

movement power nomenclature weight pressure free

Rose Bouthillier

In his expansive drawing practice, Tony Lewis uses action and language to explore communication, presence, and authority. Focusing on graphite powder as a basic material element, his works emphasize the body through scale, tension, and imprint. *pressure power movement free weight nomenclature* presents a selection of Lewis's new and recent work: large format glyph-based drawings on paper featuring Gregg Shorthand; a new iteration of a room-scaled floor piece that takes on sculptural dimension; a single-action drawing with a tennis ball; and a nail-and-rubber band text drawn from what could be described as the artist's most endeared source, *Life's Little Instruction Book*. At Lewis's request, and in keeping with the process-driven, non-hierarchical nature of his work, the word order of the exhibition's title is not set, and changes regularly.

This grouping considers both the breadth of Lewis's practice and the central concerns that drive it. His desire to keep things open, permeable, and tentative is evidenced in how the artist mines the multivalence of a source, a sentence, or a strategy. Rather than exhaustive, Lewis's approach arrives at something more along the lines of conditioning. It is accumulative, has memory.

Considerations of Lewis's work often lead back to the studio, a space for thought organized around a singular purpose: "to find new ways to make drawings."¹ It is a total environment, where paper, objects, texts, and the ubiquitous graphite powder collide on every plane. The floor is primary; coated in a slick layer of graphite, it is a vehicle for mark making, "a tool the same way a pencil is a tool."² Laid out, layered, and dragged, the large paper surfaces that Lewis constructs gather impressions and shade. Gravity is at work in this system, but so is levity, as things rise to the surface and onto the walls. Words are clipped, pinned, written, pounded, and stretched. Everything is worn, spread out in various states of becoming and undoing. Yet, there is a consistency—a simplicity of matter—which gives an underlying sense of order. As Lewis describes: "In my studio everything has a role, everything has a place and a purpose for being there. The excess used gloves that are on the floor are viable drawings."

¹ Interview with the author, March 2015. All subsequent quotes by Lewis are from the same interview, unless otherwise noted.

² Ibid.

Lewis found graphite powder, and a loose, spatial way of working with large amounts of it, while a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Conflicts with the administration about the uncontrollable medium led to multiple cleanings and prohibitions, giving Lewis insight into the limits and contradictions under which systems operate (in this case, the academy). It also pointed towards a way of working that could expand within and through them.³ When Lewis was invited to exhibit at Autumn Space in Chicago in 2011, he decided to cover the entire floor with graphite, but laid down butcher paper from wall-to-wall for protection. He also eliminated as much of the dust as possible, rubbing the graphite into the prepared surface and then repeatedly sweeping and vacuuming it. Wearing booties on their feet, viewers could “safely” navigate the surface; the invasive material, which threatens (to wander, to contaminate), was contained. The drawing also operated in relation to everything around it: the walls, the volume of the space, and the people inside; everything became part of it, everything informing it and all, in turn, informed.⁴

When that exhibition ended, Lewis removed the drawing, folded it up, and placed it in his studio. It sat there for almost two years as the artist contemplated its status and value. Lewis recounts: “I was confused about it as an object. I knew it was a drawing, but I didn’t know how to show it again, or if I even wanted to.” Over time, it became more and more interesting to look at, a weighty hunk of pink paper that continually drew Lewis’s eye from the white sheets he was working on. He decided to exhibit it again at Bindery Projects in Minneapolis, where he had to “wrestle” with it, opening it up, pushing, pulling, lifting, and dragging. Though constituted from fragile materials, its mass gives it strength, inertia, and stubbornness—“it can take a beating.” Lewis has gone on to make more of these works; so far a total of four are in existence, and there are plans for new ones in the near future. Formed to the dimensions of their original locations, they adapt to new environs and carry a record of their transitions in rips, tears, creases, and folds.⁵ They have a distinctly organic quality (like bodily masses or shed skin); from the moment they are “born” they start breaking down. They are subject to exposure, evolution, *being*.⁶

At MOCA Cleveland, Lewis has installed *Untitled (Euclid via Olin)* (2014-), which was originally created for The Olin Fine Art Gallery at Washington & Jefferson College, where Lewis completed his undergraduate studies. Laid flat, the drawing is over 1,500 square feet; the gallery in which it is presented at the Museum is just over 1,300 square feet. Rather than emphasizing this discrepancy, Lewis piled the drawing in a crumpled central mass, revealing a variety of surfaces: areas of relatively pristine dark graphite, worn and dusty patches (indicating high foot traffic), a dirty under surface of smudged paper (perhaps exposed to the atmosphere of the studio), and glimpses of fresh pink, where the paper has been sheltered and preserved. The

³ More detail on these events can be found in Julian Myers-Szupinska’s text “The Fact of Blackness (For Tony Lewis),” also in this volume.

⁴ While Lewis takes pains to protect people and places from his wayward materials, his use of powder recalls William Pope.L’s work *One Substance, Eight Supports, One Situation* (2008). The work consisted of platforms installed around the room as waist-level, each with a tall cone of white powder. As Amy M. Mooney writes, “While initially artist-determined and controlled, the experience of the work, like the experience of race, becomes delimited by the infinite possibilities of time, place, and participant [...] Even if casually brushed off, the substance remained, deeply embedded in fibers, airborne—and, potentially, digested.” Mooney, “Situation + Substance: In Support of Reciprocity,” *Black Is Black Ain’t* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2013): 30.

⁵ In their relation to place, Lewis’s floor drawings recall Michelle Stuart’s large sheets of muslin-mounted paper, laid over outdoor landscapes and rubbed with graphite. Stuart eventually started incorporating soil and smashing rocks onto the drawings, making them a direct index of their environments; as she explained “We imprint and are imprints of all that came before.” Whitney Museum of American Art, object label for #28 *Moray Hill* (1974) by Michelle Stewart, installed in the exhibition *America is Hard to See* (2015).

⁶ Here Greg Foster-Rice’s thoughts on materiality and experience, as inflected by race, are particularly relevant. In his essay “Object Lessons,” he explores how the work of artists including Rodney McMillian, Daniel Roth, Paul D’Amato, Edgar Arceneaux, Glenn Ligon, Sze Lin Pang, William Pope.L, and Robert Pruitt, all included in curator Hamza Walker’s 2008 exhibition *Black Is Black Ain’t* “provocatively

piece flattens out on either end, with a laid out corner revealing something of the initial fit, conforming to another architecture. The piece confronts viewers just as they enter the gallery, presenting as a structure to be dealt with and navigated.

Lewis's consideration of rules and unruliness extends from the physicality of his process to another subject: language. Inspired by Kay Rosen and Lawrence Weiner, Lewis began to consider language as material to be deployed visually, phonetically, and conceptually, often to disruptive ends. Lewis's first engagement with text was through *Life's Little Instruction Book* by H. Jackson Brown, Jr., which he found in the bathroom of his mother's home in Cleveland. A collection of rules to live by, it was originally penned as a personal volume of paternal advice, and went on to become a #1 *New York Times* bestseller. "Little" refers only to the diminutive format of the pocketbook, as it contains over 1,500 rules spread over three volumes—the thought of attempting to follow them all brings up an overwhelming sense of guilt over the inevitable failure to do so. Many are inane (88 · Refill ice cube trays), some are romantic (306 · Never underestimate the power of love), and many are starkly realist (294 · Accept pain and disappointment as part of life).⁷ While myopic in its expression of a white, male, upper middle class sensibility, *Life's Little Instruction Book* embodies a "goodness" which is oddly comforting in its parochial simplicity.

Lewis began by choosing pages from the text and reproducing them as drawings, smudging, smearing, and sometimes gouging the paper. From there, he isolated the statements further, reproducing only one instruction at a time. Blowing them up to a much larger scale (up to 25 feet), Lewis forms the letters directly on walls using nails or screws with graphite-coated rubber bands stretched between them. In extracting and magnifying these instructions, Lewis shifts their meaning and reveals the ways in which they assume, exclude, and exert power, while also speaking to personal fears and desires. His connection to the book is emotional and conflicted, as he explains:

It speaks to a common decency, certain social laws that are agreed upon, which can be both beautiful and scary. It's complicated for me to go through the book and read "48 · Keep a tight rein on your temper." Which is normally a great thing for people to do, but it's hard for me to swallow that and just think, "You're right," and move on. Maybe because I've had that line said to me in so many different ways by so many different people, and it has a lot to do with being a black man. There are moments when my relationship to the work is definitely earnest, but at the same time very critical and inquisitive. There's also space for humor, and a sort of deadpan read, which hopefully gives some volume, some amplification of meaning.

As reminders and epitaphs writ large, Lewis's rubber band drawings have an oppressive, paranoid quality. The materials themselves connote a subtle sense of violence; the repetitive action of puncturing the wall reads like physical self-discipline, the rubber bands are tense, threatening to snap. Held in

examines the extent to which the negotiation of race, and ultimately it's undoing as a fixed category of human differentiation, might be explored through the careful examination of the phenomenal experience of things in the world." Greg Foster-Rice, "Object Lessons," *Black Is Black Ain't* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, 2013): 65.

⁷ H. Jackson Brown Jr., *Life's Little Instruction Book: Simple Wisdom and a Little Humor for Living a Happy and Rewarding Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012): 120, 304, 293. The first volume was originally published in 1991.

equilibrium, but also frayed (the graphite scatters, flecks, falls), these works embody the strain of continually keeping one's self "in-check."

At MOCA Cleveland, Lewis has installed *232 · Keep your promises.* (2015) on a large wall situated at the foot of the Museum's monumental staircase. Nestled in the building's clean, geometric architecture, it disrupts the institutional narrative with a messy, hand-wrought directive. The text hails visitors with a curious call-to-action; repeat encounters may shift the meaning from a friendly reminder to an affirmation to the sting of personal failure. While summoning the individual viewer, the text also takes the Museum itself to task, asking after its responsibilities and claims. Most poignantly, *232* seems to speak to the social contracts between institution, artist, and audience, while remaining vague about what those promises entail, or how they might be articulated.

While developing these architecturally-scaled approaches to drawing, Lewis was also working through the possibilities of paper, eventually landing on a distinctive format constructed from four large sheets glued or taped together. The resulting grid emphasizes Lewis's structural concerns, while the size makes the works unwieldy and vulnerable. For his first comprehensive series in this layout, Lewis focused on a single sentence (the full text of which has never been revealed, but which includes permutations of "people" and "color"). Maintaining the arrangement of the words, Lewis omitted different letters for each piece, resulting in new spellings and multiple, shifting meanings. The final mark on these works is a fluid line that crosses through every letter on the composition, providing a sense of direction while also acting as a negating strike-through. The line appears to make meaning (spelling out words as it goes along) while also undoing it. The reading motion of the eye—flowing instinctually from left to right and top to bottom—is tripped up, contradicted.

The primacy of the line in these works connects with Lewis's most recent series on paper at this scale, which feature singular glyphs in Gregg Shorthand, a now outmoded writing style. Invented by John Robert Gregg in 1888, this naturalistic shorthand quickly rose to great popularity; by the early 1900s, over a million copies of its manual had sold, and Gregg Shorthand was taught in the public school systems of nearly 2,000 American cities.⁸ Like other shorthand methods, it is phonetically based, using a set of line forms that correspond to spoken words. Discovering a copy of a Gregg dictionary in a Cleveland thrift-store, Lewis was instantly struck by the fluid, expressive scrawls. If the earlier works "solidified [Lewis's] relationship with visual language, considering it as a tool to build drawings," here the "the line was the language."⁹ As he describes:

I wanted to get to a point where I wasn't dependent on the letter 'd' but I could still refer to the sound of the letter 'd'. Gregg Shorthand provided a way to consider a synthesis between sound and visual, where it's no longer a contradiction, no longer a cross out. It's still inherently a writing system, but it manifests as a gesture.

⁸ While shorthand might be thought of as a strictly utilitarian device, Gregg himself held lofty aspirations for his invention, asking people to "Cultivate a love for it. Think of it as the highest form of writing, which is itself the greatest invention of man." John Robert Gregg, *Gregg Shorthand: A Light-line Photography for the Million* (New York: The Gregg Publishing Company, 1916), xiii.

⁹ Interview with the author, March 2015. Interestingly, Gregg made a clear distinction in penmanship: "do not draw the characters. You must understand at the outset that shorthand must be written..." Gregg, xiii, original emphasis.

¹⁰ Lewis has described his relationship to his studio environment as expressing “a sensibility toward making and living.” “Tony Lewis and Hamza Walker in conversation,” *Tony Lewis* (Chicago: Shane Campbell Gallery, 2013), 1.

¹¹ Richard Serra and Lizzie Borden, “About Drawing: An Interview,” *Richard Serra, Writing/Interviews* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1994), 53. First published in Richard Serra, *Tekeningen/Drawings, 1971-1977* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1977).

¹² Laura Hoptman, “introduction: drawing is a noun,” *drawing now: eight propositions* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 12.

Each of the drawings in the exhibition features one of the words from its title, which collectively speak to Lewis’s process and concerns. They correlate with and inform each other: *weight* (of line, of material, of history); *power* (over, through, in spite of); *free* (-dom, -fall, -flow); *nomenclature* (a body or system of names or terms; the rules for forming these); *pressure* (under it; applying it); *movement* (action, gesture, progress). Together these words begin to describe a work ethic, a value system that shapes the tenets of production and the products thereof.¹⁰ On his selection of these words, Lewis reflects:

It’s a way for me to delve into, riff off of, and write about each one, to consider them, not just as separate drawings, but also in relationship to the studio and in relationship to what drawings can be. There’s a cadence in the studio, a lot of free flowing things that go back and forth. Each drawing is a word and each word is a potential drawing.

Lewis often references Richard Serra’s *Verb List* (1967-8), an inventory of 84 verbs (to roll; to lift; to collect; to erase) and 24 contexts (of equilibrium; of friction) that guided Serra’s relation to materials. Serra, who declared, “Drawing is a verb,” was steadfast in his thinking that “Anything you can project as expressive in terms of drawing—ideas, metaphors, emotions, language structures—results from the act of doing. But the meaning of drawing is meaningless to these other meanings.”¹¹ Accordingly, physicality and action were best (or only) understood on their own (non-linguistic) terms. On her survey of contemporary drawing practices in 2002, curator Laura Hoptman wrote, “With all respect to Serra, for many artists today, drawing is not a verb but a noun.”¹² In Lewis’s work, this dichotomy goes productively unacknowledged. *movement power weight pressure free nomenclature* includes adjectives, verbs, and nouns (some falling into more than one of these categories); this allows for structure to emerge, for grammar to materialize. Lewis’s work has a chaotic eloquence, formed through transitivity. In this multi-modality, possibilities exist for new (or differently experienced) ways of looking, reading, and acting.