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Four Rewarding Shows in Philadelphia

PHILADELPHIA — Rarely is it a better time than now for a trip to Philadelphia, where four of the city's major art institutions are presenting exceptionally rewarding shows, each distinctively its own thing. The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts offers a comprehensive retrospective of the career of Norman Lewis, the first such exhibition to be devoted to this African-American Modernist painter and one that invites viewers to consider Mr. Lewis's place in the history of the country's art. Dazzling the eyes and intriguing the mind, the Philadelphia Museum of Art presents two centuries' worth of American still-life paintings and sculptures, from John James Audubon's images of birds and mammals to Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes. The Barnes Foundation has an astounding presentation of extravagantly ornamental antique works of wrought iron from a French museum, including door knockers with demonic faces and coffee grinders that look as if dreamed up by a steampunk artist. And the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania has a solo show of delightfully offbeat works by the self-taught New York artist Christopher Knowles.

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

In 1971, Norman Lewis (1909–1979) created a painting called "Part Vision" that in many ways sums up his distinguished career. Made entirely in shades of blue on a canvas a little over seven feet wide, it pictures in the lower half a jumble of silhouetted semi-abstract shapes suggesting a crowd of demonstrators carrying placards. Hovering centrally above in an expansive, pale blue, mottled space is a mysterious form resembling a disembodied mouth, from which might issue a transcendental speech resolving all the conflicts represented by the agitated figures below.

Billed as the first comprehensive retrospective of Mr. Lewis's work, "Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis" surveys the career of an African-American artist who believed in the power of spiritualized aesthetics — rather than didactic or propagandistic imagery — to elevate, expand and transform collective human consciousness.

The exhibition shows Mr. Lewis starting out as a Social Realist in the 1930s, but in that decade he already revealed a serious interest in abstraction with a painting called "Fantasy" (1936), which looks remarkably like an early work by Kandinsky. From the mid-1940s on, Mr. Lewis largely expunged from his work representational imagery. Drawing on Cubism, Expressionism and Surrealist automatism, he created suavely improvisational works that play with line and gestural brush marks in luminous, atmospheric spaces.

Outside the studio Mr. Lewis was acutely concerned with and actively involved in the politics of his time, especially as they pertained to the lives of American blacks. As a painter, however, he resisted pressure to produce overtly political art, an attitude he shared with the mostly white vanguard abstractionists in the post-World War II era.

In the 1960s, however, he produced some paintings alluding to racism in the American South, and they are among the exhibition's most imposing works. "American Totem" (1960) has white masklike images compressed into a columnar form coming to a conical top at the center of a black field. Evoking the Ku Klux Klan, it has a powerfully mythic resonance. In a painting from 1961, clouds of staccato red marks on a broad white field don't configure into a recognizable image, but its title makes a clear statement: It's called "Redneck Birth." But such direct references are the

exception rather than the rule in Mr. Lewis's art. He sought reconciliation and salvation through mystical abstraction.

It's debatable whether Mr. Lewis's oeuvre, viewed from the perspective strictly of 20th century painting, ranks with those of the most celebrated artists of his generation, like Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. He mixed and matched familiar conventions of Modernist painting with sophisticated lyricism but wasn't a stylistic groundbreaker.

Considered in terms of the social history of American art, however, he's an important figure, because, as the art historian David Driskell writes in the exhibition catalog, he was "among a small number of African-American painters in the nation working abstractly at the time, and he was among the few artists of color who were represented by a mainstream gallery in New York." By most standards he had a successful career, one that many artists of his time — and of today — might envy. He exhibited regularly at the prestigious Willard Gallery in New York from 1949 to 1965, and he was included in numerous museum exhibitions during his lifetime, among them the "Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting" (now called the "Carnegie International") in 1955, and received the Popularity Prize for a 1953 painting called "Migrating Birds." In 1975 he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship, and in 1976 the Graduate School and University Center, City College, New York mounted a retrospective exhibition.

Would he have been more successful had he not been black? Maybe. On the other hand, had he been white, he might have been as easily forgotten posthumously as most white artists of the post-WWII era have been. With the push for recognizing heretofore undervalued black artists animating museums these days, this exhibition — organized by Ruth Fine, a former curator at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington — offers an excellent occasion not only to assess the significance of Mr. Lewis and his art. It also could occasion conversation about the possibly contradictory dual roles of museums: As democratic institutions representing the broad spectrum of the American population, on the one hand, and as selective judges of what is worth saving and exhibiting on the other.

"Procession: The Art of Norman Lewis" runs through April 6 at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 128 Broad Street, Philadelphia, (215) 972-7600, pafa.org.

Philadelphia Museum of Art

The first item you encounter in "Audubon to Warhol: The Art of the American Still Life" is "Venus Rising from the Sea — A Deception," made by the Philadelphian Raphaelle Peale about 1822. It depicts a square of white fabric hanging in folds in front of a painting of a presumably nude goddess. The cloth appears so realistic you feel as if you could lift it up and reveal the deity it chastely obscures. A sly tease of a picture, it's an instructive introduction to an enthralling show of 130 paintings and sculptures representing more or less ordinary objects dating from the turn of the 19th century to 1974. For what is a still-life if not the visible surface of material reality's invisible, unfathomable depths?

Organized by Mark D. Mitchell, a curator at the Yale University Art Gallery, the exhibition somewhat stretches the usual definition of the genre. In another context, you probably wouldn't see as a still-life John James Audubon's "Pennant's Marten" (1814), an extraordinarily lively image of a fierce, growling, furry quadruped rendered with exquisite refinement in watercolor, pen and ink and pencil. But since Audubon worked from observing dead animals arranged in lifelike poses, it is in a literal sense a still-life: an image of life stilled.

Near the tail end of this chronologically arranged show, you come upon "Fountain," Marcel Duchamp's famous upside-down urinal (in this case a 1950 replica of the 1917 original). Here you might wonder what sense it makes to see this conceptual prank as a still-life. On the other hand it's interesting to consider three Brillo boxes from 1964 by Andy Warhol as a kind of still-life, since

those sculptures haven't usually been seen in that category. They're not products of perceptual observation, but they certainly are objects that shed light on modern life.

The bulk of the show is given over to paintings from the 19th century and the first half of the 20th that try to represent immediate visual experience and do so often with amazing technical proficiency. Along with a surfeit of fruit and flower pictures, there are many terrific works by well-known artists, from the 19th century trompe l'oeil masters William Michael Harnett and John Frederick Peto to Modernists like Charles Demuth, Georgia O'Keeffe and Gerald Murphy, whose monumental-scale "Watch" (1924–25) represents the inner works of a pocket watch in a flattened, proto-Pop style.

Some of the most striking pieces are by less famous figures, the most intriguing of whom is Edward Ashton Goodes, creator of "Fishbowl Fantasy" (1867), a painting of hallucinogenic intensity. With preternatural lucidity, it depicts a pair of big fat goldfish in a spherical glass bowl whose surface reflects in miniature an outdoor street scene. A voluptuous pile of flowers spills over the top of the fishbowl, and the marble tabletop on which it stands bears a scattering of a woman's accouterments, including lavender gloves, a fan and a jewel box topped by carved birds posed as if kissing. This is the stuff of a Victorian novel, a supercharged slice of life.

"Audubon to Warhol: The Art of the American Still Life" runs through Jan. 10 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Benjamin Franklin Parkway at 26th Street, 215-763-8100, philamuseum.org.

The Barnes Foundation

As visitors to the Barnes Foundation know, the institution's founder, Albert C. Barnes, collected simple, flat, wrought iron objects and displayed them among the works of Modernist painting he collected. So it's eminently appropriate that the Barnes should present in its temporary exhibition gallery this fascinating selection of objects from the Musée le Secq des Tournelles, Rouen, an institution dedicated to collecting and displaying European wrought iron works. This show of 145 pieces of astounding craftsmanship and often florid imagination includes keys, locks, shop signs, candle sniffers, door knockers, window grilles, decorative plaques and jewelry dating mainly from the 15th century through the 19th century. Museumgoers may be accustomed to these sorts of things made in shiny gold and silver. To see them in metallic blacks and grays and rendered in a material not known for its malleability or luxury is a revelation.

"Strength and Splendor: Wrought Iron From the Musée le Secq des Tournelles, Rouen" runs through Jan. 4 at the Barnes Foundation, 2025 Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Philadelphia, 215-278-7000, barnesfoundation.org.

Institute of Contemporary Art

A poet, visual artist and performance artist who lives in New York, Christopher Knowles (born 1959) produces works in many different mediums that revolve principally around language, to which he relates in an unusually concrete way. Mr. Knowles, who has autism, brings to his projects an idiosyncratic, impressively versatile and infectiously playful sensibility and an evidently unstoppable creative drive.

One of Mr. Knowles's signature art-making tools is the typewriter. Typing in black and red, he produces intricate abstract patterns, images like that of a much-enlarged wristwatch and lists of rhyming words and popular songs titles. "What I do on a Typical Day" (2011), a matter-of-fact paragraph recounting a series of unremarkable activities, has a comically deadpan effect. He also creates percussive audio collages of words and sentences using a hand-held tape recorder and makes boldly graphic paintings, like a series of five canvases in graduated sizes from 2004, each a copy of the familiar rainbow-colored terrorist alert chart announcing states of risk from low to severe. The exhibition includes a stage set with walls and floor covered by pages of The New York

OFFICE BAROQUE

Times and punctuated by alarm clocks and oversize megaphones, all assembled for a performance called “The Sundance Kid Is Beautiful” that took place in November. To experience this inspiring show of more than 100 works (organized by the writer Hilton Als and Anthony Elms, the institute’s chief curator) is to take a mental trip into a refreshingly foreign mode of consciousness. It might rewire your brain.

“Christopher Knowles: In a Word” continues through Dec. 27 at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 118 South 36th Street, 215-898-7108, icaphila.org.

By KEN JOHNSON