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One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series and Other Works, Museum of Modern Art, New York — review

Ariella Budick

The artist's panels tell the story of African-Americans' northward journey



Jacob Lawrence, 'Bus' (1941)

Billie Holiday's centennial fell on April 7, the same day that the world first saw the video of a white police officer in South Carolina killing an unarmed black man by shooting him in the back. The blues singer who gave us the grim meditation "Strange Fruit" would not have been surprised. Neither would Jacob Lawrence, whose "Migration Series", now on view at the Museum of Modern Art, recounts his people's hopeless flight from prejudice. The exhibition is intense, grimly beautiful, and perpetually relevant. [Racial violence is in the news again](#), and US cities — Baltimore, this time — are once again in flames. Time collapses in on itself. Old tragedies return, appallingly fresh.

So much, and yet so little, has changed since 1940, when Lawrence laid 60 panels on the floor of his studio and began to tell the story of African-Americans' northward journey. It's a tale of fitful improvement without joyous finales. Poverty and racism drove more than 1m blacks out of the south to Chicago, New York, Detroit and St Louis, where they found more poverty and racism — but also jobs and the right to vote. They left behind lynchings, and encountered mob violence and economic exploitation, overcrowding and ghastly housing. Lawrence tells it all in emotionally intense compositions and potent colours that he left unmixed and unvaried for the sake of a coherent narrative.

He was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, but because his parents came from Virginia and South Carolina and he wound up in Upper Manhattan, he saw himself as one of those northbound multitudes. Harlem nurtured him with instruction, encouragement and inspiration. He took part in an after-school programme at the local Utopia Children's House, and the lessons he learnt there stayed with him his entire life. His earliest paintings revel in the neighbourhood's teeming activity, impromptu orators and raucous sidewalk politics. Blind beggars, ice pedlars and grim-faced commuters on a late-night trek home supplied Lawrence's early material. He recorded them in a semi-abstract vocabulary of flat, unshaded forms laid down in the cheap tempera he never abandoned.

Lawrence quickly grew impatient with these snapshots, and decided to craft something more massive, significant, and unified instead. He painted scenes from the lives of American abolitionist Harriet Tubman and Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture before settling on the ultimate project: a large-scale chronicle of the black Exodus. To deal with a whole population's shift from agriculture to industry, from warmth to cold, from country to city, he worked simultaneously on all 60 panels, and found the topic so rich that he could extract maximum variety from an unchanging technique.



Panel 14 from Jacob Lawrence's 'Migration Series'

In the deceptively simple syncopations of colour, caption and composition, Lawrence wedded advanced modernist formalism to an austere kind of storytelling. In Panel 16, for instance, we see a woman boxed into a crook of grief, her body warped by the spatial compression that serves as a metaphor for psychic imprisonment. With urbane understatement, Lawrence does not depict mob violence or its gruesome aftermath, but the emotional devastation of a lone survivor. He borrowed from cubist collage for the tilted composition and faux-bois effect, then charged these avant-garde tools with extra emotional power. The caption, however, is restrained to the point of snarling wit:

“Although the Negro was used to lynching, he found this an opportune time for him to leave where one had occurred.” (In 1993, Lawrence rewrote all the captions, and made this one even more terse: “After a lynching, the migration quickened.”)

MoMA’s show uses music, photographs, paintings, artefacts and books to flesh out the historical backdrop for Lawrence’s cycle. Footage of Marian Anderson’s performance at the Lincoln Memorial alternates with Billie Holiday singing “Strange Fruit”. Photographs by Dorothea Lang, Margaret Bourke-White and Russell Lee portray the rural poverty of the south and the urban streets of the north.

All this context only amplifies Lawrence’s monumental achievement, his vision and moral authority. He might so easily have emulated his leftist teachers, such as Charles Alston, who protested the plight of African Americans in social realist style. He might have resorted to pathos, or the hackneyed visual rhetoric of class rage. It’s not as if he avoided politics — Lawrence, like his cohort, took on the bosses’ hankering for cheap labour, industrial exploitation, and the spread of disease through overcrowding — but he did so with laconic elegance rather than a hoarse shout.

Sometimes a lone figure, reduced to a few schematic shapes, shrinks into a corner of the frame. A regular pattern of rectangular windows functions as efficient shorthand for the narrowed horizons of urban life. In Panel 44, “Living Conditions were Better in the North”, Lawrence maps the limits of abundance with a simple slab of meat that hangs from a nail on the wall and a loaf of sliced bread on a table. You could see it as a Dutch still life, refracted through Soutine’s carnivorous tableaux, but mostly it’s an example of Lawrence telling a painful tale with formidable self-control.

The show also draws a parallel between the artist’s subject and his early career. Like the southern blacks who made it to Chicago and New York, he found limited success in an unshakeably segregated world. When the Downtown Gallery exhibited the series in 1941, it was the first time a major commercial gallery had represented a black artist.

Lawrence became an overnight star. The Museum of Modern Art acquired all the even-numbered panels. (For this show, the Philips Collection has loaned MoMA the other half.) Critics reacted with condescending enthusiasm, mistaking him for a primitive or naïf. “There is little in Lawrence’s work that departs from this saga of sadness,” noted Henry McBride in the *New York Sun*. “Its appeal lies in the fact that in his emotional reactions he has really gone native — has preserved the Negro’s instinct for rhythm and love for crude brilliant colours which he handles with unfailing decorative felicity.” That kind of praise must have felt to Lawrence like life in a northern city: better than nothing, but bitter nevertheless.

Eventually, he became one of the giants of the 20th century, though when the phrase “great artist” was applied to him, it all too often bore the qualifier “black”. After all these decades, MoMA’s triumphant exhibition in a season of renewed discord shows how much easier it is to lionise a hero than to carry out his calls for change.

To September 7, moma.org