

# STUDIO MUSEUM HARLEM

The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine Winter/Spring 2015

# Studio

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# Studio Visit      Tony Lewis

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Like his drawings, the walls and floors of Tony Lewis's studio are covered in graphite powder, a material that is nearly impossible to contain. At one point, the Chicago-based artist—who earned his BA in Psychology and Art from Washington & Jefferson College in 2008 and his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2012—had worked hard to keep his workspace pristine and drawings free from marks and smudges. But eventually the graphite powder prevailed, and its presence became a condition of both the studio and the art made in it. In some ways, Lewis's studio space is indicative of his practice in general, organized by the number of projects that he is working on concurrently. He has long been interested in how language is used to represent race and convey subjectivity, and each body of work stems from particular textual sources—or narratives, as Lewis refers to them—some of which Lewis invented, others which he appropriated.

One text that Lewis appropriates is the 1991 coffee table book, *Life's Little Instruction Book: 511 Suggestions, Observations, and Reminders on How to Live a Happy and Rewarding Life*. Drawn to this book's language, for its audacious simplicity and matter-of-fact tone, Lewis isolates quotes from the book and re-presents the advice in various forms of drawing. To make *362-Know when to keep silent* (2014), Lewis first drew the statement across a ten-foot wall, and then used nails to outline the shape of each letter and stretched graphite powder-coated rubber bands around the nails. In this context, the words not only have an embedded sense of irony, but they also raise questions about authority and voice in language.

Another body of work starts from a narrative that Lewis wrote, a short statement that is a conglomeration of

euphemisms for black people. Like in the wall drawings, in these works on paper, Lewis assigns a material quality to language and text. *peoplecol* (2013), which was included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, comingles words and letters with erasures, smudges and meandering lines, and encourages viewers to move away from reading what is recognizable and toward looking at the forms that make up the composition. Another work that samples from Lewis's statement, *dope repoa* (2012), posits a different iteration of this text-as-image. By breaking down language to the level of pure, formal mark-making, Lewis's works confound drawing and writing, and generate a host of interpretations of his text.

A new body of work that Lewis is currently making uses Gregg shorthand (the most popular form of stenography) as textual source material. In a 2000 essay on drawing, Benjamin Buchloh characterizes drawing practices in the twentieth century using the dialectic of matrix and grapheme.<sup>1</sup> Simply put, according to Buchloh, "matrix" refers to the representation of objects and the perspective of the picture plane, while the "grapheme" model of drawing is expressive, a performance of the subject. Lewis's new works bring to mind Buchloh's essay because they package language—the lines and squiggles that make up Gregg shorthand—as simultaneously objective and subjective, matrix and grapheme. By omitting the familiar Roman alphabet, the Gregg shorthand works further Lewis's ongoing investigation and deconstruction of language, and continue to question and subvert fundamental notions of communication.

1. Benjamin Buchloh, "Raymond Pettibon: Return to disorder and disfiguration," *October* 92, (Spring 2000): 37–51.



Tony Lewis  
*362 - Know when to keep silent*, 2014  
Courtesy the artist; Shane Campbell Gallery,  
Chicago; Massimo De Carlo, London  
**Photo:** Genevieve Hanson

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Tony Lewis  
*peoplecol*, 2013  
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Chicago; Massimo De Carlo, London  
**Photo:** Robert Chase Heishman

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