



Nate Lewis: "Latent Tapestries"

by Francine Almeda

It began as a hum—less of a note and more of a feeling. It felt like the groan of a well-rosined bow being dragged across cello strings; the droning heat of a hot day. A noise which poured from my speakers and settled in my chest. Suddenly the track exploded with sound: a chatter of voices, the shiny notes of a flute, snippets of a trumpet, the harsh notes of a synth. I strained my ears to land on a familiar sound or phrase, but the score changed with dizzying irregularity. The voices fell away to echoes, lapsing over each other in a conversation with no reason. Music and dissonant cacophony became one. And then, as quickly as it began, it came to a halt. In the moments of silence, I found myself tense with anticipation for the next reprise: I was not recoiling from the sound, but rather eager to be thrown back into the chaos.

I was listening to the soundtrack accompanying Nate Lewis's (now online) solo exhibition, "Latent Tapestries." The Fridman Gallery in New York had moved their exhibitions to online viewing rooms amidst the COVID-19 closures—a solution which has become a godsend, albeit one that is begrudgingly accepted. In this new digital landscape, "Latent Tapestries" is a refreshing emulation of the exhibition experience.



Installation shot of Late Lewis's "Latent Tapestries" at the Fridman Gallery. Image courtesy of Fridman Gallery.

Lewis presents a striking arrangement of visual, audio, and time-based works influenced by his unique background. Before becoming an artist, Lewis earned a BS in nursing from Virginia Commonwealth University and spent nine years working in a critical care nurse. Reading diagnostic charts such as echocardiograms and electrocardiograms were daily necessities in the ICU unit; at the same time, he was becoming more and more interested in music, specifically jazz. Identifying, coloring, and creating rhythm became a driving influence in his practice.

In Lewis's words, "output imagery of medical diagnostics is a unique language critical to understanding a patient's condition, one of colors and patterns. Depicting the invisible by color and subtleties of shades and distinctions in shapes, shifts, clarities, rhythms, and textures can indicate the potential for change."

As I scrolled through "Latent Tapestries" online viewing room, I felt the deep attention that Lewis took with each sculpted image - not only in his meticulous care for his materials and techniques, but also in his care of the figures themselves.

Lewis collaborated with avant-garde jazz musicians such as Melanie Charles, Ben Lamar Gay, Matana Roberts, Luke Stewart and Kassa Overall to produce an accompanying score for the show. The final collection of artist soundtracks reflects the diversity of their musical expertise: experimental Americana and progressive jazz flow into traditional Haitian flutes. At times their tones clash, overlap, or fall into syncopation. However, it is this exact dissonance which is so beautifully mimicked in Lewis's sculpted photographs.



Nate Lewis, *Signaling XXIX*, 2020. Hand-sculpted inkjet print, ink, graphite, frottage, 44" h x 42"w. Image courtesy of Fridman Gallery.

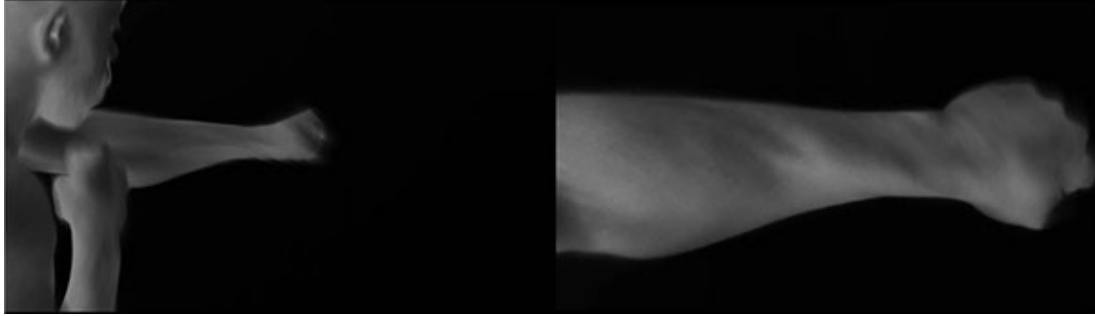
Contrasting patterns set each figure in the series *Signaling* aglow. Lewis uses a small razor on the surface of his photographs. The incision reveals the white interior of the paper like a white scar. Lewis repeats this process thousands of times, engulfing the face of his figures in a tapestry of cuts; however, although their faces are obscured, the grace of their form remains intact.

In *Signaling XXIX*, an androgynous figure lunges forward. Their body stretches with a strength and grace which is at once both masculine and feminine; however, their gender feels irrelevant. I am captivated by the architecture of their body. Their chest curls to meet the taut tendons in their neck. Parts of the body which appear solid such as the front leg and the waist are, in fact, studded with oblong patches of white dots and vertical stripes. The patches are lodged in between sharp lines like a soft organ caged in bone.



Nate Lewis, *Signaling XXIII*, 2020. Hand-sculpted inkjet print, ink, graphite, frottage, 28" h x 41" w. Image courtesy of Fridman Gallery.

I am fascinated by Lewis's quick transition between patterns—I wonder how it must have felt to create each different line. Would the small dots require a confident stab? Would the curved line glide open with a smooth cut? Would the short stripes need to be attacked with a decisive stroke? In considering these questions, I found myself reading the shapes of the body much like Lewis would have examined the electrocardiogram of a patient—not only as a collection of lines, but as symbols of the rhythmic life-force they represented.



Nate Lewis, still from *Navigating Through Time*, 2020. Two-channel video installation with sound
Image courtesy of Fridman Gallery.

However, Lewis does not ignore the role which patterns and rhythms play in society's current political landscape. Born into a mixed race family, Lewis states he has "conversations with relatives whose views I oppose" but he "[listens] to them, and [wants] to know how to navigate these conversations in a productive manner." He reconciles the fallibility of American narratives in both his first video work, *Navigating through Time*, and his most recent series, *Probing the Land*. In these series, the sport of boxing and Confederate statues are his subjects of focus.

In *Navigating Through Time*, he uses the repeated movements of a boxer to evoke its connotations of survival, defense, and community recreation in African American history. The split video shows two pairs of hands which flex and then throw; flex and then punch; flex and then punch, punch, punch. His movements are that of a fighter and then a dancer; a fighter and then a dancer; until I lose track of the difference between aggression and grace. This video generates a striking call and response effect with the exhibition soundtrack. My attention is further drawn to Lewis's ability to command synchronicity between vision and sound. This piece explicitly bridges the gaps between the worlds of his work: music, energy, and the body. His movement through these mediums is that of an exploration—a literal navigation of the African American narrative across perceived boundaries.



Nate Lewis, *Probing the Land V*, 2020. Hand-sculpted inkjet print, ink, graphite, frottage, 44" h x 62" w. Image courtesy of Fridman Gallery.

In *Probing the Land*, Lewis manipulates photographs of controversial Confederate statues which line Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia. He distorts their faces and chests with jagged lines. In one particularly powerful moment in *Probing the Land VII*, he carves open the puffed chest of a statue. His skin seems to splinter at the edges, and, past the menacing edges of the chest cavity, I notice a red hue and the delicate curve of a heart. The bronze statue seems to be gently bleeding.



Nate Lewis, *Probing the Land VII*, 2020.
Hand-sculpted inkjet print, ink, graphite,
frottage, 70" h x 36" w. Image courtesy of
Fridman Gallery.

"Latent Tapestries" is a testament to Lewis's unique method of rhythmic interrogation—and during this time of COVID-19, its online exhibition is a much-needed reminder of the tactility of art. Although I was viewing his works through a screen, I was moved by his unique background and techniques. In singularity, one cut is an insignificant action; but repeated a thousand times, it becomes an inexorable force. His work is a documentation of his rhythmic, disciplined process. Like the vibrations of a droning beat, Lewis is able to destabilize historical narratives—not through brute toppling, but with a patient hand.

"Latent Tapestries," including the above-mentioned quotations from Lewis, can be accessed at <https://www.fridmangallery.com/latent-tapestries-viewing>.

Francine is an artist and curator. She holds a BA in Philosophy from Boston College and is currently the manager of Heaven Gallery, located in Wicker Park.