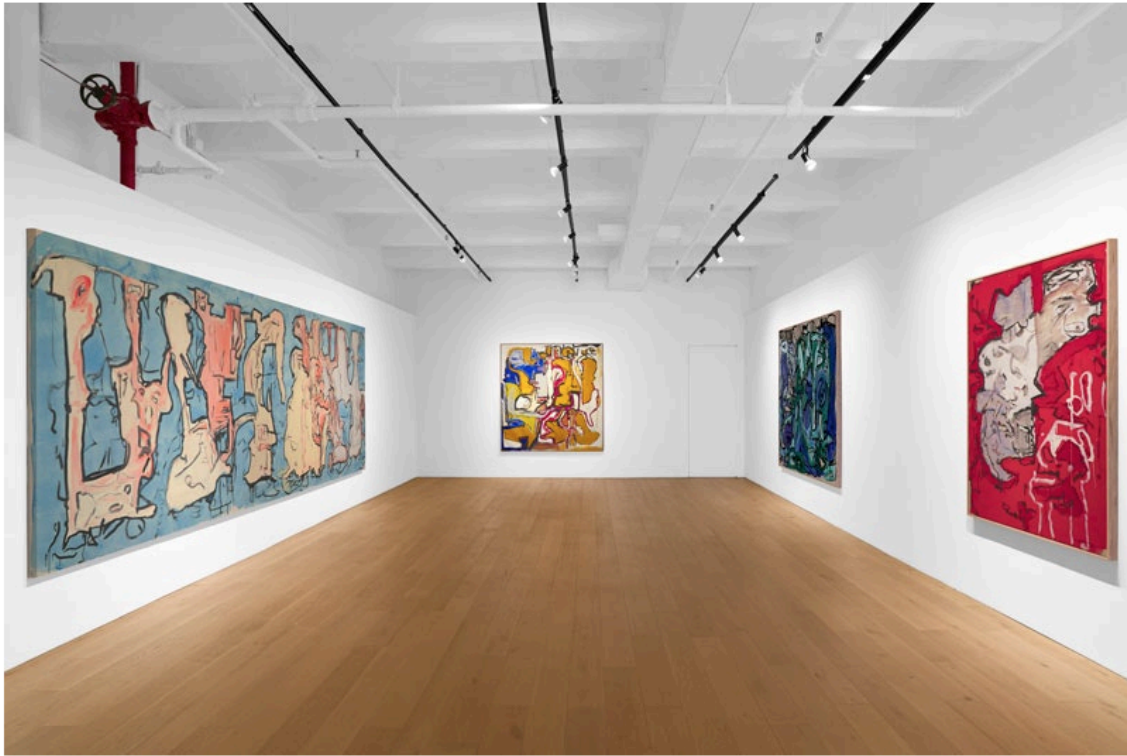




Claude Lawrence: Reflections on Porgy and Bess

April 16, 2024

Mark Bloch



Installation view: *Claude Lawrence: Reflections On Porgy And Bess* at Venus Over Manhattan, New York, 2024.
Courtesy Venus Over Manhattan, New York.

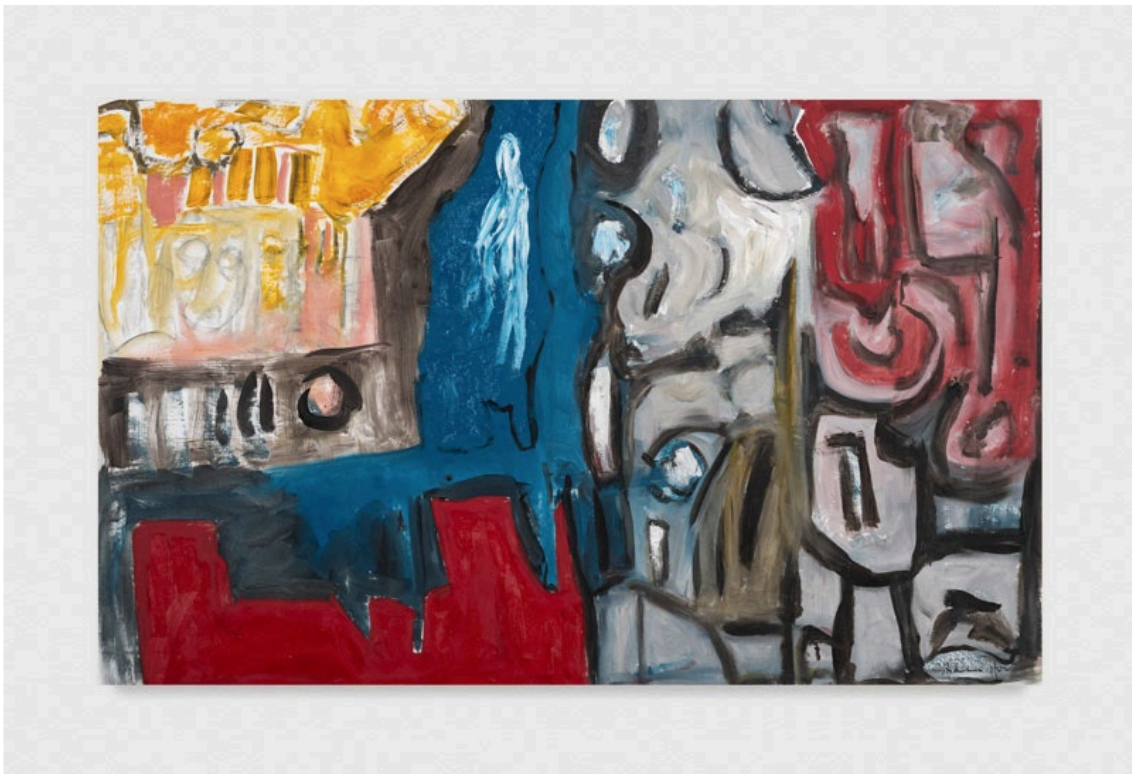
Along the West African coast in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, before the first slave ships arrived, offshoots of English were spoken, evolved from years of trade between multilingual Africans and Europeans. Later, after slavery began in the United States, a uniquely African American creole language, Gullah, developed along the 180 miles of coastline between northeastern Florida and southeast North Carolina including the off-shore Sea Islands and in Black communities in Charleston and Savannah. The Geechee people, as they call themselves, have a rich storytelling tradition. African folklore combined with American heritage produced stories featuring the animal trickster antics of Brer Rabbit, Brer Bear, Brer Fox, and Brer Wolf as well as tales of enslaved people navigating their way through morality tales.

The Black character “Porgy” from DuBose Heyward's 1925 novel is based on a Charlestonian local named Samuel Smalls, which Heyward and his wife used to



develop into a play. As a Southern white teen working on the waterfront, Heyward developed an inquisitiveness for Black culture and vernacular. Interested in the white American writers who collected such stories in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, George Gershwin traveled to Charleston and the James Island Gullah-speaking community in the summer of 1934 to work on a further adaptation of the Heywards' theatrical work and to preserve African musical traditions, combining his knowledge of New York jazz with folk songs, blues, work songs, and spirituals. With added arias and recitatives from European opera, it became *Porgy and Bess*.

Chicago-born painter Claude Lawrence (b. 1944) has pulled inspiration from the sounds, themes, and the internal expressive forces of the characters of Gershwin's Black love story. Lawrence recalled, "These are my people, I know them." Lawrence lives and works in Sag Harbor where he has spent many decades painting and working as a jazz alto saxophonist. Lawrence's first exhibition at Venus Over Manhattan is his first in New York City in a decade. Thirteen paintings, four of them in oil with the rest in acrylic, feature playful, colorful forms surrounded by confident outlines, admirably spanning both of the gallery's spaces at 39 and 55 Great Jones Street.



Claude Lawrence, *Overture*, 2022. Oil on canvas; 65 1/2 x 104 inches. Courtesy the artist and Venus Over Manhattan, New York.



His punchy abstract paintings escort us through a sequential journey through the sweep of Gershwin's epic work, which rocks back and forth between the operatic and the swingin', uniting them in colorful, confident visual improvisations, an emotional blend complimenting the eighty year old artist's well-established aural world.

Lawrence's latest paintings are his first suite, made in his Long Island studio in 2022 with the exception of one untitled prototype from 2018, that engage in dialogue with the inhabitants of Catfish Row, the port community in Charleston, South Carolina, as well as the sights, sounds, and emotions of the opera, which are depicted vividly but mysteriously. Porgy, a disabled beggar, falls for Bess, a knockout in an abusive relationship with Crown, her violent and possessive ex. A drug dealer, Sportin' Life, attempts to draw Bess back into old habits.

While none of these works provide access to what was happening in the artist's ear and mind literally, his hand elicits joy as we wonder about his exuberant, monumentally-scaled canvases that speak, just the same. Palpably tempting to read into, *Overture* provides more detail and color than the others, its smaller brush strokes suggesting clues to microcosms about to unfold in the story ahead.. *Summertime* hints at a turquoise beach landscape exploding with activity. In *The Island*, probably about Kittiwah Island where a picnic takes place in the story, two shapes face off among fine lines and brown intestinal earthy forms. The familiar, bouncy tune "Plenty of Nothing" inspired animated black glyphs against a light earth tone background.



Claude Lawrence, *Upper Fifth Avenue*, 2022. Acrylic on canvas; 81 x 211 5/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Venus Over Manhattan, New York.



Elsewhere, in paintings named for various characters, light and dark blues combined with greens and black lines help *Poor Robbins* create a mood for a murdered character, setting the story in motion. In *Comfort to the Widow*, browns and oranges surround turquoise, also speaking to that death. In *Sportin Life*, abstract shapes reminiscent of Arshile Gorky works or Duchamp's *Large Glass* slyly dazzle us. In *Crowns End*, a dominant form outlined in black, tellingly faces a more ghostly one. Similarly, in *Looked Away* also referring to *Crowns End*, a yellow profile may be Porgy, surrounded by five colors he refuses to see. Finally, my favorite is one of the largest pieces; *Upper Fifth Avenue* consists of serially horizontal pinks and beiges against sky blue, evoking promised Fifth Avenue Harlem mansions.

Thirty years ago, Lawrence left city life to settle in Sag Harbor, the 19th century whaling village and summer haven for Black doctors, lawyers, and other professionals in the 1920s and 30s. As that community expanded, luminaries like Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, and Al Loving visited, diversifying the creative context of the Hamptons where Pollock, Krasner, de Kooning, and Rothko moved to work. In this show, the genres of music, jazz in particular, and abstract painting somehow combine to say what words can't about the narrative as well as a century-old story about that narrative that begins and ends with what Lawrence calls "insiders." Following a detour through words written, spoken, and sung by people outside these stories, amended by hues and presumably soprano sax sounds, Lawrence's luminous colors express an awareness of cultural appropriation—both the intended and unintended. Lawrence's engagement with the Broadway revival of *Porgy and Bess* two years before he was born in 1944, its European premiere in 1943, the film adaptation in 1959, and many popular recordings in the years that followed produce new universal truths about Black American art forms and their location within America.