

ON VIEW

Painting Outside the Lines: New Shows at the Jewish Museum and EFA Project Space

By Maika Pollack | 10/01/14 2:08pm

The show “From the Margins: Lee Krasner and Norman Lewis, 1945 – 1952,” at the Jewish Museum through February 1, makes the case that race, gender and class identity mattered to American postwar abstraction. It also puts on view some thrilling paintings. The subjects are two very different, historically overlooked artists: Krasner and Lewis, both marginal figures in the story of postwar art.

Both were New Yorkers. Krasner was from a family of Jewish immigrants in Brooklyn and studied at the Cooper Union. The curators call Lewis “the only African-American among the first generation of Abstract Expressionist artists”; his family emigrated from Bermuda, and he lived in Harlem where his friends included Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and Richard Wright. Both made a living painting realist murals for the WPA. The year 1945 is significant to the show not because this is when Krasner married Jackson Pollock, but because during the seven years that follow both artists developed their abstract style.

Norman Kleeblatt, chief curator at the Jewish Museum, and Stephen Brown, assistant curator, emphasize the role of cultural influences on the work that follows. The paintings, while abstract, do often evoke African textiles, Hebrew script and jazz. In a sound recording from 1964, Krasner describes learning to write at temple as an influence on her painting. But they also draw on European innovations: Giacometti’s thin figures, Paul Klee’s scribbled marks and the Cubism of Picasso and Braque.

In the show’s second gallery, the paired paintings rhyme well visually and share a modest scale we don’t often associate with Ab-Ex. Both artists favor the line over the brushstroke, and paint is applied through a tight motion of the wrist rather than broader elbow sweeps. As Krasner and Lewis break with the realism of the WPA, the rich cultures of New York visibly enter their dense paintings. Still, some of the most moving visual surprises are innovations that emerge unheralded: circular canvases, and above all, Lewis’ startling sense of space and layering in his later abstract works.

The last room has the best paintings. Krasner’s *Noon*, 1947, got me: an all-over abstraction thick with gloopy yellow, white, blue and green curls of paint. Her elegant *Kufic*, 1965—consisting of skeins of yellow gestures on a yellow ground from which figural forms seem to emerge—looked like a predecessor to Amy Sillman’s queering of Ab-Ex, especially Sillman’s *Fatso* (2009).

Lewis’ *Untitled* 1965, in which thick purple paint seems to melt over a field of greys, is a fabulous painting. He shows his range in these later works gleefully inventing and exploiting new spaces in the picture plane: 1951’s *Every Atom Glows: Electrons in Luminous Vibration* is a delicate black-and-white oil painting, while his *Alabama II*, 1969, is a strong protest work—a rectangular field of red in which a triangular wedge evoking bodies marching or a megaphone’s amplified language emerges in glossier red on the painting’s surface.

So does identity matter when we look at art? A new show, “As We Were Saying,” curated by Claire Barliant, curator of the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts’ EFA Project Space on West 39th Street, focuses on younger artists who, as Barliant puts it, are concerned with “Art and Identity in the Age of ‘Post.’” The question the young curator asks is similar to the one Kleeblatt and Brown engage with at the Jewish Museum: does difference matter in art? Standouts include Michael Wang’s cage of fancy ruffed purebred pigeons communing with city birds. We project a seeming class consciousness onto the animals.

Josh Kline's surrealist 3-D printed sculptures play cannily with branded surfaces, portraying an office cleaning trolley on which household detergents and the texture of cleaning tools slip from one surface to another, and human limbs are dismembered and folded in upon themselves, revealing linings of sponge or office uniform. The show evoked, for me, the Jewish Museum's curatorial premise. Yet for the young artists, class and sexual identity seemed to trump questions of race or religion.

In an art world seemingly obsessed with art as a form of capital rather than art as an expression of culture, both shows brilliantly suggest that being an outsider matters very much, and encourage us to pay attention to the place of the culturally marginalized in art.