

Tony Lewis
Abstract Slavery

May 7 – June 6, 2026

Opening Thursday, May 7, 2026, from 6–8pm

Extended Hours (10am–8pm) on Thursday, May 14, 2026 for Frieze Art Week
509 West 27th Street, New York

NEW YORK – Olney Gleason presents *Abstract Slavery*, an exhibition of new drawings by Tony Lewis (b. 1986, Los Angeles). On view from May 7 through June 6, 2026, this marks the artist's first solo presentation in New York and brings together three interrelated bodies of work – *Word Search* drawings, *Gregg Shorthand* compositions, and *White Drawings* – unified by a sustained investigation of the Atlantic slave trade through the material and conceptual possibilities of drawing.

Lewis works primarily with graphite, colored pencil, and paper, materials he subjects to intensive physical manipulation – rubbing, smudging, layering, erasure – in a practice rooted in the labor of mark-making. Language, both as visual form and carrier of meaning, is a consistent subject. Over the past decade, Lewis has developed methods for collapsing the space between drawing and writing, treating the Roman alphabet, Gregg shorthand notation, and found texts as formal elements to be appropriated, distorted, and reconstituted. In *Abstract Slavery*, Lewis turns this framework toward the history of the transatlantic slave trade, a subject he describes as “one of the greatest examples of abstraction” – an event so vast and incompletely documented that it resists fixed representation.

Eric Gleason comments: “Tony Lewis has spent the last fifteen years redefining the possibilities of drawing. Many of the most important museums and institutions in the US have long recognized the formal and conceptual rigor of his work, and its emotive power. It is unimaginable that this is Tony's first solo exhibition in New York City, but Olney Gleason is honored to be presenting it, and especially to be the conduit for unveiling the three new series of works that will make their debut in the show.”

One such new series is Lewis' large-scale *Word Search* drawings (2025–26). Lewis adopts the familiar grid of the word game as a diagrammatic structure capable of organizing and transmitting historical information: names, places, commodities, legislation, and financial instruments associated with the slave trade. The format is deliberate. The word search operates as a pedagogical tool – a system designed for finding language within a field of apparent disorder. Lewis treats the category headings and word lists as compositional elements, directing attention between the weight of the subject matter and the visual logic of the game.

notation – a phonetic writing system that translates speech into curving, bisecting lines – as a generative tool throughout his practice. Each shorthand composition is titled after a specific word drawn from one of the word search lists, and the resulting drawing is an abstraction of that word's form in the stenographic system. The shorthand marks read as gestural abstraction to viewers unfamiliar with the notation, while encoding specific language for those who can decipher it.

The *White Drawings* originated in the summer of 2021 as a response to personal grief. Frantic graphite and colored pencil marks – scratches, smudges, scribbles – are covered by a layer of white colored pencil applied across the entire surface, producing a veiled field in which the underlying marks remain partially visible. Within *Abstract Slavery*, some of the *White Drawings* contain handwritten text pulled from the word lists of adjacent word search drawings, forming a third kind of word game. Installed alongside floor drawings, the three bodies of work present drawing as a practice capable of holding multiple registers simultaneously: research and expression, diagram and gesture, representation and abstraction.

About the artist

Tony Lewis (b. 1986, Los Angeles) lives and works in Chicago. He expands the conceptual and material possibilities of drawing in a practice that spans large-scale works on paper, sculpture, collage, digital projection, and site-specific installation. Examining semiotics and drawing as parallel forms of abstraction, Lewis appropriates and adapts forms including the Roman alphabet and the phonetic symbols used in stenography. His work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Orange County Museum of Art (2023); the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (2018); the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, Waltham, MA (2017); Museo Marino Marini, Florence (2016); and the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland (2015). In 2025, the Menil Drawing Institute, Houston, invited Lewis to participate in the exhibition *What drawing can be: four responses*, where he presented several new works including a site-specific commission. Lewis participated in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. His work is held in the collections of The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Dallas Museum of Art; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The Studio Museum in Harlem; and the Menil Drawing Institute, Houston, among others.

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