

A Sculptor Takes His Craft to the Skies

The artist Desmond Lewis brings the glow of professional fireworks to under-resourced communities in the South.

By Brenna M. Casey

June 30, 2022

GREENWOOD, Miss. — On Saturday night, June 18, the Memphis-based artist Desmond Lewis was in a public park unloading cakes — bundles of fireworks connected by a high-speed fuse — from a pickup truck. On the other side of a nearby tree line waited about 150 expectant onlookers for the Juneteenth celebration in the city that is heralded as “the cotton capital of the world.”

“The first rule of fireworks,” Lewis said as he stood over a large box of explosives in the lingering heat, “is don’t put any body part over the explosive that you don’t want to lose.”

Lewis, 28, is lanky and bespectacled. He wears a pair of dark-rimmed prescription safety glasses because, as he puts it, “I am always doing stuff.” He gave a good-natured grimace as he raised the box to his chest.

Primarily a sculptor, Lewis creates works that are forged, carved, fabricated and cast from industrial materials. His objects wed concrete to steel, wood and rebar. A block of pocked and striated concrete anchors a construction of steel in “Bout that split tho” (2021), for example. In another, the sculpture “America’s Forgotten” (2017) looms 16 feet high on the campus of the University of Memphis, where Lewis received his Master of Fine Arts degree. It features a vertical cylinder of concrete adorned with large pieces of steel shaped like broken links of a chain.





“America’s Forgotten” (2017) by the sculptor Desmond Lewis is a shaft adorned by pieces that look like chain. They tell complex national narratives that surround African American labor histories. Desmond Lewis





“Bout that split tho,” 2021. Lewis’s block of pocked and striated concrete anchors a construction of steel. Desmond Lewis

In his works Lewis recognizes an analog: To him, their smooth surfaces are reminiscent of the ways in which the complex national narratives that surround African American labor histories are dismissed, covered up or whitewashed. Many constructions feature finessed concrete, he says, “massaged to look pristine”— an impulse he rails against. His sculptures look mangled or on the precipice of ruin. They expose their own innards in ways that Lewis understands as representative of the inextricable fiction of white supremacy and the material realities of Black life. Far from being grim, however, Lewis’s sculptures are marked by bits of whimsy — a pop of color, a jaunty placement, a sentimental handprint.

That coeval relationship between tenderness and violence continues to be evident in the artist’s turn from what the art collector and minority share owner of the Memphis Grizzlies Elliot Perry admiringly characterizes as “tough materials” to more ethereal pyrotechnics, which Lewis considers highly sculptural.

Lewis’s pyrotechnic experimentation began in the summer of 2018 when he attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture — a highly selective and storied summer residency for emerging artists in rural Maine that boasts such illustrious alumni as Ellsworth Kelly, David Driskell and Robert Indiana. During his residency, Lewis began ruminating on breaking points. He had been contending with images of police brutality and attendant protests in places like Ferguson, Mo., and Baltimore. “As a Black person,” he explains, “you can only hold so much in for so long.”

While conducting visual research to investigate the ways a “very warranted” explosion could be rendered sculpturally, Lewis realized that there was little visual difference between the flames that emanate from a firework and those from a burning car. “One’s socially acceptable,” he says, “the other’s not.” To test his theory, Lewis constructed three small concrete columns and placed fireworks inside.

At dusk in a large meadow, Lewis lit his first firework.





Desmond Lewis conducted visual research at Skowhegan in 2018 to investigate the ways an explosion could be rendered sculpturally, Desmond Lewis

“It was thrilling,” Sarah Workneh, the co-director of Skowhegan recalled. “Everybody was pretty excited that it happened and that it could happen here,” she said of the audience. “They were excited by the event itself, by being shown what is possible.” In addition to his full-time position as a lecturer at the Yale School of Art, Lewis works as the sculpture shop manager at Skowhegan. Workneh characterizes the power of that early firework display as part of Lewis’s “dangerous generosity.”

That first foray plunged Lewis into the complex, multimillion-dollar industry of professional pyrotechnics. He wanted access to an industry governed by complicated state and federal regulations and dominated by a small number of large companies. Costs of display fireworks could be prohibitive for under-resourced communities, many of them Black, he realized, and the industry is predominantly white. Lewis was undeterred.

He began working part-time for a large pyrotechnics company garnering on-the-job training and eventually his display operator’s license. As part of his job, Lewis was sent to small towns throughout the Southeast where he was one of few Black people. He described these experiences as “scary” and “uncomfortable.”

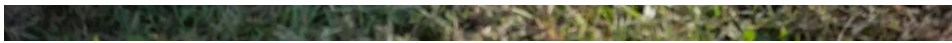
“As a sub-30 Black male in this country” he says, “I have two options. I can either be six feet underground or in a six-foot cell. The labor that it takes to avoid those options are just inherent risks of survival.”

Independently, Lewis sought licensures in multiple Southeastern states and eventually his federal Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms Type 54 license, which allows him to — in conjunction with a commercial driver’s license bearing a hazardous materials endorsement — purchase, transport and shoot professional-grade fireworks.

“Part of what I like about fireworks,” Lewis explained, “is that I get to be in the dark.”

Pyrotechnics are not novel in contemporary art. Judy Chicago was detonating fireworks in the desert as part of her feminist pushback to the Land Art movement in the 1960s. More recently, Cai Guo-Qiang has achieved international renown for his explosive art, perhaps most popularly at the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony. But Lewis’s displays are tonally different from these opulent productions.





Lewis tests his fireworks ignition equipment at Whittington Park in Greenwood, Miss., on June 18. Lewis chose the Greenwood celebration to host a fireworks show. Timothy Ivy for The New York Times

At present, Lewis assumes all the costs of his own travel and transport of the fireworks (though organizers pay for the materials and the cost of insurance). He has little control over the product he purchases especially as supply chain delays trouble the industry. Sometimes Lewis doesn't even know what colors are available. His shows are meticulously timed. "A thing I'm learning about myself," he says, "is I really love logistics." But for most spectators, they're indistinguishable from shows you may see around Fourth of July.

Greenwood is on the eastern edge of the Mississippi Delta, not far from where the Tallahatchie and Yalobusha Rivers meet to form the Yazoo. According to the 2021 U.S. census, more than 70 percent of the city's 1,400 residents identify as Black. Nearly 30 percent of the population lives below the national poverty threshold. The city currently hosts two firework shows — one with a Christmas parade, and another for Independence Day, but none for Juneteenth. Two hours south in Jackson, where 80 percent of the population identifies as Black and the poverty line hovers around 24 percent, the City Council earlier this year voted down measures to fund pyrotechnics on Juneteenth and July 4 — a combined cost of \$25,000 — according to news reports.

To arrive in Greenwood, Lewis flew from Bangor, Me., to Nashville, Tenn. He then drove to Indiana to pick up the fireworks and returned by way of Memphis before heading farther south to Leflore County. The drive took him about 15 hours. He was hauling nearly 300 pounds of fireworks for a show that would clock in under five minutes. Lewis would drive back to Memphis that evening to catch a flight early the next morning. He had never been to Greenwood before, but site plans he sent in advance were approved by the fire marshal.





From left, Labresheana Allen, 24, Maurice Metcalf, 23, and Kevian Young, 16, watch a fireworks show created by Desmond Lewis at Whittington Park in Greenwood, Miss., on June 18. The artist's goal is to give more firework entertainment to under-resourced communities. Timothy Ivy for The New York Times

The Juneteenth festival had the feel of an extended family reunion. It was organized by three friends, all in their 20s, who grew up in Greenwood. They considered it both a celebration and “a reminder that your ancestors were not free,” as Kenneth Milton Jr., one of the organizers, explained. Participants danced, joined in a rendition of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” and played a wholesome (if raucous) game of kickball.

As darkness settled in, Lewis began his display as scheduled. It was the final event of the day.

The sky lit up with pink and green flashes and the air sizzled with sound. Suddenly, Lewis sprinted from the tailgate of his truck where he had been operating the show from the perimeter of a baseball field to the chain link fence that ringed the outfield. A man — with no affiliation to the Juneteenth event — had breached the safety radius Lewis had established. Lewis yelled at him to get back, but the man persisted. If he were to be hurt, Lewis would be liable.

While everyone looked skyward, Lewis spent the last minutes of the show “eye-to-eye” with the man, using his body as a shield between the interloper and the detonating fireworks. When the explosions ended, the unidentified man sauntered back toward the street that bordered the public park.

Whoops and cheers could be heard from the distant crowd. Cars honked appreciatively from the road, but Lewis gave no indication that he heard them.

“Sensational,” said Kamron Daniels, 24, another of the organizers, moments after the show’s conclusion. When asked if they would do it all over again, he answered, “Without a doubt.”

Mayor Carolyn McAdams said, “It is a wonderful event for Greenwood,” adding, “it was a well-attended event, safe and catered toward people enjoying life with friends and family.”

Greenwood was the only Juneteenth celebration Lewis “shot” this year — in the pyrotechnic parlance — but in the future, he hopes to organize a spate of displays to honor the holiday.

When asked if the expense and effort is worth the payoff for such a brief firework display, Lewis responded, “Why can’t we just have our five minutes?”

