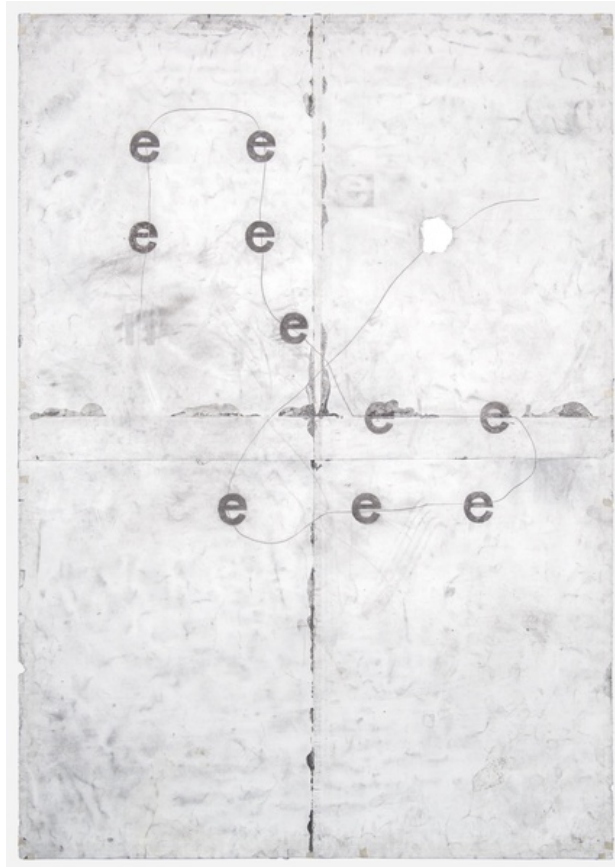


# SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

Black Visual Archive  
2013

## Nine Drawings for Charles

In his debut exhibition at Shane Campbell Gallery entitled *Nine Drawings for Charles*, Chicago-based artist Tony Lewis deconstructs racialized text through a series of gritty graphite drawings. Created on large sheets of paper that have been married together, the dismantled text compose fragmented sentences that leave the letters void of their initial intention. In the gallery press release we are informed that the text is pulled from personal and political vocabulary but by the time Lewis is done editing many of the letters, we are left with words that, for the most part, sound like the early utterings of a child — one who is yet to be aware of the way society will construct them through language.



Tony Lewis  
e e e e e e e e e e, 2011  
Pencil and graphite powder on paper  
84h x 60w in (213.36h x 152.4w cm)

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Although the subject matter of the drawings is weighted by the disorganization of social constructions, there is an unexpected air of humor throughout the show. For instance, the title alone is subtly humorous; *Nine Drawings for Charles* — Charles being the artist's first name (Anthony or Tony being his middle) — implies that these works are not only created by him but for him as well. This reference is missed if you do not know the artist's birth name and may leave people wondering, who is Charles? I should also note that there are only eight drawings in the show and not the promised nine as the title suggests. Although the works are clearly for capitalist consumption — they are in fact for sale — I like the idea that Lewis is using these “canvases” as a space to explore the way that language defines and binds us by subverting the viewers ability to read the text. In the end, we are only able to make out small aspects of the words such as “people” but there are hints of defining language that has been eradicated. In the drawing e e e e e e e e, (pictured above) Lewis has omitted all letters but the one vowel, leaving it scattered about the enveloping surface. The Es are connected by a thin almost half hearted line — similar to the childhood activity of connecting the dots — but instead it drags the viewers gaze to an unexpected hole in the paper.

As much as the text-based works read like sentences installed across the gallery, there are two large graphite illustrations of brick walls that abruptly stop your reading — much like periods. Hung lower than their peers, these drawings look similar to the short brick fences found in the type of housing enclaves I grew up in. I was naturally attracted to *Be romantic.* (2012) and *Refill Ice cube Trays.* (2012) because of their surfaces which are burnished with graphite and provides them with an almost stylistic backdrop feel. The tones are reminiscent of some of Ed Ruscha's pieces created with gunpowder. Both brick drawings are kindred to the text works in the fact that they are systematically created, utilize the same materials, and are made on the same combined sheets of paper. They are strategically placed as visual barriers to the text that is being deconstructed, yet by nature of their subject matter — a symbol urban development? — adds to our complicated visual signifiers for race.

I recently did a studio visit with Lewis, located on the Northside of Chicago. His studio occupies two rooms; one covered in graphite with drawings that are stacked on the floor and one similar to a very small gallery room where he can lay out his pieces. I was struck by the non-sentimental treatment of his works as we tromped across them. This approach, however, lends itself to the final product. For many of the text pieces they provide vast areas of negative space yet they do not feel open or airy. Instead the negative space bears the marks of their maker, one who utilizes a process that begrimes his surfaces with

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every move. They remind me of lost sheets of notebook paper that have found their way to the streets — with text that is muddled from soiled shoe and tire treads that it has come into contact with. The studio heavily contrasted the final installation of the show yet the pristine surface of gallery walls allows for the work to be much more conspicuous.

Nine Drawings for Charles demonstrated Lewis's power to define and undefine himself; he is not who he is labeled as. The purging of the mostly unknown words is somewhat of a liberating post-black poetic gesture. That gesture is what can be taken from the show but at the same time it leads you on a dizzying reading throughout the gallery with nonsensical declarations of his negation.

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