

The Spirit Within the Form: Stanley Lewis

This exhibition features a selection of stonecut prints by Canadian sculptor and printmaker Stanley Lewis (1930-2006). The prints are taken from three different series- *City Portraits* (1974), *Explorer* (1980), and *Creation* (1982). The subjects include human figures, the environment, and celestial elements, executed in stylized forms. The *Explorer* and *Creation* series explore allegorical and spiritual themes, which suggest the origins of the universe and humanity. The intimate *City Portrait* series expresses a variety of human experiences within the urban environment. For these particular works, the artist produced separate stonecuts for each colour of the prints and used transparent inks to achieve subtle colour variations.

Lewis was born in Montreal in 1930, and began his studies in 1949 at the School of Art and Design, Montreal Museum of Fine Art. He studied with Arthur Lismer, the well-known member of the Group of Seven, and went on to study at the Instituto Allende in Mexico (1953-55). Two years later Lewis received a scholarship to study in Florence, Italy under Vittorio Gambacciani, one of the last living *maestros* of marble sculpting. While in Florence, Stanley encountered American writer Irving Stone. Over a two-year correspondence, he helped Stone understand the techniques of sculpting and the artistic process, which Stone later used for his bestselling novel *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1961), a fictional account of the life and work of Michelangelo. In a series of letters to Stone, Lewis wrote “Just as one feels inside the body, so Michelangelo felt and perceived human images inside the marble block. He found the tangible image by removing to reveal... Doesn’t all great art have a soul? In the true sense of the word, the soul is immortalized within the created form. Time passes by about it but its message never diminishes.” This belief, in the hidden spirit within the form, would become a prominent, recurring motif throughout his art practice and life. When he returned to Canada, Lewis traveled to the Arctic to study the print-making techniques of the Inuit stonecut printers of Cape Dorset (1961-1966). His experimentation with this technique resulted in a proliferation of multi-coloured stonecut prints.

In the words of his close friend, filmmaker Jeanne Pope, “stone was Stanley’s spiritual essence.” The solidity of the material grounded him in his conflicted and at times, turbulent life. He was haunted and preoccupied by his own mortality. It seems fitting that through his travels Lewis always returned to Montreal and his dusty studio above Bernson’s Tombstone Company, on St. Laurent Boulevard. Even his own home was, in his words “a constant reminder that we are mortal souls but our creations are timeless.”