



Quantum jazz

Jamaica-born artist and educator Peter Wayne Lewis tells **Josh Feola** about the relationship between musical improvisation, theoretical physics, deep art history and the 'synchronicity of design' at play in his abstract painting suites

What do quantum physics, dissonant jazz, Buddhist philosophy and abstract painting have in common? The work of Peter Wayne Lewis, if nothing else.

Born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1953, Lewis soaked in the island nation's rich artistic and musical culture before moving to the United States in 1962. After a 30-year painting career in California, Lewis relocated to New York and started teaching in Boston, where he is currently a professor at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design (MassArt). He's maintained a Beijing studio since 2006, attracted here partially by MassArt's long-running exchange programmes with Tsinghua University and the China Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), and partially due to an affinity with Chinese minority culture. 'In 1854, 20,000 Hakka people migrated to Jamaica. This is a part of what Jamaica is, and a part of my cultural conditioning,' says Wayne Lewis.

An intellectual and spiritual omnivore, Lewis draws inspiration

from a panoply of sources, including avant-garde jazz (his father was a jazz pianist), quantum physics and Eastern religious philosophy. Though Roman Catholic by faith, he says, 'In reality I question all things, and do not buy into any dogma.' Over the course of our interview, he shares personally influential quotations from sources as ancient as the Hindu Vedas and the *Daodejing*, and as current as theories by contemporary physicists Alan Guth and Jacob Bekenstein.

Lewis is part of a dual exhibition currently on view at the UCCA, displaying alongside the late painter Frederick J Brown. A friend of over 20 years who shared Lewis' twin interests in abstract music and art, Brown collaborated with jazz greats Ornette Coleman and Thelonious Monk from his New York loft in the 1970s and '80s.

We talk with Lewis about the order hiding in apparently empty space, and how this hidden order can be theorised in science and ultimately communicated through the arts.

What attracted you to China initially?

It's one of the longest-living cultures in human history. To experience it completely one needs to be on the ground and feel the texture and light and atmosphere of the place. Another issue is that I'm a professor at MassArt in Boston, and we have had an exchange program with Tsinghua and CAFA for many years. I had the good fortune to meet one of the world's great artists, Xiu Bing, at MassArt in 1996. This is a testament to the importance of exchanging professors and artists in terms of cultural production and its impact on the world.

What about working in Beijing has fuelled your creative process? How have you seen the city change in the decade you've been coming here?

It's been amazing to see the architecture of Beijing evolve and shift in such a dramatic way over the years. Galleries and studios change frequently, but this is a testament to the vitality of the place. It's fascinating to me to work here, not speaking the language, but communicating gesturally to the community. Painting is and always will be a visual experience. I'm very interested in this mode of communication.

Music has exerted great influence on your work. Do you have any background as a musician?

There is a rhythm in my work, which comes from a great passion for music. This was instilled in me by my father, Herman B Lewis, who was a jazz pianist. I grew up listening to all the great jazz musicians, as well as European Classical, African, Caribbean, Japanese and Chinese music. I wanted to be a musician, but I didn't have that gift.

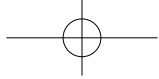
The two suites in your current UCCA exhibit namecheck jazz composer Thelonious Monk, famous for his improvisational style and incorporation of dissonance. What about his music inspires you?

I'm interested in dissonance in musical structures, as well as in the pictorial arts, with the concept of space and what is contained in it. Part of the genius of Miles Davis is the silence in between the notes of his music. We wait in anticipation for the next note while our minds fill in the

void, creating a relationship with the listener, or the spectator in paintings. The 'Buddha Plays Monk' suite refers to the spiritual Buddha, who, like Monk, reimagined how the world could be by inventing different time structures. Jazz is based on standard 4/4 time, which Monk rendered obsolete. The other suite, 'Monk Time', functions as a symphonic suite based on the music of Monk and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*.

You have also expressed an





interest in theoretical physics. How are abstract scientific ideas expressed in your work?

I am not literally trying to make paintings that specifically create a didactic representation of any of the issues surrounding theoretical physics, but I constantly refer to its building blocks: order, chaos, gravity, speed, time, light and the modulation of space. The evolution of human consciousness is also a fascination to me. In terms of coming to any understanding, one must examine the interior life of the self, which is what I do as a painter. The physical representations are symbolically representing interior life and an attempt to secure knowledge that can be shared with a community.

Your two UCCA suites are hung in 5 x 3 grids. Is there a specific logic to this?

This was a deliberate attempt at creating a work of art that reads visually as a symphony of colour, light [and] differing time signatures. The modulation of the form of the paintings is done in a way where there are quiet passages and more aggressive areas, all working together in synchronicity, or harmony of design. I am deliberately trying to break the rhythm of the spectators' expectations and deliver a new order of understanding. The grid appearance came into being with our ancient ancestors in South Africa, Australia and France, 30 to 44 thousand years ago. My usage refers to this systemic form as a language, not the Western canon of abstract painting that has dominated the past 100 years.

You're exhibiting alongside the late African-American painter Frederick J Brown. What was your relationship with him?

Frederick J Brown was a friend of mine whom I had known for over 20 years. I became acquainted with his work while I was a painter in California. I felt it was my duty to remind Beijing and China about what this great artist had done, being the first American to be granted the privilege of showing in what is now known as the National Museum of China in 1988. Both of our exhibitions are a gift to the artistic community of Beijing. I hope that many people will get a chance to see the show, which represents a continuation of cultural exchange started by Fred in 1988, and my work continuing in the same tradition. I thank the administration of the UCCA, its staff and personnel for granting me the honour of this show.

Peter Wayne Lewis & Frederick J Brown is at the UCCA until **Sunday 13**. Go online for details.

This month's openings



Spring flings Above: *Les Sapeurs de Baongo*. Below: Liu Deng's solo show

Post-Chinese New Year, March is the time to get back out into the art world and see what spring will bring. Here are four openings to check out.

Liu Deng

Jiali Gallery From Saturday 5

Beijing-based artist Alessandro Rolandi guest curates Jiali's March exhibition, a solo show for painter Liu Deng. Dense swathes of ink use the natural warp and weft of rice paper to create naturalistic yet opaque and absorbing textures. Rolandi writes, 'We can like them or not, project meaning into them or not, or criticize them, but they will remain mute and present. No attempt to seduce us or to manipulate our perception, just their presence.'

Wesley Tongson

Pékin Fine Arts From Saturday 12

The late Hong Kong ink artist Wesley Tongson is honoured with his first solo show in Beijing, a dream of his before he passed in 2012. In his work, Tongson blends classical Chinese idioms of landscape painting and calligraphy with brashly modern formal and compositional innovations. His widely collected oeuvre has expanded the medium of ink painting beyond its historical roots, cementing his name as one of Hong Kong's most important contemporary artists.

Vhhhhjjzzzh

I: Project Space From Saturday 12
Galerie Urs Meile From Wednesday 16

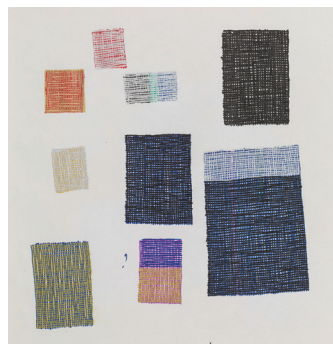
Swiss curator Jeanne Graff brings her site-nonspecific 186f Kepler project back to Beijing, following a brief visit as part of the 2015 Independent Art Spaces festival.

For *Vhhhhjjzzzh*, Graff invites American performance artist Juliana Huxtable, Swiss-Tibetan musician Lhaga Koondhor and feminist artist Mai-Thu Perret to create a floating exhibition across I: Project Space and Galerie Urs Meile. Each space will host installations and radical performances touching on social themes such as race, gender and sexual identity. Catch Koondhor – under her performance alias Asian Eyez – and Huxtable perform live on Thursday 10 at Dada.

Les Sapeurs de Baongo

Institut Français From Thursday 17

Congolese photographer Baudouin Mouanda brings his suite *Les Sapeurs du Baongo* to Beijing as part of the 2016 Francophonie festival. Mouanda, who took up photography in 1993, has garnered international attention for his vibrant photographs of *Les Sapeurs*, a subculture from the Congolese capital of Brazzaville that uses flamboyant fashion to promote peace and understanding in the war-stricken region. Mouanda will be on hand for the exhibition opening on Thursday 17, along with French novelist Frederic Cirez, who has written a novel on *les sapeurs*. **JFeo**



Critics' choice



PETER WAYNE LEWIS & FREDERICK J BROWN

Frederick J Brown made history as the first American painter to display in the National Museum of China. He was a longtime mentor and friend of Kingston-born painter Peter Wayne Lewis, who himself currently maintains a studio in Beijing. Lewis has honoured his late friend by co-organising a dual exhibit addressing the artists' shared interests in jazz and abstract painting. **► UCCA. Until Sun 13. 10RMB**

WESLEY TONGSON

The first solo exhibition held in Beijing for maverick contemporary painter Wesley Tongson. The late artist is one of the most widely collected contemporary artists in Hong Kong. His posthumous Beijing debut will present 29 works covering all periods of his career, which spanned from 1974 through his passing in 2012. **► Pékin Fine Arts. From Sat 12. Free**

JASON KAHN

Meridian hosts Zurich-based artist Jason Kahn for a two-month residency, field recording study and exhibition. The space will be open from Wednesday 2 to Thursday 31 as an open work-in-progress, during which time Kahn will collect and notate sound recordings made on random encounters with Beijing. 'Part sound-journal, part investigation into our awareness of the sounds around us', the final exhibition will be presented as a concert on Wednesday 30 and a sound installation that will run from April 8 to 24. **► Meridian Space. From Wed 2. Free**

LES SAPEURS DE BACONGO

Baudouin Mouanda visits Beijing for the Francophonie festival, exhibiting his spectacular photographs of the Congo's equally spectacular *Sapeurs*: a fashion sub-culture intent on dressing and living fabulously despite the region's systemic social and economic difficulties. **► Institut Français. From Thu 17. Free**

ART

For a comprehensive list of this month's exhibitions, go to timeoutbeijing.com/Art