

TWO COATS OF PAINT

Spencer Lewis's mesmerizing formlessness

By Patrick Neal
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Spencer Lewis: *Six Jutes (2)* installation at Harper's Chelsea. (All photos courtesy of Harper's Chelsea).

Spencer Lewis's large, colorful, gestural abstractions, on view at Harper's Chelsea, are deliciously physical and boldly display the process of their own creation. Visible from the street and hung close together, the paintings get right in your face as you enter the gallery. Gallerist Harper Levine, who has shown Lewis's work at his other locations in East Hampton and Upper East Side, has chosen to christen his new Chelsea location with this new solo show of Lewis's. Titled *Six Jutes (2)*, it is the second in a two-part exhibition that showcases eleven paintings hung six at a time, anchored by one particular piece (the "mother") that appears in both parts.

Lewis's paintings are all untitled and incorporate acrylic, oil, enamel, spray paint, and ink on jute. Each

is large and vertically oriented, and composed of slashing linear strokes that run frenetically back and forth across the threads in tangled knots, imparting gestural energy in glistening color. A few of the compositions straddle the edges of the picture plane and all leave some breathing room around the focal mark-making, where raw jute is exposed. Underlying mists and sprays of paint support the more impastoed linear marks on top, alongside drips, gobs, stringy splotches, fingerprints, and random wear-and-tear. Several paintings have folds and indentations in the jute, and one features a rough seam that resembles a stitched scar from Frankenstein monster's body. A few have little paintbrushes stuck to the surfaces, along with stray threads and staples and what appear to be crushed paint tubes. Fingers appear



Spencer Lewis, *Untitled*, 2020, acrylic, oil, enamel, spray paint, and ink on jute, 110 x 71 inches

to have etched grooves into some of the exterior marks. The most conspicuous ones - in white, off-white or yellow - are often crusty and matte, like dried toothpaste, and lend the paintings unity and structure.

The performative aspect of Lewis's work is palpable. Lewis drags his jutes on the ground, throws rocks at his surfaces, and hangs them from fences, among various assaults. Evoking this brute physicality, Lewis's compositions recall Joan Mitchell's more skeined and netted work. One painting in particular - rendered in deep blood reds, blue veins, and mustards - captures some of the somber, organic palettes she developed in paintings such as the diptych *South* (1989). It's as if Lewis's underpainting employed the lyrical and atmospheric masses Mitchell painted in France during the 1960s, while his graphic overpainting indulged the more violent, whiplash style that



Spencer Lewis, *Untitled*, 2020, acrylic, oil, enamel, spray paint, and ink on jute, 89 x 67 inches

emerged from her New York studio in the 1950s. Other paintings are subtler but retain that basic dynamism. In one, for instance, knotted strokes of harmonious pale teals and sea greens lilt upward and off the surface.

Despite the superficial randomness of Lewis's compositions, they are built on structure and methodology. In past works he began with a grid or X-shape as an armature. In his current work, he anthropomorphizes his abstractions, reacting to faces and bodies. A bow-and-arrow-like glyph appears at the center of the "mother" painting. This symbol consists of thick, white perpendicular strokes capped by two black, directional V-shapes. The symbol, augmented by a pink slash at the top and orange mass at the bottom, appears reimagined in several of the other paintings, like a variation on a theme. There are also intermittent

SPENCER LEWIS



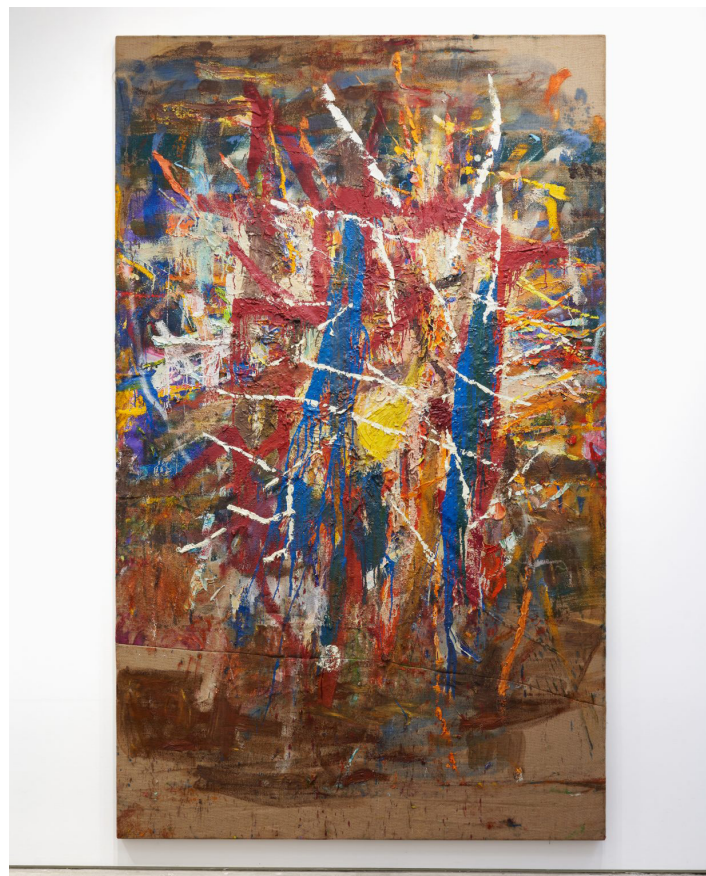
Spencer Lewis: *Six Jutes (2)* installation at Harper's Chelsea.

inflections of high-key fluorescent yellow, green, or orange accents. Lewis describes his paintings as “one large gesture made of thousands of movements and that includes going in and out of the studio.” The synergy gained from working across several pieces at once from moment to moment, interspersing painting with movement, appears to be a galvanizing force for him.

Lewis has discussed the liberating power of working on cheap, throwaway materials like cardboard or jute, due to both their plasticity and their freedom from the burden of art history that comes with linen or canvas. This evolution in his work made me think of parallels with that of painter Guy Goodwin, who similarly switched to cardboard in the course of his career. Goodwin executed his seminal series of *C-Swing* paintings from the 1970s in an equally no-nonsense manner, imposing mark on top of mark so as to blur the line between object and illusion. Both artists are also interested in the complementarity between words and images, and ponder personal and collective history in their work. Some of Lewis's pictographs embed inchoate formations of characters, numbers, or letters seeking to express themselves.

It is especially intriguing that Lewis's paintings at once embrace formalist and anti-formalist methodologies, as two sides of the same coin. In *Formless: a User's Guide*, Yves-Alain Bois and

Rosalind Krauss look to philosopher Georges Bataille's destabilizing concept of the 'l'informe' (formless) to challenge Greenbergian modernism. In an essay titled *Horizontality*, Krauss's insights into Jackson Pollock's techniques are particularly resonant in regard to Lewis's unorthodox approaches, as are other essays on Gestalt, and Base Materialism that invoke trash, impurity, the bestial, the unconstructed, etc. “When does anti-form start to gain form and vice versa?” Lewis's paintings explore this question with mesmerizing results.



Spencer Lewis, *Untitled*, 2020, acrylic, oil, enamel, spray paint, and ink on jute, 112 x 68 inches

Spencer Lewis: Six Jutes (2), Harper's Books Chelsea, 534 W. 22nd Street, New York, NY 10021. Through February 13, 2021.