

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail

Tau Lewis: Triumphant Alliance of the Ubiquitous Blossoms of Incarnate Souls

Lillian O'Brien Davis

1 November 2020



## Tau Lewis: Triumphant Alliance of the Ubiquitous Blossoms of Incarnate Souls



Image: Tau Lewis, Opus (The Ovule), 2020. Various recycled and hand dyed fabrics, recycled leather, acrylic paint, recycled polyester batting, jute, metal frame, PVA glue, secret objects, safety pins, metal hooks, wire, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery.

Tau Lewis's work transcends the medium of craft. Lewis's most recent body of work, Triumphant Alliance of the Ubiquitous Blossoms of Incarnate Souls (T.A.U.B.I.S) demonstrates a new chapter in the development of a still-young artist. Emotionally intelligent and technically sophisticated, this body of work

represents a period of intense production for Lewis. Over the period of a year, Lewis created the realm of the T.A.U.B.I.S. (pronounced /tau /beez) to explore desires for abundance, safety, deep roots, and justice.

T.A.U.B.I.S. is imbued with an ambition, confidence and a joy that exceeds the confines of a material category such as craft. The hand-dyed, reclaimed household materials such as curtains, bedsheets, blankets, towels, and clothing are colored with warm hues of pink and orange that resemble the interior of a light-filled womb. With this work, Lewis reflects on non-gendered motherhood—as well as gardens—as sources of knowledge and growth. Her sculptural textiles tell the story of an irresistible aliveness rooted in the black, fertile soil of time. In a moment of seemingly endless death and loss as we contend with the relentless public murder of Black and Brown people at the hands of police and the waves of grief related to the loss of life as a result of COVID-19, Lewis chooses to revel in life.



Image: Tau Lewis, Delight, 2020. Various recycled and hand dyed fabrics, recycled leather, cotton and recycled polyester batting, acrylic paint, PVA glue, seashells, stones, beads, pipe, wooden chair, hand sewn, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery.

Manifestations of life, hand-sewn floral blossoms strung on loose strands of fabric and leather extend from and surround each of the sculptures. Like tendrils of connection linking to the

wider world, the blossoms crawl along the floor of the main gallery to greet the audience. Larger than life with full lips and a serene expression, Symphony (2020) floats above eye level with long, thin arms and wide, open hands extending outward, covered in ropes of fabric flowers. The sculpture's arms extend away from its body and two floral nipples firmly jut out from their chest, inferring both a source of nourishment and the pulse of a beating heart. Sensual and tender, the nipple is alert and hardened—a sign of life. Tucked in the corner of the lower level of the main gallery and seated on a chair, Delight (2020) invites a closer look, hands extending outwards and reaching for the viewer while protecting a protruding belly reminiscent of the taut roundedness of a pregnant womb.

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Within Lewis's creative womb, the protective qualities of motherhood offer a safe and nurturing reprieve from the horrors outside. Finally, *Opus (The Ovule)* (2020), a sculpture of a massive head with an even larger tongue, is housed in a basement storage unit next door, and takes up almost all the available space. The imposing size of the sculpture, paired with its massive, lolling tongue, evokes a sense of both largeness and vulnerability, and is only accessible via the watchful guidance of a gallery attendant and their key. The extended tongue suggests the implicit trust of a body that refuses to retract into itself, that is unafraid to take up space while exposing its tender muscles. With an excess of references to life, Lewis's impassioned attention to care resists the existential threat of death.



Image: Tau Lewis, *Symphony*, 2020. Various recycled and hand dyed fabrics, recycled leather, cotton batting, beads acrylic paint, PVA, glue, metal hoop skirt, pipe, sea shells, wire, hand sewn, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery.

This exhibition positions Lewis within a rich lineage of other Black female artists who work with fabric and found objects, calling to mind Faith Ringgold's story quilts, Rosie Lee Tompkins's improvisational quilting and even Betye Saar's mystical assemblages. The utilitarian and subversive medium of found-fabric sculpture utilizes fragments to tell stories of resistance—such as the history of enslaved people using quilts as a form of artistic expression harkening back to traditions of African textiles—or to engage with craft to bring “women's work” into the contemporary art context, like feminist quilt artists Lee Tompkins, Ringgold, or even Canadian artist Joyce Weiland.<sup>1</sup> Like these artists, Lewis's work possesses a seductive handmade-ness—an unfiltered accessibility speaking to the irrepressible life of the continued resistance of Black and Brown people.

Arwa Mahdawi. “The Quilts That Made America Quake: How Faith Ringgold Fought the Power with Fabric,” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 4 June 2019.