## Doyle Lane, Hillside Potter by Ricky Swallow (Doyle Lane: Weed Pots, January 2023)

Throughout five decades of living and working in Los Angeles, Doyle Lane maintained a prolific and adaptive practice as a ceramic artist producing pottery, wall reliefs, clay paintings, screens, glazed beads, and pendant jewelry. While the published footprint documenting his endeavors remains relatively small and largely aligns his work with California midcentury design, Lane's impact and appeal as an artist and craftsman surpass any single specific context or categorization that would threaten to narrow its focus.

The stubborn subject of craft versus fine art, which tends to separate functional from non-objective object-making, and which preoccupied many artists working in clay during the 1960s and 1970s, did not rouse conflict in Lane. He sold his work directly to customers at street fairs and from his studio's showroom, which for a period he called the Hillside Gallery. He undertook private and public architectural commissions, often collaborated with other designers, and participated in exhibitions at galleries. During the last decade of his life, he dialed back the scale of his production, focusing on beads and ceramic jewelry, which in turn placed his work in yet another new market.

Lane's modes of making did not follow a clean, linear progression. Many types of work at every scale coexisted in the studio at the same time, with specific trajectories often driven by market opportunities Lane had landed for himself. Heavy tiles with recessed circles filled with blue glass glaze, for instance, were sold as paperweights to some customers and also utilized as compositional elements in larger wall assemblages. In the words of Stanley Wilson, fellow artist and Lane's friend, "Doyle was always looking for the next customer."1 Not privileged with the same opportunities and invitations as his white peers in the ceramic field, he labored tirelessly to create a perpetual market for his objects. Lane secured some of his largest tile-mural commissions by literally knocking on doors, going from one architectural firm to another with his quiver of mounted samples in hand. He produced constantly and continually challenged his own parameters and methodologies. Doyle Lane's work itself asserts an indelible spell, and its quiet magic—familiar to many peers and collectors for decades—is finally reaching a larger audience.

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Among Lane's many bodies of work, perhaps the most iconic are the diminutive weed pots about which he wrote, "The fascination of forming bottle shapes on the wheel (or weed pots, as I call them) is that it forces a person to make a simple and direct statement."2 Produced in staggering numbers out of his home studio in El Sereno, on the east side of Los Angeles, over a period of approximately fifteen to twenty years, the weed pots were a reliable moneymaker and the signature unit at the nucleus of Lane's practice. The exhibition documented in this book, held at David Kordansky Gallery from July 22 to August 29, 2020, brought together sixty examples, constituting perhaps the largest gathering of Lane's weed pots to date.

Lane rarely dated his work, though occasionally there will be a year marked on the reverse of a clay painting or scribed into the bottom of a pot. In some instances a specific pot can be lined up with an exact acquisition date or identified through archival photographs; but generally speaking, assigning production

dates to the weed pots is a dubious process. Institutions and auction houses alike often loosely refer to “mid-1960s” or “late 1960s,” and this is indeed when the weed pots were most densely marketed, largely due to the artist’s sales success from exhibitions at the Ankrum and Brockman galleries in Los Angeles between 1966 and 1970. However, the overall window of production was clearly larger than this.

Architect Rudy Serar (father of Ben Serar, whose prescient photographs of Lane’s studio from 1976 appear in this book) confirms that Lane was throwing weed pots as early as 1962, during their studies together at East Los Angeles City College. Of the sixty weed pots that make up this exhibition, only one is dated: “76” is scribed above the familiar “LANE” inscription on the foot.

At the beginning of the 1970s, Lane was injured in a freak accident while pushing his pickup truck up his street. The vehicle rolled, pinning the artist’s hand, and he suffered the loss of his right index finger as a result. Many people remember the severity of the accident, but its exact date is unclear. There is also varied opinion as to how much it impacted Lane’s throwing ability and subsequent studio work.3 In photographs that document a throwing demonstration by Lane at Ankrum Gallery, taken sometime between 1965 and 1967, we can clearly see his intact hand raising the bands of a ceramic cylinder. In one of Ben Serar’s photographs from 1976, we see the injured hand at work mixing glaze with a large paddle. Other photographs by Serar indicate that Lane was throwing weed pots and larger vessels during the mid-1970s; the dozens we see in progress in the studio are for the most part spherical. The most delicately scaled of Lane’s weed pots—some are as small as 1. inches tall and 2 inches wide—are notably absent.

The earlier weed pots are often more classically modern in form than later examples. UFO- or disc-like, some have minute collared openings; others Lane trimmed flush, leaving tiny apertures. Turning the pots over, the scribed “LANE” signature is also quite delicate and usually has a slightly tilted flair or lean to it as well as a noticeably taller “A”; one can trace a marked rhythm in the application of the impression (p. 9, left). The weed pots that can be confidently dated to the late 1970s are usually larger with a comparatively rudimentary signature—there is more spacing between the letter forms, which are clunky and less compressed in appearance (p. 9, right). It’s my hunch that we can use these signatures to estimate the dating of individual weed pots. Writing without an index finger, let alone carefully manipulating the plasticity of the clay at such small scale, would seem to require both adaptation and an adjustment of expected outcomes.

Another photograph from the Ankrum Gallery demonstration (p. 11), an overhead shot of Lane throwing at his wheel, provides a rare glimpse into his weed pot production (most shots feature him throwing larger vessels). On either side of the wheel head we see an amassed tray of trimmings as he shapes the surface of the pot with a wooden tool. In this delicate choreography, there’s a discernible specificity of pressure transferred from his fingers to the tool. The sensibility required and the role of his entire hand in this process are poignant indicators.

While we cannot assuredly credit Lane with having coined the term “weed pot,” he was its biggest proponent and the term has been synonymous with his name since the mid-1960s. (Comically, “bud vase”—a more popular term for a small ceramic pot—describes both a slang term for marijuana and a botanical form with more positive associations than “weed.”) Every so often a Lane pot shows up with a tiny, aged rectangular sticker printed with the words “WEED POT,” consistent with much of the artist’s DIY promotional ephemera in its economical design (see p. 94).

In a 1967 Los Angeles Times article titled “Suddenly it’s the season to pick weeds!” and featuring Lane’s work, the writer states, “The weed pot has come into its own; weeds now have a life that is distinctively their own. The best arrangements are those in which dried plants are sparsely used.”4 The weeds Lane placed in his pots were most likely collected from the hillside neighborhood where he lived. His own property had a large garden that stretched back beyond his outdoor working area. He was an avid gardener, known to share trimmings, seeds, and flowers with his neighbors. In two different photographs of Lane installing an exhibition at Ankrum Gallery, we see him setting dried weeds into a pot and holding a quiver of sprigs in hand as he converses with gallery founder Joan Wheeler Ankrum. A large percentage of the photographic documentation and press images of the weed pots, which Lane would have overseen at his studio, include arrangements of dried weeds. This botanical ritual of display, clearly an important element for Lane, completed a still life code inherent in the domesticity of the forms.

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The perfection of the weed pots emerges from their sensibility and resolve more than their technical tightness. Lane accepted and integrated elements that might, in another potter’s work, read as flaws (see p. 49). As a production potter he completed the pieces with efficiency. Using a kick wheel retrofitted with a motor, Lane would produce each pot on an individual wooden bat, which allowed him to shape it with tools and come very close to a final form, thereby minimizing the need for extensive trimming. In the lowest section of each pot the trimming is evidenbelow the settled lip of the glaze; we can see the tool’s fine drag lines and a dime-size recess that both articulates the foot and creates a clear spot for Lane’s signature. The weed pots are alternately fruit-like, pod-like, flying saucer-like, or urchin-like, with openings so small they can appear as if they are holding their breath. In the larger dimpled pots we register the artist’s hand expelling this breath, carefully crumpling the symmetry and allowing more contours for glaze interaction (see pp. 61 and 100). In terms of surface, for the most part the weed pots are smooth. Pots with applied material texture were produced in fewer numbers; patterned, impressed, or craggy, these examples break up the overall field and demonstrate variations in glaze behavior over their surfaces (see pp. 56, 73, and 98). Throwing lines register through the glaze on some vessels, with ridges capturing the light and revealing the circulatory process of their making. The hand of the maker is still entirely present and intact in each completed pot, and so to hold one in the hand or eye is to register that palpable circulation.

Lane was a master glaze technician. His simple forms owe much of their uniqueness, and their esoteric qualities, to the colorful performances taking place on their surfaces. Lane crossed paths with some amazing teachers during his studies in Los Angeles—Otto and Vivika Heino, and Glen Lukens, to name a few—from whom he no doubt gleaned much technical knowledge. It was, however, his position as a glaze calculator and artist at the industrial chemical company L. H. Butcher that deepened his knowledge and enabled him to develop the unique formulas for which he would become known. For eight years, beginning in the early 1950s, Lane created glazes for commercial sale to potters and the industry. During this time he had access to chemical ingredients in amounts that would otherwise have been cost-prohibitive, allowing him to experiment unfettered and integrate this knowledge into his own studio practice. Lane was proud of his tenure at Butcher; it bolstered his credibility within ceramic circles. It was also the only sustained employment and revenue source outside of his 12 own clay practice that anyone recalls him undertaking.

Lane's iconic glazes, which include his own versions of existing glazes, are rarely seen outside of his work. A whole spectrum of orange and red glazes run through the weed pots, for instance. By using predominantly low-fire glazes, Lane achieved exceptionally bright colors; occasionally these are uniform hues, but more often they behave as if aglow with hot spots, or with crazing or crawling effects that activate the pots' surfaces. Light blues and turquoises coat other pots with a thicker, almost confectionary feel, while more subtle beige and gray glazes with dispersed iron specks produce quieter pieces. In Lane's version of a lava glaze (see pp. 52 and 79), the bubbles reduce back into their crater-like geometry instead of becoming fixed in a more recognizable, foamy form. Glazes shrink, retracting back from the clay's surface to startling patterned effect.

Discussing Lane's virtuosic glazing during a visit to this exhibition in the summer of 2020, artist and Brockman Gallery co-founder Dale Davis pointed to a crystalline red pot and remarked, "He knew all the spots." The reference was to the potter's preternatural understanding of firing processes and kiln placement.5 Interestingly, Lane utilized a limited range of glazes on the weed pots, and certain glazes sync up with specific shapes most conducive to showing off their characteristics. Lane's inventory list of weed pots submitted to Ankrum Gallery in October 1965 (see pp. 144-147) gives a glimpse into his personal terminology for identifying the glazes. It also accounts for why certain weed pots turn up with more frequency than others; those he lists as "Egyptian Blue," "Black Silver," and "Sea Urchin," for example, are repeated many times in the document. In this invaluable resource, we see a consistent use of descriptive terminology related to the natural world. "Granite Stone," "Desert Red," "Desert Rock," and "Black Lava Bottle" are convenient (and accurate) descriptors that also associate the pots with the earth and its igneous activity.

We know that Lane, due to health issues, retired from wheel throwing to favor less arduous means of clay production at some point in the early 1980s, but there is no firm consensus on when the throwing of the weed pots ground to a halt.

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Doyle Lane moved to Los Angeles from New Orleans in 1946 with the intent to study art, following several years of military service after high school. The earliest published record of his creative endeavors in California appeared in the July 16, 1950, Sunday arts section of the Los Angeles Times, under the event listings: "Doyle Lane abstract and non-objective relief sculpture. Lobby 1999 W Adams Blvd through Thurs." The West Adams Boulevard building, designed by Paul R. Williams, had opened the previous year as the ambitious new headquarters of Golden State Mutual Life Insurance, one of the country's largest African American–owned insurance companies. Lane's exhibition at Golden State is particularly significant because it positioned his work in this iconic and symbolic structure at a moment when the company was expanding its reach. In 1957, Golden State would appoint the artist William Pajaud as its art director; when the company started a progressive art collection a few years later, Pajaud was able to route support directly to his peers by acquiring works from exhibitions at Brockman Gallery.6

By the time Lane was invited to exhibit at Brockman Gallery in the late 1960s, he was considered something of an elder statesman—a veteran maker whose work provided assured sales. That Lane had for decades survived by selling his work independently and securing large architectural commissions as a Black artist in Los Angeles both puzzled and impressed Dale Davis and his brother and gallery partner, Alonzo Davis.

Brockman Gallery's press release for a two-person exhibition by Lane and Alonzo Davis in November 1971 states: "Doyle Lane will have recent clay paintings done on earthenware tiles and famous glazed weed pots." In relation to Davis's collage paintings constructed from discarded billboard materials, the same document observes that a "great deal of [Davis's] work is a reflection of black people in this society and their limitations because of the wrong direction." Much of the art shown at Brockman was political in nature and direct in its message; this was nota prerequisite as much as it was a necessary response to the racism and social inequities ("the wrong direction") that the gallery's artists were confronting at the time. While Lane never sought to politicize his work, he also refused to be sidelined by racist mechanisms. He remained firm in his belief that his assiduous work ethic—and ultimately the quality of his art—allowed him to hold his ground.7 In an audio-recorded interview from 1988, in which he reflects on the impact of racism on Black artists in Los Angeles while recalling his beginnings as a potter in the city,Lane says, "You know why I used to love to go out and sell? Because I was very naive about racism and prejudice. I had no real understanding of it. It would have inhibited me to do something I needed to do. I didn't think of all the disadvantages, I'm going out into the world and I'd knock on any door."8

As a result of his exhibitions at Ankrum Gallery, meanwhile, Lane's work entered the collections of architects, museum trustees, professors, performers, artists, and designers. Joan Wheeler Ankrum, who started the gallery in 1960, came from an acting background. Her program was among the first to consistently include artists of color. Based on records housed at the Smithsonian, we know that between October 1965 and April 1966, Ankrum sold 230 weed pots, remitting payments of $1500 to Lane (after the gallery's commission). Considering that the artist continued working with the gallery for another two years, we can conservatively say that these numbers repeated severalfold. While the prices of individual pieces were affordable—they ranged from $5.00 to $20.00— the sheer volume sold amounted to significant income for Lane. The weed pots were also marketed to an upper-class clientele in Santa Barbara through Ankrum's association with Galeria Del Sol.

Many collectors purchased groups of works and were return buyers, which explains the frequency with which groupings of weed pots have appeared at auction over the years. Craig Ellwood, one of the architects of the famed Case Study House program, purchased seven weed pots that remain with his family; Elwood's wife, actor Gloria Henry, remembers him excitedly bringing the group of vessels home. Ankrum Gallery artist Lorsner Fettinger features repeatedly as a supporter in gallery statements, as does Jerome Gould, the graphic designer responsible for the logos of Pepsi and the speaker company JBL. Stage and screen actors Dorothy Dalton, Mildred Dunnock, and Naomi Caryl Hirshhorn also purchased Lane's work.

Brockman Gallery's clientele might not have competed with Ankrum's in terms of fame or illustriousness, but the Davis brothers regularly sold Lane's pots, often to first-time collectors, and they consistently pursued his pieces for gallery inventory. Dale Davis, who had recently completed his own ceramic studies at the University of Southern California, understood the quality and currency they possessed. In addition, selling Lane's work enabled the gallery to mount exhibitions of more radical, less marketable art.

Lane's inclusion in the traveling exhibitions Objects: USA, which originated at the Smithsonian's National Collection of Fine Arts in 1969, and California Black Craftsmen, held at Mills College Art Gallery in 1970,9 as well as his presence in the second volume of the seminal publication Black Artists on Art in 1971,10 suggest that greater public exposure to his work was afforded through Ankrum and Brockman. Samella S.

Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy, the editors and publishers of Black Artists on Art, were artists and activists affiliated with the Black Arts Council and the group Art West Associated, which both petitioned for and worked toward greater representation of Black artists in Los Angeles's institutions. Acutely familiar with the community of artists around Brockman, Lewis and Waddy would have most likely experienced Lane's work there, where it was often on display in the ground floor gallery specializing in crafts, prints, and more affordable works.11 His appearance in such survey publications created a critical foothold for researchers and collectors over the decades. He was one of the few artists to not include an artist statement in the second volume of Black Artists on Art; Lane's otherwise full-color spreads begin with a somber black-and-white portrait, followed by staid photographs of his weed pots, appearing like an insert from another publication amidst the dynamic content of the book.

The Brockman program in particular positioned Lane to make critical connections to other Black artists. Charles White became a good friend (and collector).12 Through Brockman, Lane was introduced to John Outterbridge, as well as Stanley Wilson, with whom he maintained a close working friendship. Both Wilson and Outterbridge eventually sought Lane's technical expertise on specific ceramic projects of their own. The artist endeared himself to everyone with whom he came into contact. His ready smile and kindness dominate every account of his character.
Despite Lane's sociable personality, those close to him describe him as a very private person, someone who gave a lot while never giving too much away. He was gay, though not openly so, and his orientation, however discreet during him lifetime, is significant to many of Lane's gay followers and collectors today. Lane was an outlier in many regards, and his contribution sounds some dissonance in an established West Coast ceramic field in need of more visible diversity.

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Doyle Lane lived and worked in El Sereno, a predominantly Latinx neighborhood northeast of downtown Los Angeles, for all of his five-plus decades in the city. His three known addresses in El Sereno—listed on business cards, invoices, and design catalogs—are within a quarter mile of each other. We can map Lane's trajectory over the mid-1950s to the late 1960s: from South Huntington Drive, at the bottom of the hill, up to his preferred perch on Kewanee Street, the site of his home studio for the last thirty years of his life.

Starting in the mid-1950s, Lane maintained a storefront showroom on a quiet stretch of South Huntington, where he kept semiregular hours for about ten years.13 Rudy Estrada, who met Lane as a teen, recalls this as something of a curiosity for El Sereno, with Lane frequently extolling the benefits of the creative life to those who visited. "I don't believe he intended to generate trade out of his Huntington Drive establishment," he observes, "but to socialize his endeavors with the neighborhood, which probably did not have the financial capacity to commission private work. But Doyle loved the people in the community."14 Estrada maintained a long friendship with Lane and later became a significant collector of his work. He still 16 17 regretfully recalls smashing a number of weed pots against a wall in a vacant lot for the juvenile thrill of hearing the resounding pop and admiring the resulting shrapnel(!).

Lane went on to occupy a live-work residence on Cato Street, directly downhill from his future property on Kewanee, which he purchased in 1970. For a time both locations were in play, and there is reason to believe he rented Kewanee before buying it; in any case, it was there that the artist really dug in and established himself.15 When the Cato Street property was razed for redevelopment years later, Lane unearthed a red bowl and gifted it to Ben Serar.

Kewanee Street was and remains a close-knit community. Lane probably found his way there through connections to a few different individuals. Henry Baker, an old military acquaintance from New Orleans and a union carpenter, lived a few doors down. He and his family hosted Lane for a Southern meal every Sunday. Baker's grandchildren still recall Lane's generosity with affection; they tell of visiting the studio and returning with beautiful beads. Across the street lived Ramon Lopez, a painter who had a studio on South Huntington Drive close to Lane's showroom, and his partner, Paul Ferguson, who dealt in real estate and ran a gay bar. The couple would often make friends aware of property opportunitiesin the neighborhood.

The street is its own secluded pocket of El Sereno; its meandering,narrow dirt road fringes a steep hillside and tests the resolve of visitors. Theview, looking across to the neighboring hills of Montecito Heights and MountWashington, is beautiful (see p. 108), and the open space on either side of theproperty afforded Lane the privacy to work uninterrupted, both on his ceramicsand on episodic renovations of his home and studio buildings.

Characterized by some as a "shack," the original house was very modestin scale and built above a street-level garage on a terraced lot accessed via asteep set of stairs. Lane boasted in jest to neighbors that his annual propertytax was affordable because it was calculated to the square footage of theestablished garage structure only. He added a showroom off the stairs in theform of an improvised plywood structure, and expanded into the deep yardto accommodate his kilns. He lived austerely, prioritizing space for his workareas. Friends recall that his only indulgences were his camera and the hi-fiequipment he used to play his immaculately filed jazz and classical record collection.For all its haphazard levels, the working spaces were highly organizedand laid out efficiently for the various stages of Lane's studio practice, includingthe dedicated showroom where he could display his clay paintings, weed pots,and jewelry in an approximated gallery setting. Direct sales were made fromthis space; when driving eventually became a concern for Lane, bead storebuyers would visit the showroom, make their specific selections, and settle upat $1 per piece. The affordability of the work made it accessible to many levelsof collectors and craft enthusiasts. As such, the distribution of much of Lane'sproduction during his lifetime was very democratic.

Toward the end of his life, Lane became increasingly religious, readingthe Bible daily and on occasion exhorting its values to his visitors. He died suddenlyfrom respiratory failure in 2002. Estranged from his family and withouta will in place, his house and its contents fell under probate auction after hispassing. The house was purchased by a contractor, remodeled, and quicklyflipped. The word in the neighborhood is that a worker found a box of rolledbank notes under the floorboards to the tune of twenty to thirty thousanddollars. Lane's remaining ceramic works and jewelry were sold at auction asconsolidated lots in bankers boxes. Those in attendance recount his recordcollection and Eames DCM chairs eclipsing his pottery in bidding activity andrealized results. The house on Kewanee, which retains much of its modifiedfeel, is now owned by an old friend of Lane's who still occasionally discovershis ceramic beads dispersed in the garden's soil.

It's fitting that any deep study of Lane's work requires digging, sorting,and following clues. Thankfully there are still people around who knew himand are eager to share their knowledge of his practice. Exchanges with suchindividuals were essential to his happiness and financial stability; they are nowessential to our understanding of Lane himself. A reluctant steward of his ownlegacy, Lane knew he

was making a lasting contribution to his field, but thecultivation of his aesthetic approach—with its philosophical and even ethicalovertones—kept him immersed in the daily rhythms of the potter's life. His personalarchive, which he gifted to the California African American Art Museum in2000, is housed in repurposed plywood boxes from his studio and consists of amodest assortment of largely unlabeled photographs and 35mm slides. Assumingthe sum of its contents reflects the extent to which Lane kept records of hisown achievements, the indication would be that he measured his work's valuein ways that ultimately had more to do with his ardent sense of self-sufficiency—and his quiet focus on his craft—than any external markers of fame.16 His primaryfocus was his engagement with his medium as a maker, a perpetual worker, amarketer, and an occasional mentor. That Lane's work is proving more influentialwith each passing year is a testament to the timelessness of his commitmentand the tangible integrity of his concentrated forms. ●

1. Stanley Wilson, conversation with the author, Los Angeles, August 26, 2020.
2. Exhibition placard, Artmobile Exhibit 1: 33 Living Local Artists, Artmobile roving exhibition space, Los Angeles, 1967.
3. See Lee Whitten's account in this book, p. 115.
4. "Suddenly it's the season to pick weeds!," Los Angeles Times Home Magazine, September 24, 1967.
5. See also Doyle Lane's conversation with Stanley Wilson, introduced by John Outterbridge, in "Black Artists of Los Angeles," Studio Potter 9, no. 2, June 1981, 16–25.
6. Kellie Jones, introduction to NOW DIG THIS! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980 (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2011), 17.
7. See Lane and Wilson, "Black Artists of Los Angeles."
8. Lane interviewed by his friends Cynthia Jackson and Theresa Williams at his studio, March 1988.
9. "MCAG," which stands for Mills College Art Gallery, is written in marker on the foot of the occasional Lane weed pot, followed by a number. These pieces were more than likely part of his contribution to California Black Craftsmen. It's unclear if they were labeled this way by Lane or the institution.
10. Samella S. Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy, Black Artists on Art, vol. 2 (Los Angeles: Contemporary Crafts Inc., 1971), 70–73.
11. Samella Lewis exhibited at Brockman Gallery alongside George Clack in a show that ran from May 9 to June 8, 1969.
12. Charles White helped secure Lane a mural commission at the International Children's School, where he was a board member. See Kellie Jones, South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 36.
13. At the same moment, ceramicist Tony Hill had a showroom and studio across town on West Jefferson Boulevard. Hill was a successful commercial ceramicist and his modern works—including vases and lamps slip cast from designs by fellow Black artists that he employed—were sold in department stores. See the conversation between Dale Davis and Stanley Wilson in this book.
14. Rudy Estrada, email correspondence with the author, February 21, 2021.
15. In Lane's handwritten October 1965 inventory of weed pots for Ankrum Gallery, both the Cato and Kewanee addresses are listed, with Kewanee specified as his "mailing address." This suggests that Lane might have been living at the Kewanee property years before he purchased it, while still working out of the Cato location.
16. Lane addressed the futility of seeking fame as an artist in conversation with Stanley Wilson; see note 5.