

Tau Lewis Spirit Level

The Handle of the Axe, 2024

Steel; enamel paint; acrylic paint and finisher; recycled leather, suede, shearling, shagreen, and assorted fabric; leather, fabric, and natural dyes; rawhide; seashells; coral bone; pearl; stones; assorted beads; assorted found objects; gold and silk thread; coated nylon thread; and coated cotton thread

Courtesy the artist

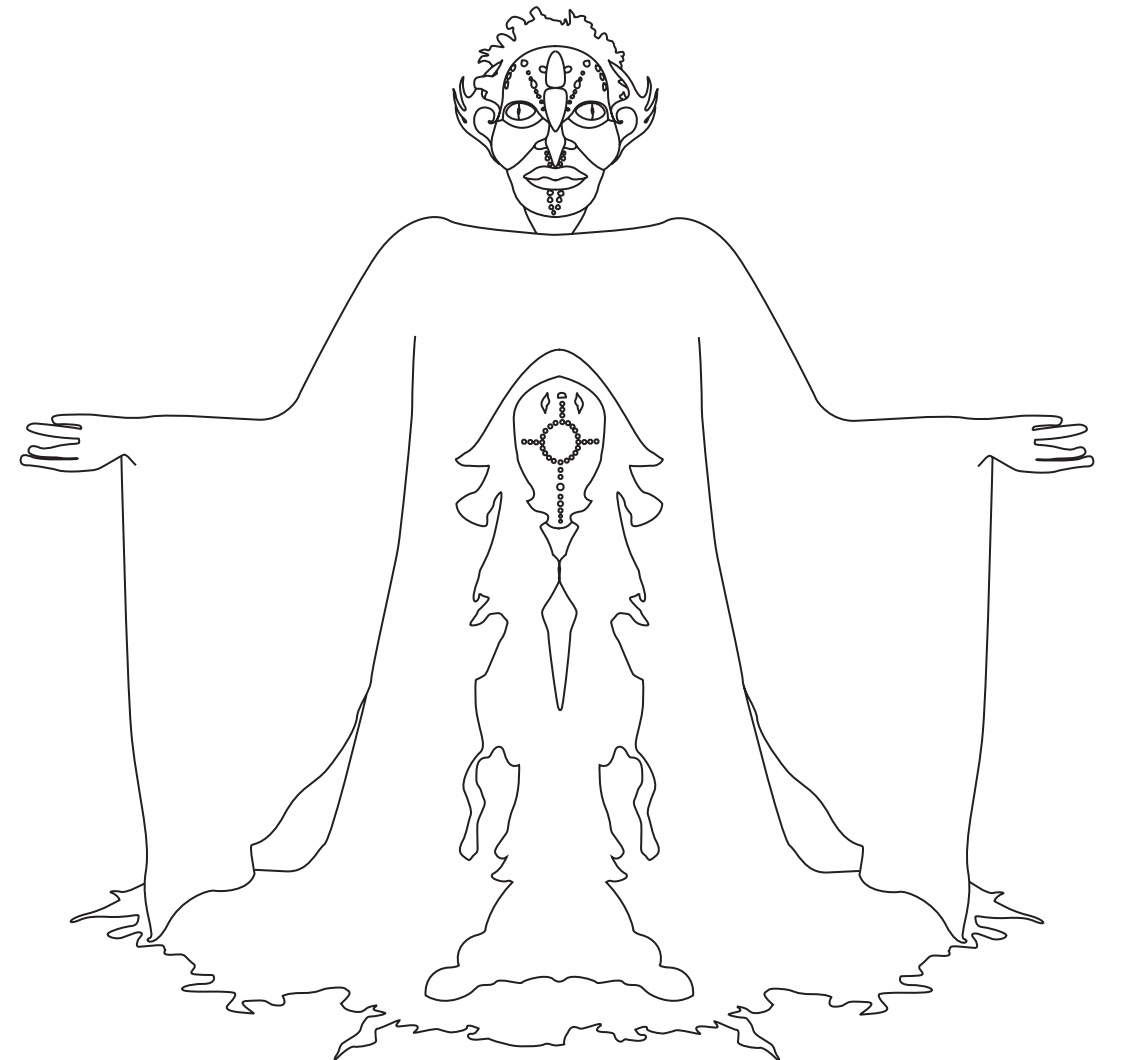
This sculpture explores the conflicting relationship between liberation, nonviolence, and memory.

The sculpture's ornate golden garments and welcoming gesture were inspired by a statue of Saint Benedict of Palermo, the first Christian saint of African origin.

The figure is also based in part on Samuel Sharpe, an enslaved priest who led a widespread, early nineteenth-century slave revolt in Jamaica. He has since been recognized as a national icon, his face featured on the Jamaican fifty-dollar bill. While Sharpe espoused a philosophy of nonviolence and forgiveness toward slaveholders, the revolt nevertheless resulted in death and destruction, revealing an abiding tension between nonviolence and struggles for liberation.

The work's title references a proverb, "When the axe came

into the forest, the trees said, 'the handle is one of us,'" which appears as an epigraph in Alice Walker's 1992 novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Here, the artist invites us to consider how danger may appear in familiar forms and how appearances should always be questioned.



The Doula, 2024

Steel; enamel paint; acrylic paint and finisher; recycled leather, suede, and assorted fabric; leather, fabric, and natural dyes; seashells; coated nylon thread; and coated cotton thread

Courtesy the artist

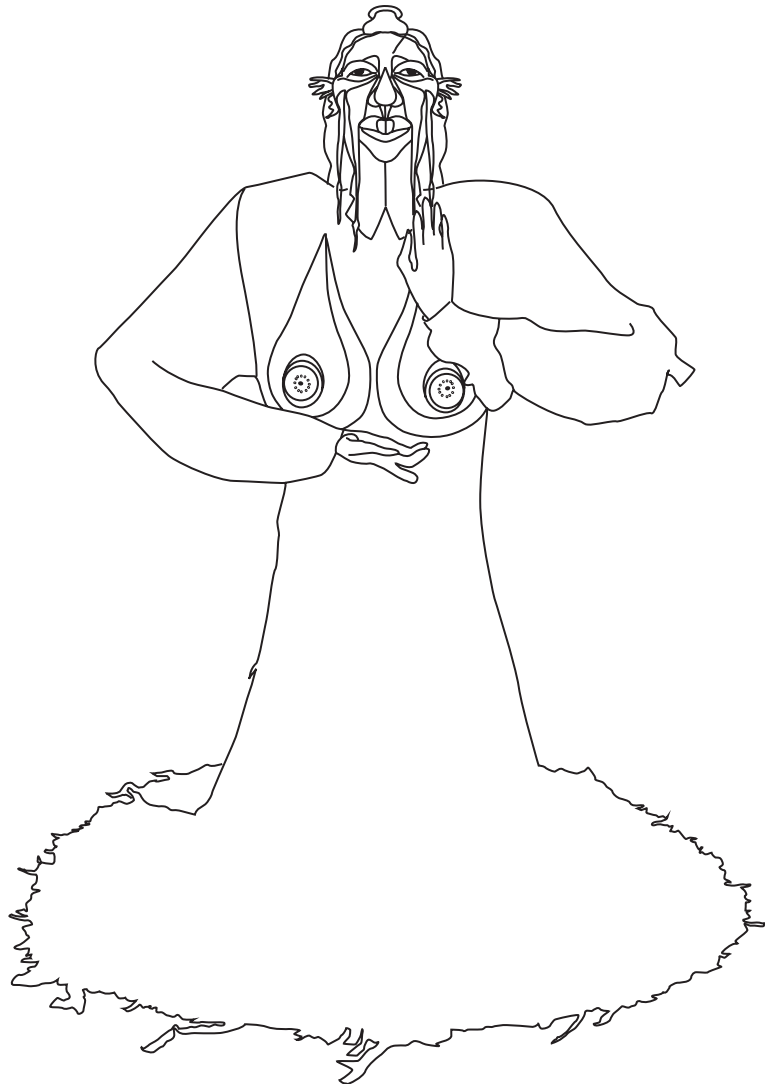


The ocean and marine life have always been a source of fascination for Lewis. Conceived as a portrait of the sea, *The Doula* explores how the ocean is a site of life and rebirth, as well as one of death and rest. The sculpture's cape sweeps across the floor as a wave might, intermingled with undersea life such as stingrays and manta rays, its hands open in a gesture of acceptance and openness. Doulas provide guidance, support, and care during significant moments throughout the lifespan, such as childbirth and death. In this way, Lewis sees this personification of the ocean as both a gentle tide and an unprejudiced force, its open palms inviting life and death to coexist. Lewis draws from a wide array of associations (e.g., Drexian mythology; the prevalence of stress-induced parturition, or premature birth, in captured stingrays and manta rays; and, time spent in and around the Caribbean Sea near her family's home in Negril, Jamaica), to imagine a portrait of the ocean as both majestic and destructive.

The Night Woman, 2024

Steel; enamel paint; acrylic paint and finisher; recycled leather, suede, fur, shagreen, and assorted fabric; leather, fabric, and natural dyes; cow bone; conch; abalone shell; stones; jute; coated nylon thread; and coated cotton thread

Courtesy the artist



The Night Woman sees Lewis working through ideas of femininity, mystery, and power. The sculpture draws inspiration in part from the apparition in Marlon James's 2009 novel *The Book of Night Women*. Shrouded in waves of black, gray, and purple fabric, *The Night Woman* stares out at viewers with an air of intrigue, unknowability, and serenity. In James's novel, which takes place on a plantation in Jamaica between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a group of enslaved, so-called night women meet in a cave under cover of dark to plan their revolt. Lilith, the book's protagonist, is followed and possessed by a spirit and must decide whether to remain submissive and obedient to her enslavers, or to burn everything down, embracing her power and fighting in the revolt. For Lewis, *The Night Woman* represents feminine intuition, an intuition based in community and specific labor practices, but which doesn't exclude force or violence. Rather, the sculpture is a guiding spirit, one which looks over working women, wielding the power to protect and to destroy in equal measure.

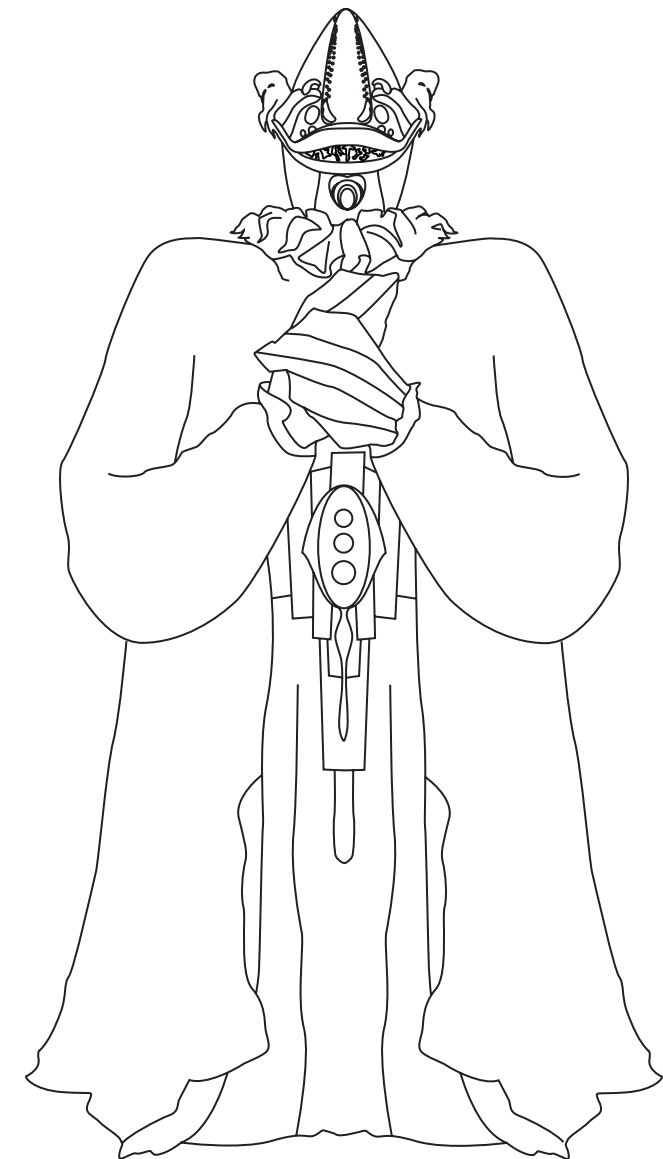
The Reaper, 2024

Steel; enamel paint; acrylic paint and finisher; recycled leather, suede, snakeskin, goatskin, and assorted fabric; leather, fabric, and natural dyes; seashells; conch; coral bone; stones; assorted found objects; wire; jute; gold and silk thread; coated nylon thread; and coated cotton thread

Courtesy the artist

In *The Reaper*, Lewis meditates on themes of life and death through her signature oceanic motifs. Fiery tones of orange, red, and purple evoke flesh and the beautiful, vibrant colors of autumn leaves sensing winter's approach. The artist notes that organisms on the verge of death often explode with color, ending their lives in a flash of beauty. Similarly, humans close to death sometimes experience an equally colorful moment of terminal lucidity. The figure's head resembles an anglerfish, a deep-sea fish that captures prey using its luminescent fin ray as a lure. The figure's mouth rests in a wide, toothy grin that is entrancing, menacing, and made up of bright coral fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle. Like death itself, the anglerfish hunts indiscriminately. Just like its undersea counterpart,

The Reaper is a trickster, luring prey with its bright exterior, poised to strike at a moment's notice.

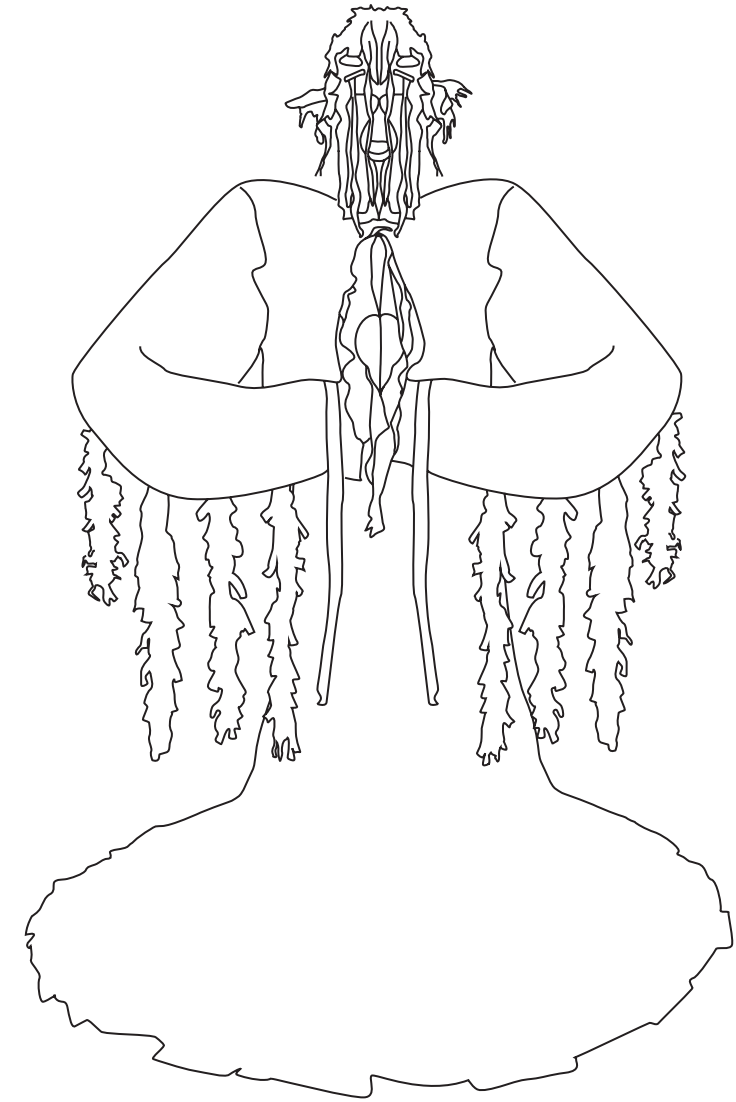


The Miracle, 2024

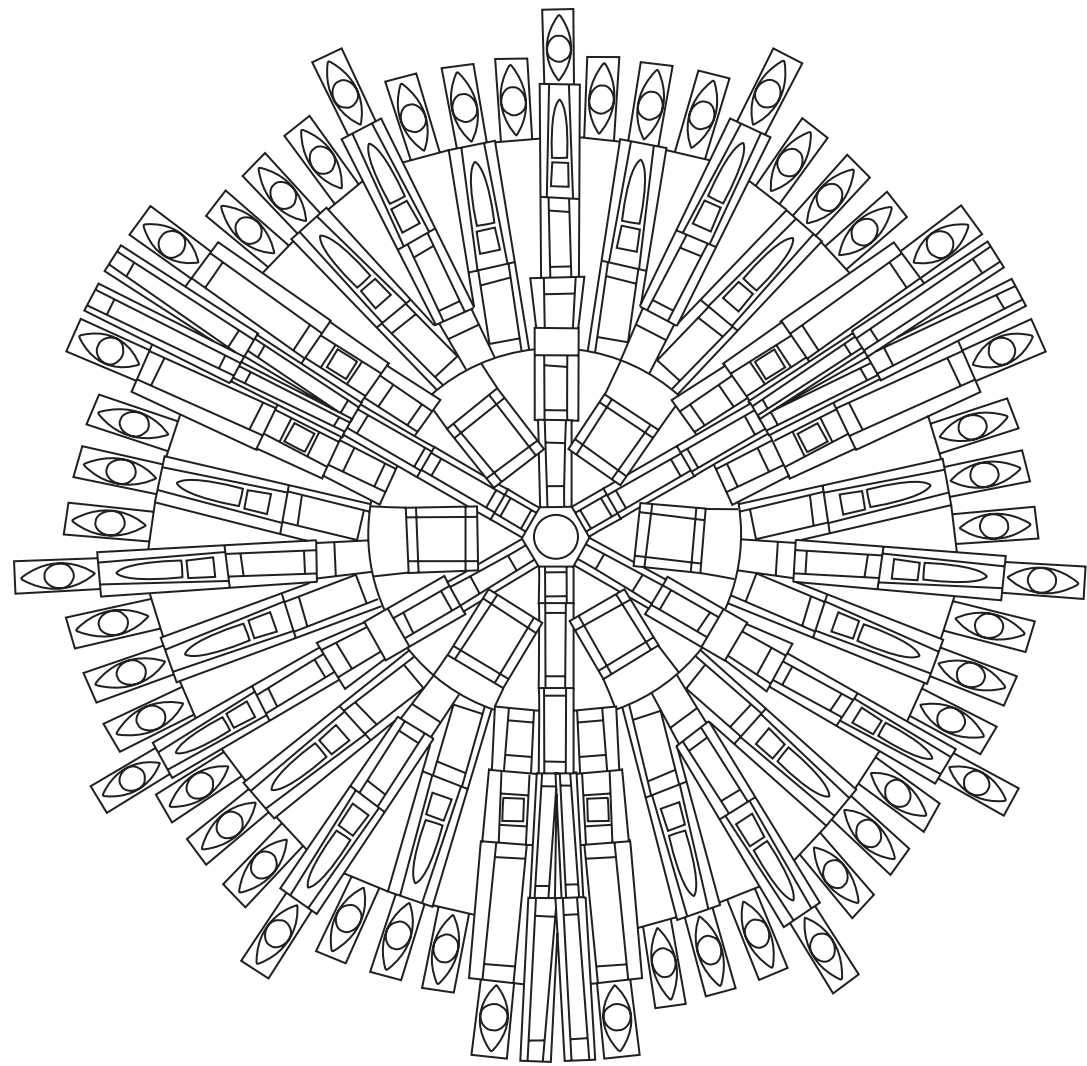
Steel; enamel paint; foam; acrylic paint and finisher; recycled leather, suede, goatskin, and assorted fabric; leather, fabric, and natural dyes; assorted beads; gold and silk thread; coated nylon thread; and coated cotton thread

Courtesy the artist

The Miracle, a bright, shimmering figure resembling a jellyfish with hands clasped together in prayer, was the final work conceived for this exhibition, and one representing the joyous optimism of new beginnings. Lewis sees the jellyfish as a symbol of rebirth. When they die, the medusa jellyfish can reaggregate their dead cells into polyps, small growths that eventually become new organisms. In this way, they transcend death in an almost miraculous process. In addition to the large figure, smaller jellyfish are scattered throughout the sculpture, including under each of the figure's arms. These small jellyfish are made from drumskin on gold threads to resemble a child's mobile. They have halos made of an ostrich eggshell bead atop a cluster of glass beads that look like tiny planets, suggesting they are each the creator of their own



universe in miniature. Where other figures in Lewis's grouping reflect on themes of violence and death, *The Miracle* is a testament to the possibility of growth in the face of loss, making it the lightest and most hopeful of the group.



The Last Transmission, 2024

Recycled leather and suede; cotton canvas; acrylic paint and finisher; leather, fabric, and natural dyes; assorted found metal, wood, ceramic, and glass objects; wire; beads; seashells; coated nylon thread; and coated cotton thread

Courtesy the artist

In addition to her figurative sculptures, quilts are a signature element of Lewis's practice. Transforming found fabrics with paint, dyes, and other objects, her tapestry-like quilts display her sustained interest in the deep sea and outer space through the inclusion of seashells and extraterrestrial forms. *The Last Transmission* lies flat on the ground, bringing the five sculptures in the exhibition together around a central point. The quilt's repeated sequence of architectural forms recalls diagrams or taxonomical systems used to organize the natural world. In the center, a found-metal assemblage points upward, suggesting the form of a launch tower for a space shuttle. The piece's title may speak to a radio communication for astronauts, a message for aliens to save a dying planet Earth, or a final goodbye to a loved one. The title is taken from one of the last songs produced by the Detroit techno duo Drexciya, whose music constructed the influential myth of an undersea civilization of the same name that has been a recurrent source of inspiration for Lewis and numerous other contemporary artists.

