

Peter Wayne Lewis: A Vibrant Guest

By Catherine Amidon

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Peter Wayne Lewis was born in Kingston, by the time he was eight, through contact with diasporas and emigration, he had experienced Jamaican, English, Chinese, then American culture. After his family left Jamaica in 1962, he worked his way up from studies in San Jose, California, to educator and New York based artist, to transnational painter in Beijing. Lewis established a studio in China in 2007 when the art scene was rapidly expanding. His work had already been in more than a hundred exhibitions across the US and internationally while he worked as painting professor, at Massachusetts College of Art & Design since 1995, with a studio in Chelsea.

Throughout his career, the locations of his studios were centers of connection. Each time Lewis moved he redistributed his energy and expanded his web of contacts. As his displacements increased over time, he participated in and added to the global reach of contemporary art exhibitions, connecting to spaces in Germany, Japan, Senegal and more. He did not just add his *oeuvre* to the nexus; he established connections, built resilient networks, and curated in art and artists that related to his Afro-Caribbean roots, including friends, artists, and colleagues.

Lewis' father was a classically trained pianist and Peter grew up listening. Music is a language and it spoke to him. His love of music, rhythm, texture, further influenced his art as he grew into Jazz and Reggae. He admits if he had the talent he would have chosen the abstract art of music instead of painting. His 'lens of perception' is not limited to the visual. From syncopated to polyrhythmic, body and soul were instilled with sound-based memory. That energy was his connection to his heritage; the link to his roots was spiritual rather than merely cultural. The physicality of painting was his way of expressing that deeper energy and sensations of his inner life.

He became more in touch with his mystical essence when he traveled to France and visited the 29,000-year-old cave paintings at *Pech Merle*. Returning to America he had a time-travel, "out of body experience" related to sensations experienced there. He felt the supernatural power of the prehistoric work and an impulse to create that resonated through time as a musical experience. Movement and gesture were his process for material reflection of inner sensation; amorphous forms floated among fragments including mud cloth and masks.

When Lewis moved to the New York City area in 1992, he removed symbolic references and shifted to pure abstraction. His titles referenced his change. The *Primal Structures* series marked a new beginning, followed by the *Time, Space, Continuum*. Science, physics, time and space theory begin to dominate his interviews, titles, and reading material. Like his Abstract Expressionist predecessors, he is conscious of the brushstroke, the materiality, and fluidity of the pigment. For almost ten years he continued to paint surfaces covered from edge to edge that reinforced the presence and objecthood of the canvas.

Strings of 2001 was a substantial leap, a plunge into both space and void; they united in the emptiness of what was surface to explore time and space. String theory is a theory of quantum gravity; an attempt to unite quantum mechanics and Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. An avid fan of sci-fi and an observer of the sciences, Lewis was fascinated. The pressure, gravity, and force of his earlier impastoed abstract paintings dissipated. Strings are infinite, one dimensional, and propagate through space. The *Strings* is a suite of 101 paintings. Lewis' marks are tight, fluid, long, short, coiled and

meandering without rules, set in a grid of marks that don't align. *En masse* they vibrate, like strings on a guitar, but to a cosmological constant. The new ideas seen in his *Strings* were in a solo exhibition at Rosenberg + Kaufman, Fine Art in New York in 2003 and became the focus of his visual research.

Lewis had already started traveling East to exhibit and paint, first to Japan and then China. The following years he experimented with many of his own defining attributes as an artist who primarily exhibited oil/acrylic paintings on canvas, he increasingly used watercolors, Japanese sumi ink, calligraphy. Rice papers, multiples that grew from diptychs to hundreds, different installation surfaces to include kiosks and floors. As his work grew, so did Lewis' need for space.

In 2007 Lewis opened *Oasis*, his outsized studio in Beijing near the 798 Art Zone. Now a celebrated part of the contemporary Chinese art scene, the former factory district had moved from half empty warehouses to a scene that supported a system selling pricy work. Lewis was introduced to the buzzing scene through the exchange program Massachusetts College of Art & Design established in the 1990's with Tsinghua University and the China Central Academy of Fine Arts.

Buddha Plays Monk, 2012-2015 and *Monk Time*, 2013, were two 15-unit suites created to pay homage to jazzman Thelonious Monk, famous for his improvisational style. Time and space collapsed inward. Lewis reimaged an ocular world analogous to Monk inventing differing time structures in Jazz.

The summer of 2010 Lewis created *Booster Scrolls: Beijing Homage*, another large selection of 138 x 70 cm works that hung together in a colossal installation. It is an ephemeral monument to his east-west exchange, as rice paper serves as support for the western material, acrylic paint; the enormity of the project is evident seeing the artist with the piece in his studio. It is fresh without being new, he's musing with fleshed out movements of his string works. Lewis has always worked on paper in tandem with works on linen, as have many artists in the western tradition, but for him there is a distinct shift away from Western tradition as these works as not studies. They are final and they are not composed. The frame is not respected, he has deserted the history of the singular work and created a proto-hieroglyphic vocabulary illegible to the intellectual mind. There is an openness and spaciousness that allows appreciation of his energetic strokes without following them through a defined space.

The *Bending Time* series of 2018, like his other major projects, was presented as suites with overlapping works. Suite #5 and Suite #3 both have nine paintings but not the same ones and the suite numbers do not indicate a numeric order of the images. Suites are flexible and overlapping, modifiable like the architecture of space, pliable like bending time. The artist shows the large series in various suites or as individual pieces to work with the space at hand.

The series was exhibited in Beijing in 2019 in an exhibition that had the energy of an artist at the height of his career with seeds of memory from youth. The *Bending Time Paintings: From Kingston to Beijing* refers to the first eight years of his life in Kingston, the time when he first became fascinated by Chinese culture - the Hakka people - which translates to 'guest'. The large population of immigrant laborers that settled on the island in waves, in the 19th and 20th centuries, created schools, shops, festivals, and a markedly different lifestyle in village-like settings that left a strong impression on him. There Lewis was, half a century later his art reflecting the energy of a travel, intuition, and inner life as a "guest" artist in an arts district in China.

Dr. Catherine S. Amidon has been a curator, writer, and arts administrator for over thirty years, with a portfolio of international projects. She was founding director of the transdisciplinary Museum of the White Mountains at Plymouth State University. She curated over one hundred exhibitions for institutions and as an independent curator from New York City to the Jamaican Pavilion, 2002 Biennale de Venezia. Amidon has worked at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. She has been awarded a Fulbright-Hayes scholarship for research in the Baltic States and Russia, and in 2008 a Fulbright Fellowship to Kingston, Jamaica where she worked at the National Gallery of Art. She received a masters and a Doctorat from University of Paris I, Panthéon-Sorbonne.