

By Janelle Zara

Tony Lewis, *I Came to Peep*, 2024

“I Came to Peep” is a site-specific installation by Tony Lewis, a Chicago-based conceptual artist who combines drawing with elements of sculpture, written language, and Black vernacular culture. The artist describes the work as a “linguistic portrait” in which the names of Ed Clark, Beauford Delaney, Loïs Mailou, Richard Wright and Josephine Baker have been transcribed in shorthand notation and arranged in a dynamic, monumental composition. The resulting work pays homage to these five Black Americans who at different times lived and worked in Paris, honoring the creative legacies and ambitions that led them so far from home.

Lewis has developed a conceptual approach to drawing that extends beyond the strict actions of taking pencil to paper. In his Chicago-based studio, drawing incorporates the physicality of sculpture and actions of the body, transforming the drawn black line into an object with visceral and textural weight. The piece comprises black cords made of various materials—hemp, vinyl and steel wire among them—stretched between a narrow matrix of black screws, each string embodying the strokes of various drawing instruments, executed with structural logic as scribbling between the lines. The piece was installed collaboratively by members of Lewis’s Chicago artistic community—Chenée Lewis, Ed Oh, Kellie Romany, S.Y. Lim, Sultan Abdul-Ahad, and Corey Potter—with simple instructions the artist compares to those of a Sol Lewitt piece: “Fill in this box with this particular material so that you cannot see the white of behind.”

On the pristine white wall, the edges are shrouded in the patina of black graphite powder, a recurring element in the artist’s practice that leaves an indexical layer over the site—literal fingerprints that record his physical presence and add the soft illusion of movement to the work. The existing horizontal seam on the wall also created an impromptu opportunity to highlight coinciding dates, for example, Richard Wright arriving in Paris the same year that John W. Boyer, dean of the College of the University of Chicago, was born.

For Lewis, drawing also incorporates the artist’s affinity for the effects of language, particularly as they exist in popular culture. Previous works have called on both written texts and recorded speeches, with source material ranging from Calvin and Hobbes comic strips to the historic 1965 debate between James Baldwin and William F. Buckley. “I Came to Peep” employs stenography as a device for visual and conceptual abstraction, where the subjects’ names have been transcribed into English Gregg Shorthand. The artist was drawn to this particular system of notation for the graphic qualities of its loose, gestural marks, often adopting its characters as the aesthetic foundation of his works. Because the marks of Gregg Shorthand refer to sounds rather than letters, its notation creates simultaneous sonic and literary dimensions. For those familiar with shorthand, to view the work is to read and hear at the same time; for those unfamiliar, the notation summons the physical execution of the work. The looping, cursive strokes elicit fluid motions from the artist. Each mark is a record of a physical gesture defined by the dimensions of his body, the height or length of his reach, with a somatic grace and a rhythm as the marks rise and fall.

The title of the piece derives from a quote of Beauford Delaney’s about arriving in Paris in 1953 and staying until his death in 1979: “I came to peep,” he said to the International Herald Tribune, “but there was a lot to peep at.” To peep can imply a kind of voyeurism—to look from a distance, cautiously or slyly through a narrow opening. For Lewis, the phrase also resonated with the relaxed humor and levity of Black vernacular slang, where “peep this” is an invitation to explore and examine, to see how much you might like something. Delaney, as it turned out, liked Paris very much. James Baldwin, as a longtime friend and romantic partner of Delaney’s, described the painter’s migration as “so dogged and splendid a journey” from his origins in Tennessee and previous works that were “black-blue midnight indeed, opaque, and full of sorrow.” On Delaney’s arrival in Paris, Baldwin continued, his “paintings underwent a most striking metamorphosis into freedom,” taking on the miraculous light that shone through the windows of the artist’s home in

the suburbs of Clamart. “This light held the power to illuminate, even to redeem and reconcile and heal.”

As the five subjects of Lewis’s installation left the racial discrimination that roiled their home country of the United States, the artist considers their expatriation an act of pursuit rather than escape. The lives they constructed for themselves in Paris, and the communities they built, nourished their respective practices in ways they could not have anticipated so far from home. Lewis presents the piece as a Mount Rushmore, a monumental homage to their audacity: “To run, for the sake of your own work, into the unknown of your own failures and successes—to make something great in a place you’d never been, is one of the most courageous things you could do.”

A book and video work accompany the piece as documentation of the time Lewis and his team spent together in Paris during the work’s installation. Inspired by the stories of Lewis’s subjects, they recorded in real time their experience of the city’s ongoing artistic legacy.