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The Art and Life of Clarence Major by Keith E. Byerman
(review)

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Byerman, Keith E. *The Art and Life of Clarence Major*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2012.

In the introduction to *The Art and Life of Clarence Major*, Keith E. Byerman states that he is content to follow the trajectory of Clarence Major's art rather than to impose a theoretical model of interpretation onto Major's extensive oeuvre (3–4). As Major's career includes both writing and painting and has resulted in fourteen books of poetry, nine volumes of fiction, and fifteen individual art shows, just keeping track of his prolific output is itself quite a project. But criticism on Major has not kept up with its plethora of material, as Major's work resulted in only one monograph-length publication before Byerman's: Bernard W. Bell's collected volume, *Clarence Major and His Art: Portraits of an African American Postmodernist* (1999). Bell includes in his volume ten short essays on Major as well as two interviews and a selection of poetry, prose, and paintings, a spread largely reproduced from the 1994 special issue of *African American Review* dedicated to Major's work. Six of the ten articles published in Bell's volume were originally published in this *African American Review* issue. While Bell's book is a significant antecedent to Byerman's work because it collected the best scholarship on Major, it also collected most of the scholarship on Major. Outside of the *African American Review* special issue, there is little research on Major's career and what has come forward has been synthesized and integrated into Byerman's text.¹ For this reason, Byerman's volume is a significant advance for Clarence Major criticism and a major contribution to the study of late-twentieth-century African American art.

Byerman emphasizes Major's individualist ethos by charting how Major fought against conventionality in his personal, artistic, and academic lives—a tenet of his personal philosophy that led to his scholarly neglect, but that also makes him a tremendously appealing subject of study. Byerman describes Major as a man who “went about the business of living and working as much as possible on his own terms in a society and culture that demanded acceptance of certain principles in order to succeed,” in the process “reveal[ing] a great deal about the limits and possibilities of contemporary culture,” an echo of Bell's introduction which considers Major a “transgressive voice” whose writing “boldly mov[es] beyond traditional literary limits and cultural boundaries in experimenting with different, occasionally multiple, narrative voices” (Byerman 5; Bell 1).

In order to systematically address Major's prolific output, *The Art and Life of Clarence Major* is organized simply and chronologically, beginning with a chapter on Major's family, proceeding through the major publications and periods of his career, and concluding with another meditation on family prompted by Major's most recent publication, a memoir titled *Come By Here, My Mother's Life* (2002). The decision to begin with the story of Major's heritage reflects how important the genre of biography—the “American racial family romance”—is to the canon of African American literature (Byerman 6). Introducing Major in this way aids Byerman's project of bringing Major into the canon by foregrounding how his work, while avant-garde, also include hallmarks common to other significant writers. In the process, Byerman demonstrates how Major could begin to be studied within a comparative framework. Immediate connections on the role of mothers within African American families, for example, could be drawn between Major's memoir and Lucille Clifton's *Generations* (1976).

However, the strength of Keith E. Byerman's volume comes from his attention to the fugitive aspects of Clarence Major's writing. Byerman notes that Major commissioned his

own first book, the ten-page *The Fires That Burn in Heaven* (1954), by paying his uncle to print copies (22). Major later burned the remaining copies of the volume because he realized how bad they were (18). Major's impulse to self-publish and then destroy his juvenilia is itself part of a long and storied tradition populated by the likes of W.H. Auden and William Carlos Williams. Few archives hold Williams's *Poems* (1909) or Auden's *Poems* (1928) (Young 8, 15). Likewise, Major's *The Fires That Burn in Heaven* can only be found in two locations: the University of Delaware's Hugh M. Morris Library and Emory University's Manuscripts, Archives & Rare Book Library. The University of Minnesota, which holds Major's literary collection in its Anderson Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts, does not include a copy. Although Byerman only glosses *The Fires That Burn in Heaven* in order to consider at greater length Major's later volumes, he nevertheless engages readers' interest with his attention to Major's early work.

One of the most helpful aspects of Byerman's book is when he emphasizes the significance of Clarence Major's publishers. Byerman reflects that conventionality would have improved Major's reach, for despite being the most prolific of his peers, Major "is the only one not to have a conventional commercial publisher" (247). Again, Byerman reads this fact as a symptom of Major's integrity, a deliberate "refusal to produce work that can be easily marketed" (249). The avant-garde Fiction Collective, for example, published *Emergency Exit* in 1979. Major placed *Painted Turtle: Woman with Guitar* (1988) at Sun & Moon Press, a self-identified "experimental press." Other notable Sun & Moon writers include Charles Bernstein, Djuna Barnes, and Lyn Hejinian, while its classics series featured authors such as Fanne Howe and Gertrude Stein ("Register of Sun & Moon"). Both the Fiction Collective and the Sun & Moon Press situate Major squarely at the center of innovations in late-twentieth-century writing, rather than segregating him into a purely African American literary tradition. These publishers highlight Major's investment in experimental writing over racial solidarity, even though he published with many of the most significant African American venues—including, most notably, Dudley Randall's Broadside Press.

At times, Byerman overstates Major's unconventionality by emphasizing his individualism instead of his role as a prominent voice within a larger critique of black nationalism. While Major participated in the Umbra workshop in New York's Lower East Side in 1962, now considered the earliest and most significant predecessor to the Black Arts Movement, he found himself among those more interested in literature than social activism (40–45). As Byerman reminds readers, the decision to prefer art to political protest is a deeply unconventional choice for the period. Byerman illustrates that even though Major eventually became a contributing editor of the *Journal of Black Poetry*, the most significant journal related to the Black Arts Movement, he broke with his colleagues over publishing what he saw as a cheap aesthetic of "bull shit and propaganda" (46). Due to the need to write about Major as an individual instead of the time period in general, Byerman begins to suggest that Major was not alone in his perspective on the Black Arts Movement, but it would help to have a stronger sense that Major's views were not necessarily unique, even at the time, and that his arguments are supported by critical opinion today.

Throughout *The Art and Life of Clarence Major*, Byerman emphasizes the need to consider the visual art of Major's career, describing at one point how a series of "blues paintings" were produced simultaneously with the volume *Dirty Bird Blues* (206). Byerman concentrates on the novel rather than putting the paintings into closer association with the book,

but it would be enriching in the future to consider how the two art forms complement and challenge one another. Knowing that the paintings exist is helpful, but reading about them rather than seeing them makes it difficult to imagine the connections. Byerman's biographically-inflected reading of the novel, which argues that the book reflects Major's own ambitions for a partner who understands the need to pursue an artistic career unrestricted by financial considerations, combined with the fact that *Dirty Bird Blues* was the most successful of Major's books, makes examining the paintings produced in tandem with the novel even more important. Byerman does include seventeen of Major's paintings in color in an inset section in the text, but these represent a comprehensive selection of the pieces discussed throughout the text rather than focus on the artworks created over a single period or during the composition of a specific book.

Byerman argues that Major's avant-garde aesthetics required a type of hustling in order "to persuade (or manipulate) others to accept" his vision (4). Considering Major's participation in many of the most significant literary journals, presses, and conferences of his era, future studies are well positioned to follow up on Byerman's assertion—and his prodigious legwork—by delving into Major's connections and seeing how he presented himself and his work. How Major hustled could help map the complex dynamics of late-twentieth-century print culture and illuminate some of the period's most innovative publishers. Byerman provides a comprehensive introduction to Major's career that succeeds by delving into lesser-known aspects of Major's art, a process he alone was able to accomplish by gaining Major's trust and being welcomed into his house—and his garage. The result will be appreciated by readers and used by scholars.

—Amy Hildreth Chen

NOTE

1. Byerman states that *African American Review* produced two special issues on Clarence Major, but I can only find one: 28.1 Spring 1994.

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