

VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

Press Release

CLAUDE LAWRENCE: REFLECTIONS ON PORGY & BESS

March 14 – May 4, 2024

Opening: Thursday, March 14th, 6:00 - 8:00 pm

Venus Over Manhattan

39 + 55 Great Jones Street

New York, NY 10012



(New York, NY) – **Venus Over Manhattan** is pleased to announce **Reflections on Porgy & Bess**, a major solo exhibition of new paintings by Chicago-born, New York-based artist Claude Lawrence. Spanning the gallery's spaces at 39 and 55 Great Jones Street, this presentation—Lawrence's first with Venus—debuts a suite of exuberant, monumentally scaled canvases created in response to composer George Gershwin's 1935 masterpiece *Porgy & Bess*. Lawrence's abstract paintings unfold sequentially, echoing the opera's sweep and emotional impact through the artist's radiant abstraction and confident improvisation.

Born in 1944, Lawrence has spent many decades as a jazz saxophonist, painting throughout but shifting his primary focus in recent years to the visual arts. The exhibition at Venus, bridging his dual passions for music and painting, will be his first in New York City in a decade. On view through May 4, *Reflections on Porgy & Bess* will be accompanied by a catalogue. On April 10th, the gallery will host a jazz performance and book signing with the artist.

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Raised in one of the world's great jazz capitals, Claude Lawrence found an early calling in music, attending a vocational school and falling in with a circle of Black musicians and visual artists. For many years, he toured the USA as part of a jazz trio, bouncing most frequently between NYC and Chicago. In the 1980s, he began to pursue painting with an energy that reflected his musical ambitions. For Lawrence, there is an innate and powerful union between the visual and aural worlds, and today, at the age of 80, he continues to play the saxophone while painting full time. Music informs the essential intention and execution of his work.

As a Black abstract artist, Lawrence belongs to a lineage that includes Norman Lewis, Jack Whitten, and Peter Bradley, among many others. He knew many of these artists personally, as they ran in similar circles in Chicago and New York. But as his own practice evolved, so did the distinctiveness of Lawrence's individual style: strategies familiar from improvisational jazz, particularly the free-associative thought and confident, intuitive strokes of gesture and tone, led him to huge sweeping marks, saturated and alive, that refuse to be easily defined. His consistently unexpected yet masterful decisions about color and gesture are both a testament to the impact of jazz on his way of perceiving and creating, and also reflect a freedom rarely seen in painters with such an identifiable style. Lawrence is an artist that is of his time, who also operates free from its constraints.

Like many Black artists, Lawrence faced pressure to make art that explicitly depicted racial issues and foregrounded stories of inequity. But in a quietly defiant way, he joined fellow abstractionists in choosing to instead to create art that felt authentic to their instincts and priorities, modeling the type of freedom of expression and autonomy that contemporary civil rights movements sought to achieve. Furthermore, Lawrence has consistently pushed back against the notion that abstraction isn't political: "Many jazz

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artists supported social issues by playing for huge crowds and raising money for the Civil Rights Movement. The music did not have to be 'about' the issues of civil rights. Music could be in the service of these issues and I believe the same of art."

Thirty years ago, Lawrence left the bustle of city life behind to settle in Sag Harbor, New York. Nestled at the eastern end of Long Island, Sag Harbor has long been a significant destination and cultural landmark for Black artists and patrons. This 19th century whaling village became a summer haven for Black doctors, lawyers, and businessmen in the 1920s and 30s. As its Black community expanded, Sag Harbor welcomed poets, authors, and painters, hosting such luminaries as Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, and Al Loving. The village became known nationally as an epicenter of Black art and creativity, aligning with the larger creative context of Long Island's Hamptons communities, where Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko, among many others, lived and worked.

In Lawrence's latest paintings, made in his Long Island studio, the artist undertakes a dialogue with the 1935 Gershwin opera *Porgy & Bess*, which tells the story of a fishing community in the port city of Charleston, South Carolina, and the lives of its inhabitants. Porgy is a disabled beggar who falls in love with Bess, a beautiful woman in a troubling relationship with her violent and possessive lover. Gershwin's masterwork combines opera, jazz, choir, and spirituals in what finally amounts to a luminous tribute to quintessentially Black American musical forms. Naomi Andre, a scholar who writes on Black opera, acknowledges that "practically nowhere else in the operatic repertory (before or since) do we have the chance to see so many Black people onstage—and in the audience."

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Though written by a white Jewish composer, *Porgy & Bess* holds special significance in the history of integration and expansion of opportunity for Black artists. First performed in 1935, *Porgy & Bess* featured a classically trained, entirely Black cast. Anne Brown, the actress playing the role of Bess, was the first Black vocalist admitted to The Julliard School. When the production's tour reached Washington DC in 1936, the cast protested segregation at the National Theater, leading to that institution's first integrated audience for a performance. While the popularity of *Porgy & Bess* has fluctuated over time, it claims the undeniable legacy of having helped mobilize integration in theater and presenting a story of Southern Black life on a truly national scale for the first time.

Through the vividness of its central figures' struggles and through its defining characteristic of mingling and collaging of musical forms, *Porgy & Bess* remains powerfully relevant today. As Lawrence has said, "There are two ways of seeing the world. From the outside in, and from the inside out. These are my people, I know them."

For the new paintings on view at Venus, Lawrence has pulled inspiration from the sounds, themes, and characters of the opera, unifying psychological and expressive forces. Just as Gershwin has deployed musical motifs, Lawrence unites his compositions through repeated visual strategies that include layering and juxtaposing specific colors and duplicating energetic geometric shapes. *Overture*, which features a frenetic mix of bold primary colors and interlocking shapes, lays out the thematic and visual through-lines of the exhibition. This canvas establishes a tension between rich patches of color laid down in counterpoint to quick and lively strokes of black—a visual strategy that repeats through the entire body of work on view.

Numerous works in the exhibition take their titles directly from the songs or lyrics of *Porgy & Bess*, including *The Stories You're Liable to Read in the Bible*, *Gone*, *Rise Up*, and most notably *Summertime*. The song *Summertime* is the most acclaimed and widely

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familiar number from Gershwin's production, one that has been covered by such legendary Black performers as Ella Fitzgerald and Nina Simone, and that occupies a permanent place among standards in the American songbook. By composing his own renditions of these classic songs at the intersection of paint and gesture, Lawrence contributes to the opera's history of re-interpretation and recontextualization, carrying it into the 21st century for a new audience to interpret.

ABOUT CLAUDE LAWRENCE

Claude Lawrence (b. 1944, Chicago, IL) lives and works in Sag Harbor, NY. Lawrence's work has been the subject of numerous solo presentations, including recent exhibitions at Anthony Meier, San Francisco; David Lewis Gallery, East Hampton; and The LAB, Seattle. His work features frequently in major group exhibitions both stateside and abroad, including recent presentations at the Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville; the Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill; the Long Island Museum, Stony Brook; the U.S. Embassy in Paris, France; Guild Hall, East Hampton; the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento; and the Newark Art Museum, Newark. Lawrence's work is held in the permanent collections of more than thirty public institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville; Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; the Nasher Museum of Art, Durham; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton; and the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, among many others.

For further information about the exhibition and availability, please contact the gallery at info@venusovermanhattan.com

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39 Great Jones Street
55 Great Jones Street
New York, NY 10012

GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday – Saturday
10:00 am – 6:00 pm

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IMAGE CREDITS

The Inquisitors, 2022. Oil on canvas; 75 ½ x 107 in (191.8 x 271.8 cm).

Summertime, 2022. Acrylic on canvas; 79 ¼ x 158 ¼ in (201.3 x 402 cm).

Can't Sit Down, 2022. Oil on canvas; 73 ½ x 88 in (186.7 x 223.5 cm).

Overture, 2022. Oil on canvas; 65 ½ x 104 in (166.4 x 264.2 cm)

Images of all works by Claude Lawrence: courtesy the artist and Venus Over Manhattan, New York.