

## **Exhibition Provides Revealing Exploration of Seminal 1940s and 1950s Works by Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis**

**The Jewish Museum in New York Presents**

***From the Margins: Lee Krasner | Norman Lewis, 1945–1952***

**Opening September 12, 2014**

New York, NY – From September 12, 2014 through February 1, 2015, the Jewish Museum will present *From the Margins: Lee Krasner | Norman Lewis, 1945–1952*. This survey features key 1940s and 1950s works by two powerful painters during a transformative period in American art when both artists were experimenting with innovative approaches joining abstraction and culturally-specific references. Lee Krasner (1908–1984) and Norman Lewis (1909–1979) were major contributors to Abstract Expressionism but as a woman and as an African American, respectively, they were often overlooked in mainstream criticism of the time.

The work of Krasner and Lewis has intriguing formal similarities while reflecting each artist's personal background. Krasner's Little Image pictures relate to her childhood upbringing and study of Hebrew, and are today considered significant contributions to Abstract Expressionism. Lewis's Little Figure paintings reference African American cultural heritage, including urban life, Harlem, jazz, and textiles. Beneath the formal elegance of Lewis's paintings runs a characteristically subtle inflection of his lifelong social activism and humanitarian concerns. Both artists' work of this formative period embodied the all-over approach characteristic of the style. Yet, rather than the bold, gestural strokes of their peers they focused on smaller, repeated images with self-reflective cultural references. Their paintings—brimming with gesture, image, and incident—are dynamic yet modest in scale compared with the canvases of many of their contemporaries.

*From the Margins* was inspired by the Jewish Museum's 2008 landmark exhibition, *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning, and American Art, 1940–1976*. In a show that featured artists whose stature has grown legendary, two highly personal paintings juxtaposed together, one by Lee Krasner and the other by Norman Lewis, stood out. They possessed, as *Action/Abstraction* curator Norman Kleeblatt said, a "magical synergy" and spoke in a common pictorial language. The paintings were Lee Krasner's *Untitled* (1948) and Norman Lewis's *Twilight Sounds* (1947) which are among nearly 40 artworks offering visitors a thorough and revealing exploration of these artists. The new exhibition highlights the evolution of their artistic practice, as well as their ambitious handling of line, form, and gesture.

Krasner, often overshadowed as the wife of Jackson Pollock, created innovative systems and iconographies within the overall painting style of Abstract Expressionism. In her Little Image paintings, Krasner worked with small repeated pictographs that she systematically painted onto the canvas from right to left, as she was taught to write Hebrew. The shapes are not recognizable images, yet evoke letters, signs, or symbols. Meticulously crafted and intimately scaled, the Little Image works reflect her deft control of unorthodox painting methods such as applying pigments with sticks and palette knives or straight from the tube. Her art celebrates

painting as a primal means of communication through an analogy with picture-based writing systems.

Lewis produced unique linear abstractions that shared much conceptually and aesthetically with the work of celebrated Abstract Expressionist painters, such as Ad Reinhardt and Mark Tobey, while expressing his own identity with sources from African American culture. His Little Figure paintings, with their highly abstracted formal structures, make reference to the urban experience, the vibrancy of Harlem, musical structures, jazz, and African textiles.

The paintings of Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis selected for this exhibition suggest several parallels. Developed within a key period in American art and culture, their works offer scope for reflection on interrelated themes: abstraction and meaning; artistic expression and identity, whether related to class, gender, ethnicity or race; and the reasons artists may have been marginalized from an emerging discourse.

*From the Margins: Lee Krasner | Norman Lewis, 1945-1952* is organized by Norman L. Kleeblatt, Susan and Elihu Rose Chief Curator at the Jewish Museum, and Stephen Brown, Assistant Curator.

Lee Krasner was one of the most radical of the first generation of Abstract Expressionist painters. Through six decades, she continually explored innovative approaches to painting and collage. Born in Brooklyn, New York, to an Orthodox Jewish family from Russia, Krasner pursued formal art training at several New York City institutions and also studied with the influential German abstract painter Hans Hofmann. She was a muralist in the Federal Arts Project and a member of the Artists Union and American Abstract Artists. Krasner married painter Jackson Pollock in 1945. Though often overshadowed by Pollock, Krasner was an experienced artist well before she met him. Active in the New York art scene of the 1930s and 1940s, she introduced Pollock to the artist Willem de Kooning and critic Clement Greenberg, among other key players. During her time with Pollock at their home in Springs, Long Island, Krasner developed her Little Image paintings.

Norman Lewis was the second of three sons of immigrant parents from Bermuda. His family lived on Lenox Avenue, near 132<sup>nd</sup> Street, in Harlem. Lewis studied drawing and commercial design in high school before joining the merchant marine and sailing through the Caribbean and off the coast of South America. Back in New York in the early 1930s, Lewis met Augusta Savage, the founder and director of the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts, an influential art school in Harlem. From 1933 to 1935, he participated in Savage's studio and attended Columbia University. Lewis was active in the Federal Arts Project, and was a member of the artists' group 306, which met in the studios of Charles Alston, Henry Bannarn, and Ad Bates at 306 West 141<sup>st</sup> Street. The group formed a nucleus for creative life in Harlem and included Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Richard Wright. The relationship between the artist and society was a frequent theme of discussion, yet from a style grounded in social realism, Lewis moved, during the early 1940s, toward abstraction. Around 1946 he began exploring an overall gestural approach to abstraction, establishing himself as the only African American among the first generation of Abstract Expressionist artists. Inspired by sources in music, nature, Asian and African art, and modern painters from Wassily Kandinsky to Piet Mondrian,



Lewis experimented with a wide variety of approaches to abstraction. His paintings from this time hover near abstraction while maintaining references to African American settings and culture.

### **Exhibition Catalogue**

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Jewish Museum is publishing a 96-page catalogue by Norman L. Kleeblatt and Stephen Brown, distributed by Yale University Press; with essays by Lisa Saltzman and Mia L. Bagneris. An introductory essay surveys the trajectories of Krasner and Lewis within an artistic community dominated by white men. This book offers a fresh view of the contributions of two highly significant abstract artists. Featuring 64 color illustrations, the book will be available worldwide and at the Jewish Museum's Cooper Shop for \$30.00.

### **Support**

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### **About the Jewish Museum**

Located on Museum Mile at Fifth Avenue and 92nd Street, the Jewish Museum is one of the world's preeminent institutions devoted to exploring art and Jewish culture from ancient to contemporary, offering intellectually engaging, educational, and provocative exhibitions and programs for people of all ages and backgrounds. The Museum was established in 1904, when Judge Mayer Sulzberger donated 26 ceremonial objects to The Jewish Theological Seminary as the core of a museum collection. Today, the Museum maintains a collection of over 30,000 works of art, artifacts, and broadcast media reflecting global Jewish identity, and presents a diverse schedule of internationally acclaimed temporary exhibitions.

The Jewish Museum is located at 1109 Fifth Avenue at 92nd Street, New York City. Museum hours are Saturday, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday, 11am to 5:45pm; Thursday, 11am to 8pm; and Friday, 11am to 4pm. Museum admission is \$15.00 for adults, \$12.00 for senior citizens, \$7.50 for students, free for visitors 18 and under and Jewish Museum members. Admission is Pay What You Wish on Thursdays from 5pm to 8pm and free on Saturdays. For information on the Jewish Museum, the public may call 212.423.3200 or visit the website at [TheJewishMuseum.org](http://TheJewishMuseum.org).

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