

HYPERALLERGIC

Art

Stanley Lewis in a Wayward World

Lewis's tattered canvases and pasted over drawings mirror a world in need of constant upkeep and repair.



by John Yau
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Stanley Lewis, "Intersection Post Road and Compo Road" (2015-19), acrylic on paper, 28 1/2 x 30 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Betty Cunningham Gallery)

I think of Stanley Lewis, who paints from observation, as a Sisyphian painter. He attempts to climb a mountain whose summit he never reaches. The struggle is between the overall composition and how many little details can he get into a painting or a drawing without it seeming to implode or becoming clotted. His desire to get it right has led him to make radical decisions, such as cut out an area of a painting and add a new section where he begins again, or cover over part of an artwork with a piece of Bounty paper towel and paint on it. Certain areas of his drawings bring to mind a shingled roof, because so many rectangular sections have been added to the original sheet and reworked. As idiosyncratic and drastic as Lewis's method is, he seems to share that capacity for doubt known to possess Willem de Kooning, Chaim Soutine, and Albert Pinkham Ryder. Yet, there is no one who works like Lewis: he is the sole member of a club no one else wants to join.

Lewis's singularity is the primary reason why I went to his exhibition, *Paintings and Works on Paper* at Betty Cunningham Gallery (May 12–July 1, 2022). One of the remarkable things about these works — which you can see immediately in the acrylic on paper “View of the Garden with Orange Fence II” (2020) — is how deep the compositions can be. The orange fencing, a row of what look like young pine trees in front of a white wall, and the sunlit end of the house, all situated on the right side of the painting, press toward the picture plane with their rhythmic stripes, repeated shapes, and delicately drawn lines. In contrast, the left side of the painting pulls the eye back, with the only visual obstacle or stopping point being a webbed, aluminum, green and white folding lawn chair facing toward what lies beyond it. That chair become a surrogate for the viewer, an invitation to contemplate the everyday world in which you live.



Stanley Lewis, "View of Our House with Rhododendrons" (2022), pen and ink on paper, 24 1/4 x 28 inches

For all the painting's unruliness, the chair's placement within the composition is a clear indication of Lewis's genius, his ability to balance the wayward world with the human desire for order. Look at the attention he pays to atmospheric light, to the pale blue of the sky, the different greens and browns of nature, bare branches and undergrowth, and you get a sense of how much the artist wants to get into the paintings. What sets Lewis's views apart is that he is essentially an abstract painter working with line and narrow bands in a pasty medium. The end result is an uneven topographical surface. There are areas where crisscrosses of different browns, flecks of green and orange become a tangle of mud and vegetation in late autumn.

Near the center of the painting's bottom edge in “View of the Garden with Orange Fence II” Lewis has painted

a dirty pink planting pot with two bare stems popping up, angling to the right and to the left. That color, unlike any other in the work, reveals how attentive he is to encouraging our attention to move in the space and across the detailed surface.

I could not figure out how many sections and overlays Lewis ending up using for the acrylic on paper “Intersection Post Road and Compo Road” (2015-19). He even went so far as to bisect the painting vertically, make a gap between the two sections, and add third section underneath, joining them. He painted the space between the two sheets a grayish green, suggesting a telephone pole. By working this way, Lewis reminds us that painting and our view of reality are things we construct. He hides neither his decisions nor his dissatisfactions; he is willing to leave one part of a section of paper he adhered to the surface unpainted. Nature has no sense of decorum and neither does Lewis. His rejection of bourgeois tastefulness, both in his working methods and his subject matter, ought to be more fully considered. Or do artists have to announce their intention to be considered political or radical?



Stanley Lewis, "View of the Garden with Orange Fence II" (2020), acrylic on paper, 38 1/2 x 33 1/2 inches

Just when you think Lewis has settled into a subject or an approach he does something altogether different. His pencil drawing “Dan West and Crew, Roofers” (2020) depicts three men replacing shingles on a roof. The view is direct, as if we are standing on ladder looking at them. In this drawing, Lewis’s working method echoes the weathered wood, the inescapable effects of time and the changing season. The bare branches rising from behind the house evoke late autumn, while gray and black pencil, the worked paper, added sections, and the scarred surface underscore the continuous presence of imperfection and the fact that nothing can withstand time’s

power over us and art. That is why I find these works so moving and relevant. Art is not his way of escaping mortality, but of facing and even embracing it. Lewis celebrates necessary labor, wagons left in the yard, orange fencing, roiling skies, and backyard gardens. His tattered canvases and pasted over drawings mirror a world in need of constant upkeep and repair.

I consider Lewis, Rackstraw Downes, Lois Dodd, Sylvia Plimack-Mangold, and Catherine Murphy our great observational painters. While the others in this list have had museum shows and monographs devoted to their work, Lewis has never had significant institutional attention, which is long overdue. Just to make sure that I am not overstating his absence, I checked out the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Museum of Modern Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and learned that none of them own a single work by him. Why has he never had a show at the Drawing Center? He is 81 years old. Already exceptional in his work, what more does he have to do to get the recognition he has long deserved?



Stanley Lewis, "Dan West and Crew, Roofers" (2020), pencil on paper, 25 3/4 x 35 1/2 inches

Stanley Lewis: Paintings and Works on Paper *continues at Betty Cunningham Gallery (15 Rivington Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through July 1. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*



John Yau

John Yau has published books of poetry, fiction, and criticism. His latest poetry publications include a book of poems, *Further Adventures in Monochrome* (Copper Canyon Press, 2012), and the chapbook.