Alain Locke, one of the leading champions of black culture, sadly admitted that, "when the younger Negro artists first became aware of this heritage, a sudden hectic interest flared up which led, unfortunately, to relatively superficial understanding and shallow artistic results. African art could yield little through direct imitation."

Lewis was one of the first to realize that the transformation wrought on primitive art by, among others, Picasso and Modigliani, was both more powerful and more useful than this slavish imitation. From these painters he learned to

simplify his forms, and strengthen his color. More importantly, he learned the rhythmic possibilities of the angular displacement of lines he found in Cubist composition, a discovery which allowed him to go on to develop a visual equivalent to the jazz music his brother played. And what could be more closely identifiable with black American culture than jazz? By allowing himself to look hard at modern European painting, Lewis made the first steps towards a mature style which could convincingly contain his black identity without losing its integrity as modern art. Along the way, he also discovered himself in the midst of the increasingly bitter quarrel between realist and abstract artists, a quarrel which, as it spread through the American art scene, inevitably drew Lewis into the mainstream of American art.

During the years from 1935 until the outbreak of the War, Lewis was variously employed as a teacher under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration. Originally with Augusta Savage and then Gwendolyn Bennett at the Harlem Art Center, he was also given work at P.S. 139. There he supervised the children in the making of two large murals depicting the freeing of the Negro slaves and their progress since as a result of education. In 1937, he asked to be sent to Mexico; he found himself instead in Greensboro, North Carolina, in charge of a small education project. But the racial tensions created by his position as supervisor grew intolerable and within the year he was back in Harlem, once again teaching at the Art Center. Because of the uncertainty of tenure in any of the Federal Arts Projects (most positions were assigned for only six months at a time), radical artists quite early formed an Artists' Union, affiliated with the CIO. The Union agitated not only for artists' rights but also joined in many CIO picket lines. It was at union meetings that Lewis first met Ad Reinhardt and David Smith, who were both to become important friends. Through personal experience on the picket line, these three, along with many other politically acute artists, began to feel that the gap separating aesthetic and political action could not, and should not, be bridged.

The artist as human being was obliged to remain politically active, but the artist as artist should only be concerned with the problems of aesthetic expression and, of necessity, the politics of the art world. In 1936 several American art-

ists who had been connected in various ways with the European abstract movement joined together, to combat the apparent rejection of non-European abstraction by the major American museums. Among those early members of American Abstract Artists were Balcombe Greene, Ilya Bolotowski, Burgoyne Diller, I. Rice Pereira, and Carl Holty, while Reinhardt and Smith joined the following year. Lewis was never a member of the organization, but was closely associated with it and exhibited by invitation. Another early member who exerted a brief influence on Lewis was Vaclav Vytlacil, who gave a series of lectures at the Harlem Art Center which Lewis found particularly stimulating. Lewis was never Vytlacil's pupil as such but at a time when he was making his first tentative moves toward abstraction, the European's grasp of current developments must have been valuable.

At the same time there was a growing concern about the cultural policies and implications of the rise of Fascism on an international scale. Following along the lines of the League of American Writers, a committee of artists, under the chairmanship of Stuart Davis, was formed to prepare an American Artists' Congress against War and Fascism; and by the autumn 114 artists had signed a call for such a meeting to be held in New York on February 15, 1936. The response was so widespread that the meeting was finally extended to three days and some 360 artist-delegates attended. The sessions ended with a sense of euphoria as the delegates voted to form a permanent organization called the American Artists' Congress, with Max Weber as Chairman and Stuart Davis as Executive Secretary. Lewis was invited to join, which he considered an honor, but despite the undeniable prestige of the Congress, he continued to feel that the Union and the Harlem Artists' Guild, which concentrated on the problems faced by black artists, were more valuable. The international situation was certainly disquieting, but for a black artist living in Harlem there were more pressing problems nearer home.

Although gradually moving towards a complete separation of art and politics, Lewis continued to exhibit regularly in Harlem in politically oriented group shows. In the spring of 1937, there was an exhibition of the Harlem Artists Guild in the 115 Street Library, and the following year the Art Center sponsored a show of *21 New York Negro Painters*,

including Ernest Crichlow, Jacob Lawrence, and Lewis. In 1939 Gwendolyn Bennett helped to organize a show sponsored by the Labor Club, while Bronx House showed *Art Of and By Negroes*. In other words, there was a great deal of interest in a socially relevant art, particularly if it reflected on the position of the black people. Yet despite this high level of energy, there was still a basic sense of insecurity, a feeling that there was no real identifiably black style, and that such a style was desirable. This continuing rejection of modern art is exemplified in the following statement made in 1939 by the journalist Edgar Rousseau:

"We cannot afford as yet to accept the theory that great art must rise above nationalism and racialism, because, in our case, we have a powerful enemy with which to contend in the superiority complex of the whites."

That same year the Museum of Modern Art staged a large Picasso retrospective, an event of enormous importance to the emerging abstract school in New York. Able to scrutinize the whole range of Picasso's art, from *Les Femmes d'Alger* through the late Cubist paintings like *The Musicians*, to the looser, Surrealist work of the Thirties, Lewis discovered an idiom suited to his needs. The jagged rhythms of Picasso's painting proved an ideal vehicle for suggesting a syncopated jazz notation, the beginnings of an abstract style based on sense perceptions, the rhythm of music, a sense of space, and of motion in space.

The presentation of an exclusively black art reached something of a climax in 1940 with Alain Locke's panoramic exhibition of the *Art of the American Negro*, hung in the Tanner Art Galleries, Chicago, an exhaustive survey of black art from the days of slavery to the contemporary scene. Locke had a fundamentally optimistic view of both its stature and promise. Although the emphasis was still on social realist art (a typical work by Charles White was on the cover of the catalogue), he did include the modernist painters, the painters trying more directly to confront the issues of contemporary art. The new maturity he discerned came in part from a realization that it was the self-conscious search for ethnicity that so often contributed to the failure of black art to reach beyond the provincial, a realization paralleled in American art in general as artists came to terms with the problem of creating a new pictorial language relevant to their own needs, free of preconceived

ideas of what was and was not permissible.

Locke's exhibition was one of several events heralding the end of this period of intense activity. The Nazi-Soviet Pact had dealt a severe blow to the credibility of the American Artists Congress and there was a great deal of infighting among different factions wishing to clarify the issue of Communist influence within the organization. By January 1941, financial considerations forced the Congress to give up its office and its secretary. A general meeting was held in New York that June, co-sponsored by the United American Artists, as the Artists' Union was now called. One of the events was an anti-war demonstration; yet two weeks later, after Germany's invasion of Russia, these same organizations were calling for the armed defense of Russia, Britain, and China. In obvious disarray, the two bodies merged in 1942 to form the Artists League of America. The WPA itself was closed down the following year, as no longer necessary; the War had reduced the unemployment figures. An era had come to an end; and when Locke reorganized his retrospective view of black art in 1945 for the Albany Institute of History and Art, the younger artists working in varieties of abstract and semi-abstract styles were allowed greater prominence.

Unable to secure a position as a camouflage artist at the outbreak of the War, Lewis moved west to take up a job at the Kaiser Shipyards in Vancouver. He soon quit, however, because of discrimination against blacks. Blacks could not join the union but could be fired for not being members; and, of course, without union membership, they could not expect to find anything more rewarding than unskilled labor. Even out west, Lewis kept in touch with the art scene in New York and exhibited at the ACA Gallery with the Artists League of America in June 1942 in a special exhibition by and for artists in war production.

Late in that same year, Lewis joined a cooperative gallery called Artists Associates, where he showed his work periodically. And in 1943, he won a competition to design a War Relief poster for the CIO. The poster, in red, white, and blue, shows an heroically proportioned worker calling on his fellows to buy war bonds. The uncompromising strength of the image, its bold design, and color are not characteristic of his work, which always tended to be introspective

and lyrical rather than strident. It may be significant that the only work he did with a specific political purpose should have seemed so unnatural to his inclinations and taste.

He maintained his commitment to radical politics, but increasingly saw the necessity of separating it from his commitment to art. He began to feel that his development as an artist was being hampered by his desire to make political art, while his political commitment was being compromised by aesthetic considerations. It seemed better to allow the aesthetic to develop alone, and seek more direct ways of expressing his political dissatisfaction. Once described as "the best art teacher in New York," he taught at two radical schools during the mid-Forties. He joined Crichtlow, White, and Woodruff, under the directorship of Gwendolyn Bennett, at the Washington Carver School, whose mission was the development of a sense of identity and pride in the black community. And he also taught alongside Reinhardt at the Thomas Jefferson School of Social Science, until both were fired for refusing to teach an acceptable variant of socialist realism.

Despite his lessening interest in political art, Lewis continued to work as a cultural radical. In 1946, coincidentally the year in which he was first accepted by the Willard Gallery on a professional basis, he helped organize, along with Rockwell Kent and Philip Evergood, an exhibition of work by seamen at the Waterfront Artists' Workshop, sponsored by the Communist Party. Yet a statement made for Hale Woodruff in 1947, on the subject of IBM's purchase of the work of black artists, is an indication of how far he had come from his earlier preoccupation with creating a black, working man's art:

"Such action as this is the beginning of acceptance of the fact that the Negro artist, as any artist, is capable of individual expression, good and bad, and that segregation and stereotype in the arts are merely the extension of segregation and stereotype in other areas of living."

This new sophistication of thought is reflected in the new sophistication of the paintings he was producing.

A great deal of his output during this period was confined to small oil studies on board, sketches, and notes which record his formal experimentation. While still, in these and his larger pieces, using a geometric arrangement to delineate

space, he also began to use a more free calligraphic line similar to that of Mark Tobey. This loose line can also be related to the automatic techniques of the Surrealists, such as Matta and Masson, who were in New York as a result of the War; as can the element of playfulness evident in some of his work, particularly the work still recognizably based on figure studies. Like the Surrealists, Lewis never completely abandoned subject matter, and it is legitimate to ask how many of the New York painters did at that time. In many respects, he can be seen as a typical painter of the period, moving towards an abstract style capable of a more free and lyrical expression than traditional realism, or than the newer tradition of Cubist-inspired abstraction, yet maintaining a firm grasp on the perceived world as an important stimulus for working. Lewis as a painter was not confronting his very existence with every gesture, but rather recording his daily experience with a sensitive, flickering brush stroke.

He was accepted by the Willard Gallery in 1946, joining a stable which included Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, and David Smith. He was not offered a one-man exhibition until March 1949, however, by which time he had all but given up hope. But the show was something of a success, and Henry McBride discussed it in his column for the *New York Sun*. This notice, though short, is perceptive of both Lewis' strengths and weaknesses and deserves to be quoted in full:

"Norman Lewis, a new painter showing at the Willard Gallery, is entitled to a very good mark if only because of the special success of one of his pictures, the one in black and white called 'Rhododendrons in Winter.' This is a first rate picture ready to go at once into any good collection of modern art. The lank leaves of the plant droop as they do in nature at this season of the year and they have been played up in the drawing in a way to make pure eye music. The lyric touch is present throughout in Mr. Lewis' work but noticeably so in this 'Rhododendron' and in the one called 'Jazz Musicians.'

"Most of the other pictures are unfortunately too close for comfort to the style employed by Mark Tobey. One Mark Tobey is enough. Imitators should beware. His stuff looks easy but it is capable of ruining those who copy it."

Initially after this first real critical appraisal, Lewis was given shows fairly regularly at the Willard Gallery, and he seemed assured of a promising future. And in 1955 he won

a prize at the Carnegie International Exhibition in Pittsburgh for a painting entitled *Migrating Birds* which, in the spare quality of its design and execution, evokes the thin quality of sea air in an almost Oriental fashion. Yet because his work was not selling, he was compelled to find employment as a taxi driver to survive, and his financial insecurity was matched by a chronic creative insecurity. Faced with an apparent lack of public interest in his work, he immersed himself in it, working feverishly, yet constantly changing direction and returning again.

Still his work during this time is not as diverse as one might suspect, for he in fact concentrated on several basic themes which lend a sense of unity which was often made in a mood of despairing confusion. Rather than record the look of the world, he wanted to make a visual record of his emotional experience of it, and it is this underlying emotional quality which serves as the unifying factor. His painting appeared vastly economical of means in an era which delighted in fat painting, while the pale, sensitive color and general lyricism of mood that it implied was too easily neglected amidst the large scale dramas of American abstraction. Quiet, refined work in an age of heroic bombast, his paintings required leisurely contemplation rather than active, participatory engagement. A painting like *Ritual*, 1950, with its pale stains of paint creating an atmosphere of mystery veiling some obscure rite, requires time. It is reserved and allows for a sense of uncertainty, unlike the positive assertiveness of the major painters of the New York School.

There are two major points of departure in Lewis' work, his experience of urban life and his experience of natural phenomena. His cityscapes, painted over a period of years, can, in a sense, be viewed as an idiosyncratic variation on his earlier realist art, expressionistic evocations of city life. But whereas the earlier paintings detailed narrative incidents, often concentrating on the more depressing aspects of the urban scene, these later ones have a more generalized air in their delight in the visual effects of city lights, while still maintaining a quiet, introspective mood. Painting on a neutral base, he either uses an all-over linear structure reminiscent of Tobey's white light cityscapes, as in *Tenement Number 2*, 1950, or more often, a looser arrangement of short painterly strokes creating an atmospheric grid-like

structure, geometric by implication, if not in fact. Examples of the latter might be *Tenement* from 1952 or *Metro-polis*, dating from 1954.

The warm vibrancy of some of the *Tenement* pieces is further emphasized in those paintings which develop themes taken from everyday street and cafe scenes. For if the cityscapes tend to retain some of the melancholic atmosphere characteristic of Lewis' work, the near abstract paintings based on genre scenes play up the humorous side of his nature. Gay colors and brisk energetic brush strokes conjure up the liveliness of the street in *The Line Up*, 1948, just as they do in the later *Carnivale*, painted in 1962, while an element of caricature enlivens *The Jazz Musicians*, also from 1948. And the nervous network of lines interspersed with small areas of pure color capture the hectic confusion of the senses in *Roller Coaster*, 1946. The "jazziness" of these pieces, with their flashes of humorous observation modified by a sensitive lyricism, suggested to more than one reviewer that his work had a musical quality. Among the best of them, Henry McBride wrote for *Art News* in 1951:

"There is a temptation to think the artist a musician as well as a painter for he starts in softly on the blank page like a musician improvising and as he sees a suitable motif taking shape, swings into it with confidence, plays it up for what it is worth and then, satisfied he has gone the whole way with it, permits it to fade softly out."

McBride's description of Lewis' working method is even more aptly applied to the abstractions based on his observation of nature. These paintings are in no way scientific in spirit, but rather evocative, and even contemplative, reflecting the artist's consciousness of himself in the face of the bewildering beauty of natural form. The initial visual excitement is transformed into an almost mystical sense of light and space in the various night pieces and autumnal compositions. *Moon Madness*, 1952, for example, is a straightforward rendering of the artists' sensations on a moonlit night in the country, while *Orpheus*, 1954, transposes the same suggestive, fragmentary imagery into a recreation of the myth of darkness lightened by hope.

In a letter to Lewis in 1972, Robert Gist, a good friend of the painter, wrote:

"Painting is a science and should be pursued as an inquiry into the laws of nature. Why then, may not landscape painting be considered as a branch of natural philosophy, of which pictures are but the experiments?"

While this is not strictly applicable to the main thrust of Lewis' work in the Fifties, his later, bolder compositions can often be viewed in this light, paintings like *Arrival and Departure*, 1963, which Lewis described as a landscape. Yet even in the early Fifties a painting like *Every Atom Glows*, 1951, seems to presage an interest in the microscopic structure of life forms.

Lewis gradually withdrew from his connection with the Willard Gallery as the decade advanced and finally gave it up in the early Sixties. Far from leaving him feeling adrift, however, it freed him from the anxiety of playing the art world game. At roughly the same time there was a resurgence of interest in the problem of racial discrimination, paralleled by a renewed interest in black culture. In 1963, Bayard Rustin organized the March on Washington for "Jobs and Freedom," an important event in focusing national attention on the discontent felt by the majority of black people in America. Along with a group of other artists, Lewis founded *Spiral*, organized to demonstrate their solidarity with the Civil Rights Movement and advance the cause of black artists. He had already been experimenting with large scale compositions worked out solely in black and white, like *Alabama*, painted in 1960, which dealt allusively with the issue of racial conflict, and he suggested that for their first group show in 1965, the artists of *Spiral* should similarly limit their palette. One of the most dramatic pieces in the show was Lewis' own *Processional*, with its Futurist-like deployment of "lines of force," compressed between two black wedges. Painted to commemorate the March on Washington and the other Civil Rights demonstrations, it carries the most directly political statement he has made in paint since the early Forties.

His playful interest in the idiosyncrasies of people in groups is still evident in the paintings of these years, as in the joyous *Players Four*, 1966, in which one can almost hear the music, or in the satiric *Rednecks*, dating from 1961. However the bulk of his work dissects, with ever more particularity, his experience of the natural world. Small incidents among falling leaves, a glimpse of light through trees, or

glancing off cliffs, the rolling movement of waves, these are the themes which increasingly preoccupied him. From the frankly descriptive, like *Kisses*, 1963, to the more allusive treatment of atmospheric effects in work like *Never and Always*, or *Canyon of Light*, both from 1965, his work maintains a sensitivity to the nuances of reflected light.

Since the mid-Sixties he has also returned to his interest in teaching, encouraging many young artists through the early years of uncertainty. He taught for a while at HARYOU-ACT, a Harlem youth group, and still teaches at the Art Students League. In 1971, along with Crichtlow and Bearden, he founded the Cinque Gallery, a showcase for young ethnic minority artists. And, of course, he is still painting, working on themes culled from his sketchbooks from holidays in Greece and the Rhode Island shore. Stylized rock forms and rolling wave-like motifs recur, in large horizontal canvases, dominated by single, often strong, color. Working in series, he is now more consistently than ever developing the implications of making variations on a limited number of themes. Lewis' work may be "too lovely to be important," but it takes great courage to distill and soften, to refuse easy assertion. Full of a sense of quiet enjoyment, his paintings pay graceful homage to the beauty he finds around himself.