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Oral history interview with Norman Lewis, 1968 July 14

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Norman Lewis on 1968 July 14. The interview was conducted in New York. NY by Henri Ghent for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

HENRI GHENT: This is Henri Ghent interviewing Norman Lewis, painter. You are a New Yorker, aren't you Norman?

NORMAN LEWIS: Yes, I was born in New York, specifically Harlem.

MR. GHENT: When?

MR. LEWIS: Oh, many years ago. [Laughs]

MR. GHENT: How many?

MR. LEWIS: Too many years ago. I am fifty.

MR. GHENT: You are fifty years old?

MR. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. GHENT: Where precisely were you born in Harlem?

MR. LEWIS: I think it was 133rd Street or 132nd Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenue and from there we moved to 132nd Street and Lenox Avenue and we lived there for many years and then, through a cousin who was a superintendent of a building in Harlem, I used to stay on 143rd Street, which was tenanted by--the whole neighborhood was white at that time. I think the only Negroes who lived up in that area were superintendents.

MR. GHENT: And their children were children of the superintendents. Was your father a superintendent?

MR. LEWIS: No, my father was a stevedore. His job was like a supervisor on the docks. A little better than a stevedore, he had a better job, but he was a stevedore basically.

MR. GHENT: Did your mother work or did she housekeep?

MR. LEWIS: My mother did both. She used to work for a school teacher and she was a housekeeper. Like three hours a day she would take care of this woman's house. We had a kind of nice environment because our parents fortunately were very beautiful people as I later got to understand them and what they gave to us. And there was three of us, a younger brother who was killed in Korea, not killed in Korea-- he was a casualty; he later came back here and died.

MR. GHENT: Because of injuries received in Korea?

MR. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. GHENT: Oh, I see.

MR. LEWIS: And I have an older brother who is a detective and I think he is about to retire. He originally was a musician and had his own band and used to play with Count Basie and Chick Webb and around. But eventually he gave up the--he was a violinist and stopped playing because there weren't many openings for Negroes as a serious musician. He used to play Bach, Beethovan, you know, all the concertos and all of those kinds of things, which seem very foreign.

MR. GHENT: Remote from that sort of environment.

MR. LEWIS: That is right, yes.

MR. GHENT: You are the middle child?

MR. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. GHENT: Were either of your parents artistic?

MR. LEWIS: Neither one. I always wanted to be an artist. I remember at nine years old there was some Negro woman who used to paint and I used to constantly see her in the street and I used to look and look and look. I always wanted to be an artist, you know, the drawings that children make in the street and stuff like that. I remember coming home and I said to my father that I wanted to be an artist and he said this is a white man's profession. It is a starving profession. He never encouraged me, but musically they fostered my brother's becoming a violinist and he was good. And yet visually they couldn't understand my desire to be a painter, you know, which I pursued on my own, and feeling as I did very inferior about becoming an artist, despite the fact that I eventually got a scholarship to the John Reed School, which I didn't attend. I taught myself, which is a hell of a long way of going about it, because there are shorter ways of discovering what you are.

MR. GHENT: Before we go on talking about the pursuit of a painting career, let's talk a little about your childhood in a Harlem that was then, fifty years ago, predominately white. What was life like for a Negro child in Harlem in those days?

MR. LEWIS: Recently there was, I noticed, some church appointed--I think it was a Catholic Church appointed a Negro--or an Episcopal Church.

MR. GHENT: It was Catholic I believe.

MR. LEWIS: As the head of this area. This was 141st Street between Seventh and Eighth and I remember as a kid going to school--and this was Jewish, Irish, Catholic neighborhood--and on my way to school I used to see these kids dressed in uniforms. But all of the kids in this school were white. There were no Negroes despite slowly there were Negroes moving into the neighborhood. And eventually the school closed because I suppose the people were moving out of the neighborhood in middle class and moving into suburbia and Jews moving away from the neighborhood. And eventually this school, you know, it is almost like letting Negroes become Catholics and joining the Church, you know, so that eventually the school became like a cadre of black, young kids in a Catholic school. But before that the neighborhood was predominately Italian, vegetable sellers, Jewish small shop owners and it was predominately white, which slowly changed. I don't know what the hell else I can remember other than--

MR. GHENT: Was the life pleasant for you? Did you have any friends among your white schoolmates?

MR. LEWIS: Oh, yes, the school that I attended--one of my best friends was a Swedish fellow. We both took a postgraduate course in commercial design because I didn't know what the hell to do. There was no advice and, despite my halting speech, I graduated from high school with one of the best marks in the school. Yet to speak correctly in my neighborhood was something to say, if "This is I, " which is right, is correct, the thing to say is "It is me" instead of "It is I, " you know. And this was something--speaking like my parents, who came from Bermuda, were very concerned about one's development and going to colleges--as I eventually did on my own. It wasn't a question of making money; it was a question of how better to live as a human being and reason. This is what education meant to them and not that I should make a lot of money.

MR. GHENT: Let's get back to that woman painter who so fascinated you that you watched her work. Who was she?

MR. LEWIS: There was a Negro painter whose name I can't recall but she painted about the war. She painted Negroes in the war.

MR. GHENT: World War I?

MR. LEWIS: Yes, World War I, and I don't remember the name but she was well known and I don't want to--Romy would remember her name.

MR. GHENT: Does the name Augusta Savage mean anything to you?

MR. LEWIS: Well, I later discovered her when I was about 23 and 24. We lived on 143rd Street between Lenox and Seventh and I used to walk by her and I looked in the basement and I saw this woman doing sculpture. And it fascinated me, just her ability to manipulate the clay with her hands, clay. And one day I got up enough guts to go into the basement and tell her that I was interested and I would like to learn. She was a very open and she let me work in her shop and I started as a sculptor. Yet my main interest was painting. This was in her basement and the place was dirty as hell and being very bourgeois that I couldn't understand, you know, the conditions in which she worked .And eventually I helped her clean and whitewash the whole damn basement so that it was a pleasant place to work in.

MR. GHENT: Did she help you a lot? [interruption]

MR. LEWIS: The meeting of a black artist who, incidentally, that was a woman was quite a challenge. She was a very impressive personality and very encouraging but as an artist, I mean the whole rudiments of trying to become a painter or sculptor, there was little that she did. It was just my observation, looking, seeing her work and feeling stimulated by a woman sculptor. Just the fact that she had a place where I could work was the most fruitful thing of our meeting. I worked with her for about two years but there wasn't any direction, she never suggested "do this" or "do that." I just worked. Eventually I stopped sculpture and painted as I wanted.

MR. GHENT: Whom did you meet at Augusta Savage's place?

MR. LEWIS: At that time it was still--I met loads of people; Roland Hayes, Countee Cullins.

MR. GHENT: Was a poet.

MR. LEWIS: I met Claude McCay. I met a painter who was very well known then, and many of the-- the guy who wrote *Nigger Heaven*.

MR. GHENT: That was Carl Van Vechten wasn't it?

MR. LEWIS: Yes and, oh Jesus Christ, I can't remember the names, but many people then who found a great deal of nostalgia or-- I don't know what the hell they were searching for in Harlem, but I met many people who felt that there was something here, a Negro experience that they didn't have, or couldn't share, any place else because all the jazz, everything existed in Harlem, which is contrary to what exists today. This was my becoming and being, sort of, like a New York Harlem kid who spent the majority of his time in a poolroom. You know, I gambled-- this is how I went to college. So this was a whole new avenue of expression for me which opened many other doors.

MR. GHENT: So, as a child did you like to read a lot and if so what sort of things did you like to read?

MR. LEWIS: The only reading I did was probably what was necessary in school and high school. But it seemed as if reading was almost putting you in another hang up. Kids in the street never read and I found that despite the fact that I spoke English well, I was looked down on. So naturally, wanting to belong, one spoke in the vernacular of the street jargon and in the poolroom, despite the fact that many things that I did I didn't believe. [Interruption] I don't know about other kids' environment, but my own was like if you read books you were looked on as being queer or something like that because you had feelings that weren't shared by the majority. And when I finally started to paint on my own I never told anyone. And the majority of my friends eventually became white kids who I knew were painting and I could share; there was a give and take that I nourished because this was what I wanted to do. But I didn't know any, black kids who painted or read or wrote poetry, stuff like that. It was the poolroom, which was like going to a job. I woke up in the morning and my mother fed me and there was no--we were very bourgeois and they never suggested that we work. But there was always the need of money. I, as a kid, used to sell newspapers and I used to have a job delivering groceries. And I met an Armenian tailor in the neighborhood and I eventually became a presser, you know, the suit and clothes and dresses and stuff like this. And eventually I made clothes. And this is how I kept myself later as a painter. But he was like a second father to me and a very beautiful guy. Eventually it got to a point where I worked downtown and I didn't have the guts to tell him that I was earning like $250 a week when most people were just earning fifty.

MR. GHENT: What were you doing when you were earning that much?

MR. LEWIS: Nothing. I just found that I had a lot of friends, so-called friends, but I eventually discovered what they knew me for was not what I gave to them mentally but what I had materially in terms of money, which they didn't have. This I eventually stopped and later became a seaman, you know, for several years. I spent two and a half or three years in South America sailing, which I enjoyed. It was an opportunity to see that there are other people as bad off or even worse than black people in America. And places like Bolivia where at that time they earned about 25 cents a day in the tin mines, and places in St. Thomas, Jamaica, Montevideo. In fact I knew more about South America than I knew about New York City or the United States as a whole.

MR. GHENT: Did you feel that you were completely accepted by these white kids in your neighborhood who also had an interest in art socially as well as, you know, having your artistic aspirations in common?

MR. LEWIS: I think that I found probably, it might have been superficial, but I find that prejudice exists with parents so that whatever another kid brought to me, his attitudes were forced on him by his parents. But, on the whole, it was there and they accepted you with a feeling as if they were superior but were surprised that you brought some knowledge of what you were as a person to what you were doing. This existed in high school, so that I enjoyed school because there was a great deal to learn, a great deal to share. Yet after high school

suddenly I found with all my ability that I couldn't get a job as they could get a job after school. And slowly it dawns on you; it is a kind of rude awakening that you are not part of this system you know.

MR. GHENT: Did that bother you?

MR. LEWIS: Oh, yes, very definitely because there were things that I wanted to do, things that I wanted to achieve as a person, and you find yourself finding other roads to sustain yourself. Such as I gambled. I went to school. My doing other things to sustain myself was because there no communication in the neighborhood. Art was something extremely foreign. I would paint on my own and this, naturally at home doing it, I would paint at night and my mother would say that I was burning the light, you know.

MR. GHENT: Too much.

MR. LEWIS: Yes, so then I bought a lamp light and so the next thing was I was ruining my eyes. So eventually I--there was no stimulus there and when I met Augusta Savage this was an opportunity to pursue what I wanted to do. I lived--I told you I met her--she was working in a basement--shelved on the top floor of this building, and I finally moved there partly. I used to go home to eat and my mother used to be upset. My clothes were always filled with plaster and plaster dust. But this place was one of these old tenement buildings with the garbage in the basement. Finally we cleaned this out but I couldn't adjust myself to this way of living because it was so foreign to me, you know.

MR. GHENT: You found it repulsive.

MR. LEWIS: Not only that, it just stank, you know.

MR. GHENT: Would you say that Augusta Savage encouraged you even though she didn't offer any sort of technical advice and assistance to you? Just being around her was sufficient.

MR. LEWIS: It was great, just meeting her and seeing a black woman create. Or even to see a black woman try to create out of herself was a tremendous encouragement to me because I had never known anyone, and as it exists today, this question of black and white. To me, then, being very naive, it was just the fact that she--despite the fact I knew discrimination existed in the arts, but it does, which many white cats don't understand. Unfortunately it is not enough to just have talent, this is a business and a dirty business in the sense that it can destroy whatever initiative one feels in terms of becoming an artist.

MR. GHENT: Yes, sure. When did you leave home in earnest? You know, to be your own man and to pursue your life as, you know, as you saw fit?

MR. LEWIS: I think I was about twenty and I got this job on a freighter going to South America. I was scared to death because I didn't know where the hell I was going.

MR. GHENT: You had never been away from home before had you?

MR. LEWIS: Yes, but it was kind of wonderful. I went to some place in New Jersey, this freighter was leaving and I had my own room and it was carrying freight and the first place that we stopped off was--it was like sixteen days at sea if you can imagine, which gives some indication of how slow this boat was going because the first morning I woke up, I remember, I was seasick that whole day. And that just lasted a day. One hears of having sea legs, one has to know how to walk on a ship. But after that day I was okay. Then it became very monotonous, expecting to see land and not seeing it for like two weeks. And finally when we anchored in St. Thomas, it was only to take on vegetables and materials for eating and stuff like that. And then just seeing the sea, the color of water, of blues and greys and murky and muddy water in various ports--there were different discoveries, they were beautiful to see for me who, was a kid, who couldn't sit in a park on the grass because you felt the worms or ants or something like this would bother you. So here I was discovering a whole new life which is most usual, I guess, to a lot of people, but not to me.

MR. GHENT: So when did you finally come back to the States and sort of set yourself up?

MR. LEWIS: When I came back I landed in New Orleans and the whole problem of arriving in a station and of buying a ticket to come back to New York City. I remember making certain errors of my physical being. Like New York City, if there is a seat in the subway you sit down and regardless who you are sitting next to. And I remember getting my ticket; I even bought a ticket at the wrong box because there was a box for colored and a box for whites.

MR. GHENT: You mean a box for colored and a box for white.

MR. LEWIS: Yes, and sitting down, I sat there for about fifteen minutes, and it was next to a white woman, she had to move over. She did it pleasantly, there was no-- I sat there for fifteen or twenty minutes and a Negro

porter came over to me and said-- he whispered in my ear, “this room is for white.” And it was almost as somebody says "attention" and I suddenly became aware of where I was and I got up as if it were a command and I went into the Negro section of this station. You know, you suddenly become aware of where the hell you are. You are back in America. I took the train back and for some unknown reason, I think I was around Georgia, and the porter said to me--change of trains and stuff like this--and he said to me, "You are not from the South." And I wondered how he knew. Evidently, there were things that I was doing on the train, which black people don't do in America.

MR. GHENT: So you got back to New York and--

MR. LEWIS: It was a whole struggle to just exist I went back to the poolroom and yet I did in some way try to nourish this whole thing of wanting to become an artist and painting by myself and just doing it alone. And questioning and by this time I had become very engrossed in this thing and meeting Augusta added the necessary impetus to go on and make a tremendous amount of sacrifices. One of the things to sustain me was gambling. I used to gamble and that is how I bought materials.

MR. GHENT: What did you play, poker?

MR. LEWIS: Poker. Horseracing, which is an art in itself and depending on how much larceny--

MR. GHENT: Is involved.

MR. LEWIS: Yes, and it is a question if you want to be a gambler or be an artist. They are extremely greedy people. You know, I mean I think there are many people who make money at races. It is just if you are a two-dollar bettor, you are a two-dollar bettor and to bet ten frightens you to death and that if you continue to bet, say as I would bet like five and ten and not feel afraid to lose or picking a horse or stuff like that, or betting in a game. And psychologically, poker was a tremendous understanding of other people. One becomes aware that even if a guy has aces backed up he is going to bet very gingerly when he has got it made and doesn't bet his hand as he should. But this afforded me an opportunity to buy many books that I now have when I didn't have any books at all. And buy all the things I felt necessary to encourage me to go on and now I have a library of books that I want.

MR. GHENT: Do you feel that you read more now than you did when you were a child?

MR. LEWIS: Oh, of course, yes.

MR. GHENT: What sort of things do you read? Art books or--

MR. LEWIS: There wasn’t books on artists, Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani, Van Gogh. Herbert Reed was a tremendous impetus to me creatively for what he conveyed in his writing. He just died.

MR. GHENT: That is Herbert Reed?

MR. LEWIS: Yes. And this was my education. It is like doing it yourself and historically the books that I read were more of people who have made it from humble beginnings. And this encouraged me to read other things and in recent years with my discrimination and discovery of Albert Schweitzer, who when I eventually was appointed to teach, I used to write on the blackboard for my students, who were white incidentally, some of his remarks and observations. Until later I was very upset when I discovered how he felt about the Africans and I stopped reading this man because I felt what he was doing and how he felt about the Africans--as if they were children and, you know.

MR. GHENT: Incapable of helping themselves.

MR. LEWIS: Yes. And not really seeing the true situation that existed in Arica. Yet this man is held up as being a god to these people when he really wasn't.

MR. GHENT: In the good sense of the word.

MR. LEWIS: Yes. But books are beautiful and even the art books, which I have ceased to buy because the contribution of American artists are not evaluated, they are not written about, there is no history of black people that is nourished and encouraged. And I just stopped buying books despite the fact that in Europe, you know, in the Prado in Madrid and various places I wanted to see, there are pictures that are done say two hundred years ago and you see black princes and historically Christ, a crucifixion and all this kind of thing. It is kind of upsetting to see the commercialism and the setup in America that denies you what you are. You know, it gives you no encouragement for what you can become as a person.

MR. GHENT: Knowing these facts and having had all of these humiliating experiences, do you find, Norman that

you have a desire to escape from reality?

MR. LEWIS: Well, there is no escape, you know. One, being an artist is as much a gamble as trying to become anything in America and this kind of violence-- not violence, it's just a--I don't think that white people know that they have this violence. It is just part of their way of living which they have become accustomed to. And one has to find some means of sustaining oneself. I think there are many rich people in the sense of, not material wealth, but mental and what they are as a people that keeps them going and searching for beautiful avenues to nourish and sustain themselves, which has nothing to do with money. And I think education and the whole emphasis today of education is--I don't think one has to go to college. College should be probably the opportunity to learn how to reason rather than just the question of if one gets a degree it means that one can earn, you know, 12 or 15 thousand dollars a year. And not just be a factual education. And when I say factual education I mean just--I don't think even some of the answers to some of the problems might be just one and one makes two. But I think it goes beyond just having factual information.

MR. GHENT: Norman, when did you take your first studio?

MR. LEWIS: Some time after I met Augusta Savage I felt that, you know, it was time to get on my own. And there were people who I met like Gwendolyn Bennett and Gwendolyn Knight who later married Jacob Lawrence. All of us were trying I suppose--and Romy, were trying to find some identity. Romy calls me a loner because I have always been by myself. It is only because, I guess, I feel very inept so that I would rather make my mistakes alone.

MR. GHENT: By Romy you are referring to Romare Bearden?

MR. LEWIS: That is correct. And the first place that I had was at 28th Street between-- in fact I was up there just the other day-- between Broadway and Fifth Avenue. I lived there for quite a while until I discovered-- the place was something like--I think it was $15 a month and I discovered that despite the fact that these were a bunch of left-wing artists that I was paying twice as much rent as they. And then the whole goddamn thing upset me because these were guys, white artists, who I enjoyed being with and we, at that time, were fighting for a lot of things that they materially benefitted from but I didn't. We were trying to set up the unions, teaching unions. We had an artists' union and yet many things that they benefitted from I am still fighting for today.

MR. GHENT: Who were some of those artists? Are any of them famous today?

MR. LEWIS: Oh, yes. A very good friend of mine just died, Ad Reinhardt, Jackson Pollack, Franz Kline, Barney Newman, de Kooning, Jackson Pollack's wife.

MR. GHENT: Lee?

MR. LEWIS: Yes. Lee Krasner. The artists' union, and WPA was such an education and such a beautiful thing for artists who wanted to paint or people in the theater and so on. It was just an opportunity to learn a lot of things, which you couldn't learn in school.

MR. GHENT: Tell me, this group of artists that you just mentioned most of whom have become enormously successful now; did they encourage you or pretend to encourage you when you were struggling?

MR. LEWIS: I think amongst themselves that as white artists--I make this distinction because there is a difference between being white and black which is quite obvious--their problems and my own never coincided despite the fact that we were fighting for, say, a better world, like there was the boycott on Japan and we felt the necessity to picket. And I was constantly being investigated by the FBI and when we picketed, being harassed by the police, that there is something different. I mean their harassment and being bothered by the police was entirely different from the black cat being beaten by the police. It almost seems that the police had more license to beat you up despite the fact that there is a sit-in the building or something like that. The hostility, they almost singled you out to beat you up. Things like this, and unfortunately, it is only recently with getting this studio here on Grand Street. It's something I probably should have done fifteen years ago. Because slowly I lost contact with people who believed in me and there happened to be whites who were afraid to come to Harlem and it has cost me a lot of money despite the fact that the attraction was the cheap rent in Harlem. But yet it was almost a death living there, culturally because there wasn't the stimulus there to nourish this thing that you believe just talking to people. There just wasn't the stimulus there.

MR. GHENT: Now when you left your studio at 28th Street, did you move to your studio on 125th Street?

MR. LEWIS: Yes, I lived there for-- it was an attraction, it had a sky light and cheap rent and what I thought at that time was a big room because all I had was a suitcase and easel. And I bought a lot of paper work and about six or seven canvasses. What eventually happened was I accumulated so much work that the place became almost like a closet trying to work in it you know. You know, I continued to see people; people came to Harlem

then because it had places which were entirely different, which no longer exist in Harlem, which you now find in the Village. Places to eat and places where typically a Negro experience, which I think you will no longer find in Harlem.

MR. GHENT: Why do you think that is so? The change of the times and the current social revolution we are undergoing?

MR. LEWIS: Well, partly that but I think that it is something even deeper than the fact that I think the investment of money and how you can deprive people and keep them down, and the brainwashing. I think black people in Harlem on the illusion that a landlord is going to fix up the place and do certain things. They don't do them downtown in the Village and people take the initiative to operate on their own. Like, you have the people cleaning the streets in Harlem or in blighted areas, but they do it of their own necessity of people being militant enough to go to City Hall and command they need a street light. The other thing Negroes feel is that, well, the city is going to put it up because it is needed and this is not true.

MR. GHENT: Now, tell me about what is 306?

MR. LEWIS: Oh, 306 was a--these were some beautiful people--

MR. GHENT: Is it an address or an organization or what?

MR. LEWIS: No, it was a place that Spinky Alston and Ad Bates had. Ad Bates who was a dancer, a seaman, an actor and Spinky Alston and he and Bill Attaway, Ruth Attaway who is an actress. Bill Attaway is now a writer, he writes music and writes for Belafonte, different people in Hollywood and so on. But it was a stimulating environment in the fact that if you were doing anything culturally, theater, dance, so on, you met people who felt some kind of togetherness with what you were doing. So that, you know, it was like almost every weekend there was something going. You know, we sat and drank booze and talked. It just created some need that enhanced somebody else. It was a sharing.

MR. GHENT: That was 306 where?

MR. LEWIS: On 141st Street.

MR. GHENT: That was 306 W. 141st Street right in the heart of Harlem?

MR. LEWIS: Yes, off Ada [ph] Avenue, it no longer exists. There is a public school there. It was just a building and these cats had the-- it was a three-story building in which Ad Bates lived and being he was a carpenter also and completely refurbished this place, and Spinky lived upstairs. And during these days the WPA existed and there was people like Orson Wells, Joseph Cotton who--

MR. GHENT: The actor?

MR. LEWIS: Yes. Who came around and it was a sharing of ideas, which doesn't exist today.

MR. GHENT: This wasn't a left-wing group?

MR. LEWIS: No.

MR. GHENT: Just people who had mutual interests?

MR. LEWIS: Well, there were people from left-wing who came. There were those who were probably communists, but there was no exclusion. There was a sharing of ideas.

MR. GHENT: That was probably one of the memorable experiences of your life and career, wouldn't you say?

MR. LEWIS: I feel that it was. I mean just the feeling of belonging without ostracism.

MR. GHENT: There were others who were struggling, trying to do something the same as yourself?

MR. LEWIS: There were white artists who were struggling even harder because I suppose they felt they should make it easier. But the struggle, our struggle, was kind of different because we took it with a--I don't know, there is something beautiful about black people that they manage to go on despite the hostility or--

MR. GHENT: The obstacles and everything.

MR. LEWIS: Many of these people continued to flourish despite the fact they didn't have the avenues open to them. But some managed to make it.

MR. GHENT: Norman, do you see any difference between the artist of the 1930's when you emerged and the artists coming up today?

MR. LEWIS: Oh, yes. Well, I find there are a lot of opportunities, I find that there are a great deal of black artists painting. But when I say artists--I don't find that there are that many artists, I find that they are opportunists as you would find in anything. And having, I think, I hope, matured to the point where I can distinguish greatness, I find that many of the younger people are exploiting what has been denied them as human beings under the guise of talent. And many of them are being given opportunities just on verbalness, which has nothing to do with being creative. And unfortunately many whites are giving to black artists many things that they don't give to white artists. And it is such a confusion that even the worst white artists get along better than the best black artists, and where they do help a black artist they are giving to black artists things they don't deserve, because are not really artists, they are people who are just learning. You know, I don't call a doctor an artist because he paints. And they give this to Negroes without a really thorough investigation of what this guy has to offer.

MR. GHENT: Well, this would more or less bear out the fact that even though you have won the Carnegie prize and you represented the United States at the Biennale in Venice and all these people namely, Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, de Kooning and all of them became successful but you?

MR. LEWIS: Well, the thing that I believe for a long time, after eighteen years in the Willard Gallery and having shown with all those people and personally have been very encouraged by someone like Lionel Feininger that this is a business and it is a clique that, with all the things that surround me and encourage me, yet I never felt the freeness to--like being in Blanchette Rockefeller's, collection and certain people I knew in the Museum of Modern Art--that you are still like a hybrid, you know, someone who is not really making a contribution. And yet I have never had a show that was a bad, I have never been reviewed wrongly.

MR. GHENT: Badly.

MR. LEWIS: Yes. In fact, people have been surprised that I am black, you know, which has been another detour. I was always--I questioned myself much too critically because what I thought was wrong wasn't wrong that it was other artists. And one of the things that I think started me drinking was the fact that I just felt that I didn't have it. Yet I had and I think this is a brainwashing which America does.

MR. GHENT: You mentioned the Willard Gallery. Now, that certainly is one of the prestige galleries in New York. That is at 72nd and Madison Avenue isn't it?

MR. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. GHENT: Now, I know for a fact that you have had several shows there. When did you go with that gallery?

MR. LEWIS: Oh, it has been about eighteen years ago and that was a beautiful experience meeting someone like Marian Willard because she very innocently, I think, thought like I did. Art is devoid of prejudice and then some fifteen years later she says to me, "I know I have failed you." What that implied was it was something lacking in promotion or my physical presence to certain environments, you know, rather than being an artist, I am an oddity. You know, like Jacob Lawrence. And many people are surprised today to find out that Romy is a Negro, Romy Bearden.

MR. GHENT: All of your reviews would indicate that as you said earlier and I know for a fact that all of your shows at the Willard Gallery have been successful, critical successes. Now, tell me did your paintings sell?

MR. LEWIS: Yes, they sold, but I think I was under certain illusions about--like I felt this way--that one didn't have to see the artist.

MR. GHENT: To appreciate his work?

MR. LEWIS: Yes. I felt that it was just sufficient to see what he is doing. But I find that there is a tremendous amount of social intercourse here which doesn't exist with Negro painters.

MR. GHENT: By that do you mean that the collectors want to be able to socialize with the artist and if they happen to like his work and he turns out to be a Negro, it sort of stops there, right?

MR. LEWIS: Yes, and I think there is a tremendous political thing here. I found that certain white artists made it politically, but yet art has nothing to do with politics so that you found you weren't encouraged by the left-wing.

MR. GHENT: Which pretended to--

MR. LEWIS: Yes and I think somebody like Harold Cruise brings it out in his book about the hang-ups here with the left-wing. You know, this certain amount of patronage that they paid you. No sooner you start doing for

yourself this question of the right of self-determination and communities and things like this. That it seems so foreign, and this is twenty years ago. And I think if the black people then had gotten together how much further we would have been advanced about what we believe for ourselves, you know, but this question of sitting in your church and waiting for some white father to give you this or that or change the situation. I think that black people have been very docile in what they demand, you know.

MR. GHENT: Norman, your style for a long time was fairly a realistic one and then you progressed to what I think could be described as a realistic abstraction. Do you want to tell me about that?

MR. LEWIS: Well, in teaching myself and buying books and looking at pictures and being so critical was to try to understand what was really inherent here. For instance, I never felt that I could draw, yet after I knew how to draw I wondered what really was creation. And that lead me to just endlessly searching people like Van Gogh and Matisse and Picasso, Giacometti and suddenly discovering that one of the things that I completely ignored was that many of the compositions of Picasso are identical with Delacroix and older painters who came before them. But it was like doing something that lived in their time not a hundred years ago. I think that there are many Rembrandt's that, hell, I prefer the original rather than the imitation. And the thing that I noticed was the individuality and how Matisse saw certain things, how Picasso saw and the whole--really, after one learns the history is to see what one can contribute as beautiful. And this was the thing that sort of drove me away from--like I used to paint Negroes being dispossessed, discrimination, and slowly I became aware of the fact that this didn't move anybody, it didn't make things better and that if I had the guts to, which I did periodically in those days, it was to picket. And this made things better for Negroes in Harlem. Negroes were employed and they had jobs and stuff like that but it still didn't make my art any better. But I felt that political things had one thing or at least kind of protest paintings that I was trying to do never solved any situation. I found the only way to solve anything was to go out and take some kind of physical action. And that painting, like music, had something inherent in itself which I had to discover, which has nothing to do with what exists, it has another kind of reality, that which is inherent in painting in those four sides; in sculpture which is around. So that with this kind of awareness naturally you really get with yourself and you wonder what can I say, what do I have to say that can be of any value, what can I say that can arouse someone to look at and feel awed about. And this is where it gets very challenging and the question of being alone, this becomes--I don't think many black cats know how to be alone because it requires this kind of concentration, and when you are alone what do you have to say? Do you have anything to say? You want to turn that off a minute?

MR. GHENT: Norman, you have mentioned to me during the time that I have known you about your little people in space. Tell me about them. Who are these little people?

MR. LEWIS: It is humanity in terms of the space in which you live in. And certain things have--like my becoming--it has been very funny.

MR. GHENT: Your becoming what?

MR. LEWIS: Whatever I am. I hope something beautiful. That I observe a lot of things around me and you know even the discovery of the fact that man can go into space sort of-- this whole--and I am not religious, and that is something else again that would be worth going into. That there is no heaven, you know, there is no ceiling up there, there is just infinite space. And when you think this damn capsule that we send into space is very minute--the analogy is that human beings are almost like ants, you know, and you notice them going into Macys, everybody goes into the same goddamn doorway waiting for the revolving door yet nobody takes the initiative to open the other door, which exists there. Little situations like this. I have always been interested in people yet Romy says I am a loner and I am aloof. But I still observe because whatever affects others affects me. I remember I used to live downtown on 14th Street and a guy used to walk a dog in front of these three windows. I lived on the ground floor and I would see as if one window was a panel and I would see the dog and I would wonder where the hell the guy was who owns the dog, I see him in the next window. But in between I didn't see the leash, I just saw the two objects. And I used to paint pictures like this about how people followed each other and the movement of people and yet it was always the individual that was against the masses. I started that way just trying to convey this movement of people. Now one of the first things that I painted was something that inspired me from Balzac' people. I forget the name of the book but it was like sides fighting each other. Oh, I think it was the *Red and the Black* by Balzac [Stendhal]and I tried to paint this thing and it was just a question of painting, a question of painting black and red. You know, and then it was a battle and then I painted other things and other things suggested things to me like tic-tac-toe. I eventually painted a picture which was like double cross and using the symbolism of "O" and "X" and there was another picture I painted of bocci the Italian game with just balls, yet trying to express this paint-wise, but using these existing things. But then the things became less and less realistically human looking but became something that should have been, which is part of painting. Instead of individual masses and showing a lot of heads it was just a blob of black paint or white paint, like something that I did in the Selma thing.

MR. GHENT: Is that the procession painting that you did?

MR. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. GHENT: Oh, that was a beautiful one, yes.

MR. LEWIS: It was just—there are white and black people who feel a togetherness so that you can't tell who is white and who is black. I think this whole goddamn thing of black and white, you know, we haven't yet learned how to live as people together. You know, like Jews and Egyptians and Germans and stuff like that. As if Germans don't eat bread but Americans do, and Jews don't eat bread or something like that. This is a lot of crap. But just people, you know, the whole feeling that you have for them is identical. You know, the goddamn materialistic aims probably exclude it but I think people want to live and any war for Christ sakes won't solve anything.

MR. GHENT: Speaking of wars, what are your feelings about the Vietnam War?

MR. LEWIS: Well, when I was in Madrid or was it Barcelona, wherever the Prado is, one of the things in my own self education, was the discouraging fact that painting pictures of protest didn't bring about any change. And then there was also--when the war with Japan--I think Roosevelt's wife got the Goya's *The War*, something that Goya did about war - and hen I was in the Prado I saw these Goya's, you know, and the thing occurs to you that people like Shostakovich had written music, it maybe has a name or a title, but these goddamn things don't stop any wars you know.. Goya's etchings didn't stop any wars and that the whole thing in Vietnam, the loss of life doesn't prove anything and there must be some other recourse to this kind of aggression you know. For me as an American 3,000 miles away to say I am going to be the savior of somebody else when you don't even consider these people to begin with but only possibly how this infringes on what you have. And you take the initiative to--which you know is really saying to masses of people but you say, "This thing bothers us, in infringing on what we are eating, " or something likethis. I think it is a great mistake.

MR. GHENT: You are against the Vietnam War in other words?

MR. LEWIS: Obviously.

MR. GHENT: Now what about our own domestic political situation in this country? And the assassinations that we have been inundated with in the past several years?

MR. LEWIS: I don't know who it was, Ralph—one of these black--.

MR. GHENT: Ellison?

MR. LEWIS: No, not Ellison. Somebody said violence is as homogenous as apple pie to America. I think it was Rap Brown. And this is true, you know, but we don't realize it. White America is so goddamn aggressive that it negates anything that gets in its way. It is almost like the Mafia and it is insidious and that in a sense it is so goddamn organized. Like when you think of trying to arrest the situation, well, hell you have got to change the whole goddamn structure of America and so hence, you know, the subtle thing of unearthing where the Mafia has gotten into the American scheme of things. To change American's thinking and stuff like that, is trying to change,would be probably doing the same goddamn thing you know. The other day there was an article in the paper which makes me--it is slow and it takes a long time to be revealed and it says something about success and that some psychiatrist said that one can be not successful but still contribute to the society. The guy who tries has tried and is still in a way successful in what he believes in pursuing. And this should be encouraged rather than, you know, if you make--I think a guy who makes maybe $100 is successful but the guy who makes $90 a week is also successful. And I think it shouldn't be set on what you have or what you are.

MR. GHENT: Speaking of being successful, do you make a living as an artist? Or do you--?

MR. LEWIS: No, I don't. I don't think any black artist makes a living. Despite his prominence or what he contributes to American culture it is always sort of second class. I think that someone like Duke Ellington and his contribution to music, this man should be a millionaire in comparison to somebody like Paul Whiteman who was an exploiter rather than--.

MR. GHENT: Contributor, yes.

MR. LEWIS: Yes. And Xavier Cugat and stuff like this. Yet the Academy of Arts of Pulitzer, there was some question about giving him an award despite the obvious contribution this man has made to music in America. Yet someone like Gershwin you know is lionized with his, I feel, theory of what exists. And the contribution of black musicians as creators and the music, you know. I mean nobody hears of Nathaniel or--oh,god, these names —

MR. GHENT: Boltner?

MR. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. GHENT: Edward Boltner?

MR. LEWIS: Yes. Nobody hears of these people and yet everybody exploits what they have done.

MR. GHENT: Well, how do you make a living? Do you teach?

MR. LEWIS: Yes, I teach. I have driven a taxi, I have been an elevator operator, I have been a pants presser, I have washed floors, I have been a cook, I have been a seaman, I have sewed dresses, I have sustained myself in whatever the moment and has been necessary to just exist.

MR. GHENT: But you now teach art classes at HARYOU [HARYOU-ACT (Harlem Youth in Action)] that the antipoverty agency in Harlem set up for Negro kids don't you?

MR. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. GHENT: Are you also at the Jefferson School?

MR. LEWIS: Oh, no, that no longer exists. That was many years ago. It was a left-wing school and the majority of people who came there were white. In fact, the six years that I was there it was all white students. And this was a tremendous lift to me because I was black, and they were white, and yet I had something to give them that they didn't get from their own. Slowly this is another avenue of finding that you have something to offer which is your own--black people don't even see--that you have. And I enjoyed it because it was a challenge because many of the people there were teachers, PhDs, you know; doctors and so on so that it was constantly questioning and being aware what you knew. Because you know they had more opportunities to these avenues when I taught there and I enjoyed it. I enjoy teaching because it is a challenge.

MR. GHENT: Describe you teaching duties and experiences at the HARYOU agency in Harlem where you are currently working.

MR. LEWIS: Well, I was asked to teach there and I refused several times and finally I accepted the opportunity to work there. And I was very disappointed with much of the work that I saw because it seemed like a class in Negro history rather than a class in how to paint. And with two weeks--I originally had like 20 students and within two weeks I had about five. And frequently I would raise issues like who is Matisse, who is Picasso, who is Tanner, who is—or many black artists that were painting and nobody knew. But I would ask, who is Duke Ellington or Count Basie and Nina Simone and they readily would answer. This they knew. And I said that this isn't a class in jazz or stuff like this. I said this is a class in painting and I expect you to know the paintings of these people, which no one knew. So I wasn't very popular because I seemed to be anti-Negro, but slowly they were getting the message. Unfortunately these are kids who have been so damn brainwashed and at this moment I tell them that the government owes them more and this was similar to welfare to me. And that this was an opportunity for them really, I felt that I was wealth of information, that they should question me about anything just to find out what they could bring to what they were doing. The challenging thing was these were kids who were given money as if to cool it, which they didn't understand and that anything they did was in terms of money. And frequently there would be opportunities for them to do something for somebody else and it was always a question of how much is in it for me. This bothered me and still does because I felt that HARYOU and similar agencies could be a development such as WPA was to my becoming what I am. But it doesn't exist as this. There are salary people who are given money, of people who can articulate in front of committees to get a fund, and so you have conditions in which students being as conniving as they; are that informed so that I don't know whether students are studying with me because they are being paid or they are really desirous of learning the profession.
Now this summer we get, depending on whether the government feels the necessity and the importance of funding these things--I have gotten a couple of students--one in particular who is an extremely beautiful black girl, very little--she looks like she is fourteen years old and she happens to be nineteen. And I discovered by looking at her several times in class that she sleeps and her eyes are half open. I didn't want to believe that she is on dope but it turns out when I investigated that she is an addict. But previous to this a lot of students bring nothing to what they are doing. They are just promiscuously led into these classes like sewing or singing and something like that. And I said, well look, why don't you take a class in sewing, at least this would afford you an opportunity within a year to be a seamstress, a dressmaker or something of this kind. And the brainwashing that these kids are getting is the fact that they, even when you afford them the opportunity of getting a job, they have been so brainwashed that they feel they can get by doing nothing on the job. So I am not popular because I insist that they work in my class. And the other thing of trying to stimulate; that I don't have to be in the classroom every minute to see that they work and that they work and desire to do even when I am not there which is quite a job to see that this can flourish without my being there. And, plus the fact that most classes that I have ever had, if it is four hours I find that I don’t have to be a policeman and that when I come in everybody is working. And this whole scheme of operation, which black kids don ' t understand.

MR. GHENT: Even with all these problems and as you admit that you are not popular there do you find that it is all rewarding? Personally.

MR. LEWIS: Yes, naturally I think of my own becoming and what I can bring to them. I think there are many things I feel a great sense of achievement about having gotten several scholarships for really talented kids. I've opened their eyes to a lot of beautiful things around them that they don't see, and that they have an experience which is entirely different, which is very worth exploiting in America and that is a Negro experience which hasn't been exploited. And I have gotten kids into the Julliard Music School, several different fashion schools, School of Music, Music and Design someplace. But I felt very good and this, even if I helped one kid. I feel that this is very beautiful. I'm getting drunk off this beer.

MR. GHENT: [Laughs] Let's go back a bit. You spoke about having traveled extensively in South America and you mentioned Spain. Do you know the other part of Europe as well?

MR. LEWIS: Yes. When I met Marian Willard, she is an extremely beautiful person and I think naive in terms of her relationship to me.

MR. GHENT: How is that?

MR. LEWIS: Well, I feel she thinks being an artist is sufficient, as Lionel Feininger, being an artist is sufficient, but she ignores the race question which is very prevalent and it hinders many of the things she wanted to do for me and has done for him. I forget your question again, so when I met Marian I met Groupius, I met many people like--not Kandinsky, but later painters - I met Feininger, I met Jose Sert, he was a Spanish artist who knew Miro. So when I went to Europe I met Miro and I met many of the established people who worked at the Bauhaus in Germany and who came here as expatriates from Germany. This was very beautiful for me because I never met them in America. And yet they were very anxious to know me and part of my stay in Spain, which I spent some nine months, and three months in Italy and France and Spain. My joy in staying there was through Jose Sert who is the Dean of Architecture at Harvard University. This was a great encouragement for me.

MR. GHENT: Did you work while you were in Europe at all?

MR. LEWIS: No, it was just like going around and walking.

MR. GHENT: Just touring, just sort of soaking it all up.

MR. LEWIS: Trying to retain everything I saw. And the miseries that I saw in Spain, the Gestapo--like state of Spain and the fact that America supports Spain. It's almost like every fourth person you see is in a uniform.

MR. GHENT: How did that affect you? How did it impress you?

MR. LEWIS: One slowly realizes the fact of the whole involvement of American politics, the support that we give Germany despite the fact that there is a tremendous amount of anti-semitism and the police state of Spain, you know. And what could happen here if anything was really threatened. Like today you have in France this rebellion, which seems to Americans very foolish. And the newspapers in America don't really let Americans know what the hell is existing abroad.

MR. GHENT: If you had the opportunity would you prefer to live in Europe or Africa or any other country other than this one?

MR. LEWIS: No, I am an American. I just want things to be what they should be for me, or any American, regardless, which includes the Indians. The Indians should be in the vanguard of the civil rights movement in America.

MR. GHENT: In recent years, with the steady rise of black nationalism has this affected you in your approach to your work? I know that you mentioned that very, very impressive painting *Procession* with regard to the march in Selma. Has your work taken on any significance as a result of this steady rise of black nationalism in the country?

MR. LEWIS: Well, you see, my whole becoming and my whole involvement in the left-wing--painting became one thing and fighting for the cause of the working man in America was another, so that my whole education was working for conditions that didn't exist for the average guy. So that, and when I say average guy I thought then it would include black people but it never did. White workmen benefitted more than black workers benefitted and the unions, the CIO, the AFL never bothered themselves. There was a period when they tried to educate the worker into what existed in America. This doesn't exist today. And I am against the CIO, the AFL because it has become big business and that there is no longer the concern for the average worker. It is money. Black people have just suddenly been discovering themselves and I would think that unions would be concerned

about this and they are not.

MR. GHENT: Let's talk about Spiral, the organization of Negro artists here in New York of which you were the first president, right?

MR. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. GHENT: Tell me about it.

MR. LEWIS: I think there was a tremendous need for this kind of group because a lot of things had been happening to me, which I didn't quite understand. Why such a reception from the public that my projection on the American scene wasn't similar to people like de Kooning, Barney Newman and even in a lesser sense - and I noticed that people like Hale Woodruff, Romy Bearden, Charles White, Ernie Crichlow, Jacob Lawrence, these people had been painting for a long time and had tremendous things to say and yet they always were being sidetracked. And a group of us got together, and the problems, despite the fact that we existed for quite a while, one of the things that was always constant was the economic thing. That why weren't they on the scene despite the fact that their work was no worse than anybody else that even the worst white artist got along better. And there was some togetherness there and it was nourished. But yet the fact that white America can buy and divide, I think that the unfortunate thing that happened was many of the black artists didn't see the need for pursuing ideas which was entirely different from white artists. Because this is the problem, that black artists have an entirely different problem than white artists. Which, since the white power structure can divide and conquer, some of the artists where singled out which destroyed the group. They say I don't need this. And then unfortunately what happened was the fact that, you know, maybe six or seven months later certain things would happen and the cat would say, well, I made a mistake, and he would see the fact that we were right and they were wrong. But I still think there is a need for this kind of organization and Romy, Crichlow and myself have tried to keep this thing going to pressure the white press and black cats to give us the necessary publicity that we need to enhance ourselves.

MR. GHENT: Do you think since the black American is awakening to his own self-awareness in this country that black artists should direct themselves to ethnic material to augment or enhance this awareness?

MR. LEWIS: I think it is a kind of peculiar problem here in the fact that when I started to paint the majority of painters that I knew who painted Negroes were white.

MR. GHENT: Who were some of them?

MR. LEWIS: Philip Evergood, Jack Levine, Gwathmey, and their subject matter, like for instance black artists talk about black art. And I don't think that there is any such thing unfortunately. And these guys were very militant and still are. For instant, an example is that if you have a classroom and you have a model that is black and maybe there are ten students and they are all white and they paint a black model or draw. I mean you can't look at the subject matter just because it is black and say it was done by a black artist. I mean in Europe you see paintings in which they might have a black figure. That doesn't say that the artist was black.

MR. GHENT: I agree.

MR. LEWIS: Unfortunately in America some of the tricks that black artists are perpetrating on the black population is that if subject matter, since it is black, is that this is great art. And a lot of it stinks. It is bad, it is not even technically efficient and people are being perused to buy this stuff. I don't think everybody who paints is an artist. In fact, I just think they are just learning how. I mean you go to the Apollo and somebody—the thing I would like to see is the response that you see at the Apollo Theater with some awareness of music brought to painting. In terms of, you get up on the stage there and you sing for maybe ten minutes and baby if you don't bring it off, you forget it. But in painting, like one of the students in HARYOU came, and she had copied some things and her mother or grandmother had brought her there and the things were bad and she says my kid is an artist and stuff like this. The mother is under the--that being able to draw makes her a painter. And hell, I can write and I don't call myself a writer. This is just part of something I initially learned; to write a letter. But I don't call myself a writer. This is another dimension you know. And I think this is the unfortunate thing that segregation and denial of the opportunity to learn, a Negro feels because the kid draws or something like that he is an artist.

MR. GHENT: You have never been married have you, Norman?

MR. LEWIS: Yes and no. [Laughs]

MR. GHENT: Well, whatever that means. Well, tell me about it.

MR. LEWIS: I guess I have been married, yes, and she was a very beautiful girl. She was Irish and was a

psychiatrist and it was a great deal of togetherness that--some of the hardships I wouldn't expect any black woman I know to endure because of the mass media and stuff like this. The question of finding out what you don't want and I don't feel black women have had this opportunity to do.

MR. GHENT: How long were you married?

MR. LEWIS: Oh, it was about fifteen years.

MR. GHENT: There were no children?

MR. LEWIS: No.

MR. GHENT: What do you think about the institution of marriage in general?

MR. LEWIS: It is fine if you are lucky enough to find the right person.

MR. GHENT: Yes.

MR. LEWIS: I say if you are lucky enough to find the right person because I think it is a job. You get a job you don't like you quit it. You get another one. I think marriage is similar to me. There are so many goddamn people working at jobs they don't like. So many people get married and feel that they have to stick with it when there is nothing there. And this is very discouraging.

MR. GHENT: Do you have any hobbies? I notice that you have many beautiful plants including almost every conceivable variety of cacti here. Would you consider that a hobby?

MR. LEWIS: Yes, I love plants. In fact, this place that I just moved from unfortunately was in a situation, it was a situation in which I couldn't control the heat. I used to spend at least $200 a year just buying plants and they always died. I would ask people to bring me plants, you know, from all over America. I never could keep them alive. But here I have the opportunity with the sun; I find it is just reverse, I have too much sun and it is a question of, you know, straining the sunlight so they don't get such direct heat. But what really was my hobby was raising fish. You see that big tank? I used to raise them commercially and sell them. This is an opportunity for me--it is an excellent situation here.

MR. GHENT: You are going to resume it now that you are in your new studio?

MR. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. GHENT: Now let's talk about this studio. It is 64 Grand Street in Lower Manhattan and it is--is it seven stories here?

MR. LEWIS: Yes. It’s 7 floors.

MR. GHENT: And it has gone cooperative?

MR. LEWIS: Yes, it is cooperative. There are four buildings, two five-story buildings, one garage, and this is seven stories and there are about fifteen individual artists, cooperatively we bought these buildings.

MR. GHENT: They were former factories and warehouses weren't they?

MR. LEWIS: Heavy industry but nothing in them so, as you see, I am just about to have my john and utility closet and kitchen and more than adequate space to paint in. This is something that I should have done ten years ago because with the change of scene in Harlem. Despite the fact that I enjoyed living there the conditions economically weren't suited for my maintaining myself. In fact, less and less people came uptown because of hostility and so it reached a point of my losing money and it was kind of foolish to just go on putting money down the drain. Then the whole problem of moving is quite a problem because I encountered endless discrimination and it took me about two years. It was just accidentally that I found this cooperative going up. And I suppose the other thing that pushed me out of Harlem was the fact that the whole block was being bought by the State and I had to move whether I wanted to or not. So I am glad to be here.

MR. GHENT: With your present situation I would say that it was sort of a blessing in disguise.

MR. LEWIS: Yes, it was.

MR. GHENT: How much space do you have here?

MR. LEWIS: It is about 25 by 85.

MR. GHENT: That is tremendous.

MR. LEWIS: It is great.

MR. GHENT: Great light, the air is good. Your neighbor is also a painter, in fact, you are all painters here.

MR. LEWIS: Yes.

MR. GHENT: He was saying to me that he was hoping that each artist would be able at some future point to have a one man show on each floor which I think is a tremendous idea.

MR. LEWIS: Well, it is sort of--you see the galleries are--artists have been at the mercy of galleries and galleries don't do that much for the artist here. You find that the whole, this goddamn romance about being an artist is written in books and it is hard work and you are paying someone to look out for you and they don't--it takes a hell of a lot of salesmanship to promote and artist. Why shouldn't the public come and see where an artist works and see what the hell he is doing. I think that this idea of going to where the artist works and not removing him so remotely from society as if he is some goddamn kind of--

MR. GHENT: Freak or animal or something.

MR. LEWIS: Or when you see him you expect some kind of wisdom. There are a lot of creative painters who are stupid as hell and have nothing to say but they are making a contribution here. When you asked me for this interview, you know, I said Jesus Christ I don't have anything to say. But you force me in a position where I have to describe my work which I am so glad to be able to do and do it competently so that visually when you come here possibly you don't have to see me but just see what I am doing and if it can excite you then I am satisfied. To explain it, you know, if it were jazz and with something so exciting you just stood erect, I would say well hell he ain't moved. But if I feel and see you moving I know well, you are with what I am doing. So when you come and you say “gee” and you don't know what to say but just the, “gee,” excites me. You know, I feel, well, I have achieved something. And it’s crazy.

MR. GHENT: Let's talk about form and content of central interest in your work. Let's talk about that.

MR. LEWIS: Oh, Christ. I say oh Christ because so many other things are so much easier to talk about you know. There are so many--I suppose I have my own--the word in Jewish, there is a word in Jewish, the expression doesn't occur to me--but it has to do with feeling, and the person, the individual, and becoming a thinking human being. And it is all embodied in one phrase which doesn't occur to me at the moment. This thing of form, I think that much of what happens and what one becomes is definitely an outgrowth of what one feels. Regardless of the establishment that exists, but there is a richness that can be discovered if one has that kind of insight or becoming and searching. You know, some guy goes off on the desert and he spends his life just looking at all the plant life that grows here. All the cacti that exists, all the plants, the animals, the reptiles and this is his thing. And that is what I think being, you know, you say form. It is discovering what one can do in paint, what one can achieve, what visually excites you and what you want to see that hasn't been done, you know.

MR. GHENT: Norman, I know that you were a friend in good standing with Mark Tobey and you have one of his paintings that I admire very much. How long have you known him?

MR. LEWIS: I have known him about 20 years and this was a rich environment. I knew Richard Lippold, David Smith, a very talented guy who accidentally was killed in an automobile accident, and there is Ezio Martinelli. The artists were almost like a stable of horses, the artists that Marian had. And Feininger, these were people, like Mark Tobey and Feininger being older; if they were with what they felt as human beings they shared it with you. And Feininger certainly, he stooped to stimulate and his importance was never so opulent that he couldn't become meek, you know.

MR. GHENT: Are you currently doing any experiments with color or new materials?

MR. LEWIS: It is a good question because I haven't worked consistently in the last year. I have been just dabbling and moving downtown where there are more available things at one's command like plastics and different kinds of new paints. I am constantly--I have thrown myself into just building this damn studio which after the seven months I have been here, just three weeks ago I have water. And it's not hat available, I have to use buckets to try to get it, and a hose. But just walking around Canal Street and in this area I keep wondering with the new things that I see when am I going to paint, what am I going to do. And I don't know what I am going to do. Because I find that civil rights affects me; so what am I going to paint, what am I going to do. I don't know. And I am sure it will have nothing to do with civil rights directly but possibly I just hope that I can materialize something out of all this frustration as a black artist in America, an experience which is typical to something that would happen to a black cat in America. And I don't think white painters have any opportunity to

do it. I think it has to come from black artists. And I am sure if I do succeed in painting a black experience I won't recognize it myself. I'd have to live with it many years and not destroy it because it is unfamiliar to me, but just do it and keep it. And see it around me and possibly, eventually it will become a part of me as a person and something that I welcome seeing.

MR. GHENT: Thank you, Norman Lewis.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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