



In New York, an Artist's Lifelong Love for Jazz Comes Into Focus

At 80, Claude Lawrence is opening a major solo show at the downtown gallery Venus Over Manhattan.

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Claude Lawrence in his exhibition 'Reflections on Porgy & Bess' at Venus Over Manhattan, 39 Great Jones Street, New York, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Venus Over Manhattan.

For the self-taught abstract painter Claude Lawrence, art and music have always been intimately connected. Growing up in the 1940s on the South Side of Chicago, surrounded by a vibrant jazz and visual arts scene, he was barely five years old the first time he felt drawn to painting, and just fourteen when he picked up a saxophone. "I adored the image of it—the mystique surrounding it," Lawrence tells W. "Charlie Parker was my hero."

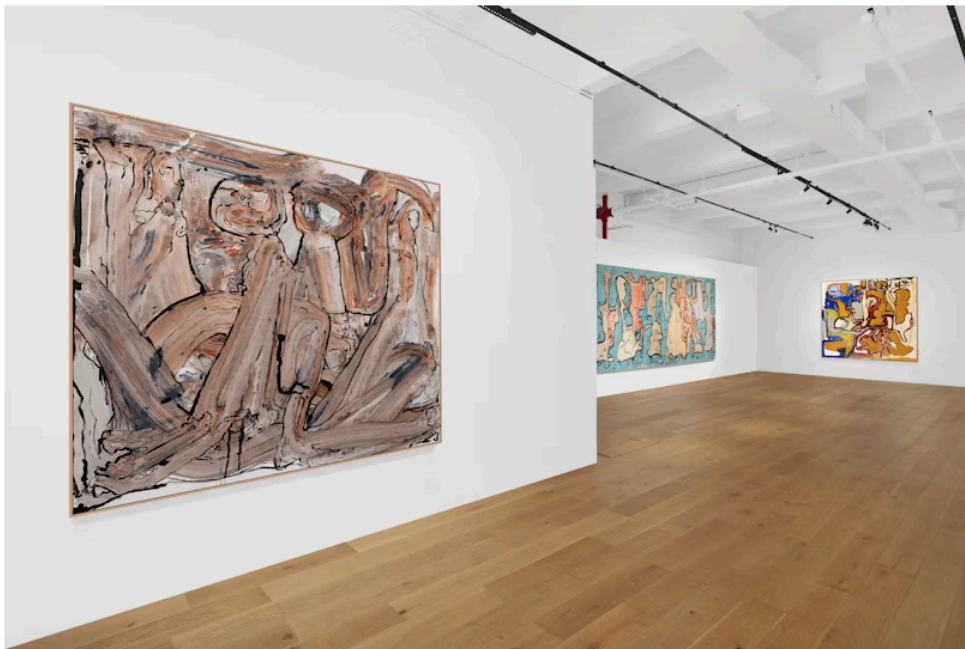
Out of high school, he became a professional saxophone player, joined a jazz trio, and performed all over the United States until the 1980s, when a psychic friend told him he would soon pursue a different vocation. "Maybe a day or so later, I got into painting," Lawrence recalls.

Yet his profound love for music would reverberate within his artistic practice indefinitely. Lawrence, who is now 80 years old, has created works held in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art



in Washington D.C., and the Studio Museum in Harlem over the course of his six-decade career. But it wasn't until a few years ago, after moving back to the Black cultural enclave of Sag Harbor, New York (where he lived in the 1990s), that he had the opportunity to show his paintings regularly, with solo exhibitions at galleries like Anthony Meier in San Francisco, David Lewis in East Hampton, and The LAB in Seattle.

Now, he has a major solo show opening at Venus Over Manhattan in New York City through May 4, 2024. *Reflections on Porgy and Bess*, exhibited across the gallery's spaces at both 39 and 55 Great Jones Street, marks Lawrence's first show with Venus. The exhibition consists of a series of rich, large-scale abstract paintings inspired by George Gershwin's 1935 acclaimed opera *Porgy & Bess*.



Installation view of Claude Lawrence: *Reflections on Porgy & Bess*, at Venus Over Manhattan, 55 Great Jones Street, New York, 2024.
Courtesy the artist and Venus Over Manhattan, New York

The beloved play, often hailed as the Great American Opera, brings together quintessential Black musical genres such as spirituals, choir, and jazz to tell the story of Porgy, a beggar with a disability who longs to be with Bess, a beautiful woman troubled by her abusive ex-lover Crown and the drug dealer Sportin' Life. The tale is set in the 1920s on Catfish Row, a segregated fishing community in Charleston, South Carolina.

Lawrence, who remembers coming of age and listening to the songs of *Porgy and Bess*, says feeling an intimate connection to the characters of the story was what prompted him to create the series of paintings currently on view. "This is a very character-driven



piece—I know these people,” the artist says, likening Gershwin’s fictional community to the one he grew up around in Chicago. “The characters and their interactions create something like a Greek tragedy, and the place where they live, Catfish Row, is like a ghetto where so much is happening. These are my people.”

The artist’s energetic series, comprised of 22 abstract paintings, follows Gershwin’s opera sequentially; many of the painted works, such as *Sportin’ Life* (2022), *Poor Robbins* (2022) or *Crowns End* (2022), have titles based on characters from the original production. One of the largest and most vibrant paintings in the collection, *Summertime* (2022)—rendered in yellow, blue, and peach tones—is titled after the most celebrated song of the opera, which has been performed by legends like Nina Simone and Charlie Parker himself.

Music’s deep influence on Lawrence’s oeuvre is palpable in the paintings’ visual compositions. Highly gestural, with vibrant geometric forms depicted in rich hues oftentimes emphasized by dynamic black strokes, it’s not hard to imagine the artist creating the paintings in his Sag Harbor studio, guided by the vibrations of music. “You can do a dance with the colors when there’s music on in the background,” Lawrence says of his process. “I build a dialogue with each painting. It speaks to me, it tells me where it wants to go, and when it gets there, it’s born. It’s done.”



Claude Lawrence in his exhibition *Reflections on Porgy & Bess*, at Venus Over Manhattan, 39 Great Jones Street, New York, 2024.
Courtesy the artist and Venus Over Manhattan.

Lawrence, who continues to play the saxophone, sees how his love for jazz and its intrinsic dynamism has informed his life in more ways than one. “When I graduated



high school, I could've gone to college or academia. I could've led a career-driven life, but I chose the jazz life—a life of movement, of no [consistent] jobs, of no money," he says.

Over the years, he's lived in Europe, Mexico, and more. To support his nomadic lifestyle, he took on varied jobs—at one point working as a house painter and then as a chandelier cleaner. But times have changed, as he's now put down roots in Sag Harbor (but still travels to a chateau near Paris once a year). "I'm confident my purpose is through music and art, and I know that I'm inhabited by a purpose that I have nothing to do with," Lawrence says, laughing. "In other words, I'm just a purpose package, and I can't take credit for any of it. If I can paint, play, and exercise, then it's a good day."