CARROLL CLOAR (1913–1993)

Blood of the Maguey

Casein tempera on board, 20 1 / 4 x 26 in.

Signed (at lower left): Carroll Cloar

Painted in 1952

RECORDED: *Hostile Butterflies and Other Paintings by Carroll Cloar* (Memphis, Tennessee: Memphis State University Press, 1977), listed in "Paintings by Carroll Cloar: A Catalogue Raisonné," p. 160 no. 1952.23 // *Art News* 51 (December 24, 1952), p.6

EXHIBITED: The Downtown Gallery, New York, 1952, no. 22 // Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, November 1952–January 1953, *1952 Exhibition of Contemporary Painting*

EX COLL: the artist: to [The Downtown Gallery, New York, 1952]; to Courtland Dixon Barnes and Katrina McCormick Barnes, New York, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1952 until 2011; to estate of Katrina McCormick Barnes, 2011; to sale, Leslie Hindman Auctioneers, Denver, Colorado, November 17, 2012, no. 311; private collection until the present

In 1951, Carroll Cloar, a native of Earle, Arkansas, was living on the sixth floor of a walk-up tenement building on New York's Lower East Side, trying to make a living as an artist. Guy Northup, in his biographical "Introduction" to *Hostile Butterflies and other Paintings by Carroll Cloar* (Memphis, Tennessee: Memphis State University Press, 1977) writes that Cloar:

> … heard that Mrs. Edith Halpert, who represented Ben Shahn, Yasuo Kunioshi and other well-known artists, had set out to "discover" new talent. Cloar, at the same time, had decided he was ready to find a gallery to represent him. He packed a portfolio and sallied forth to the Downtown Gallery to see Mrs. Halpert. She looked at his work, was impressed, and he was officially discovered (p. 29).

On October 1, 1951, Halpert sent Cloar a letter congratulating him at having been chosen by her for representation "among hundreds of artists who submitted" work for her consideration. Halpert laid out the terms for his joining her influential gallery, which specialized in contemporary American art and sculpture as well as American folk art. Cloar was thirty-eight years old and had struggled for years to find his métier as a visual artist.

James Carroll Cloar (his birth name after his maternal grandfather; he dropped the "James") was a chronicler with a paintbrush whose family origins and rural upbringing provided rich fodder for his imagination. While he told colorful and not entirely consistent stories about his parents and grandparents, the basic facts are a matter of record. His people were substantial farmers. Grandfather Thomas Jefferson Cloar (1814–1876) came down from Union City, Tennessee to Crittenden County, Arkansas sometime in the mid-nineteenth century. Crittenden, in northwest Arkansas, hugs the Mississippi River on the east, facing Memphis, Tennessee. T. J. Cloar settled on a tract of thickly forested land which he cleared to plant cotton. He married Adelaide Amanda Acock (1825–1864) in

1846 in Tennessee. They produced a large family, of whom five survived to adulthood. Grandma died giving birth to Charles Wesley Cloar (1864–1928), the artist's father. Charles Cloar increased the family holdings and married Julia Eva ("Evvie") David (1880–1928). James Carroll had two older brothers and an older sister. One sister died before he was born, and a younger sister died at the age of three, when Carroll was ten.

By his own description, Cloar was a frail child, and thus exempted from strenuous work on the farm. He described himself as quiet and exquisitely observant. In his commentary accompanying the color illustration of his 1955 painting *Alien Child* (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.; see *Hostile Butterflies*, colorplate 58 illus.). Cloar wrote:

> Even as a small boy I felt I was somehow different from the rest of the family. A sickly child, I had turned to books, music and drawing, unlike my brothers, and since a sister on either side of me had died, I was left in a lonely age bracket and grew apart from the rest of the family. I often wondered if I was really their child. Had I been adopted? Had I been stolen from the gypsies? Another of my fantasies was that I had been the surviving child of a beautiful young couple who had been eaten by panthers.

His own phrase, "alien child," precisely describes the psychological stance of his mature work. He painted the society he knew as a boy, the upbringing that had shaped him. As a young adult, he moved away, but then, at the age of forty-two, he returned to celebrate his home virtues while maintaining a distance that was simultaneously loving, amused, respectful, but always somewhat distanced. Cloar's parents both died in 1928 in short succession and he was left to the supervision of older brothers. He also inherited a share of the family property, which yielded sufficient income for him to follow his own muse. However, it took years for the shape of that muse to reveal itself. Initially Cloar left home at seventeen to enroll in Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes College)

to major in English, immersed himself in extra-curricular activities including the campus newspaper, and contemplated adding a minor in mathematics. Then, as he said, "I got tired, bogged down and almost flunked. I had to figure out something in a hurry. I had had Spanish in High school, so I switched to that." Cloar graduated and remained adrift.

> I didn't quite know what I wanted to do. I wasn't drawing much, but I was still interested. I considered radio, the theater, newspaper work and writing—and then I decided to go back to art. School. I thought I might be a cartoonist, a rich one, living in Florida (as quoted in *Hostile Butterflies,* p. 27).

After a summer in Europe, he returned to Memphis to study at the Memphis Academy of Art and then determined to go to New York to the Art Students League where he hoped to hone the skills that would allow him to create his first comic strip. Cloar's career could serve as an object lesson in the serendipity of unintended consequences. He never succeeded as a cartoonist. He failed in an attempt to gain a commission for a cover for the *New Yorker* magazine. When Cloar first studied painting at the Art Students League, his teacher Ernest Fiene was unimpressed. "Fiene would look at my work, shake his head, sigh, and say 'Color, color, color.' He had no hope for me" (*Hostile Butterflies,* p. 28). Still at the Art Students League, Cloar took his penchant for line drawing in black and white and turned to lithography. He sent home for old family tintypes. Working from these, from 1938 to 1940 Cloar produced a series of lithographs recalling rural Arkansas. The lithographs, printed by Will Barnet (1911–2012), resident printer at the Art Students League, did well commercially. One of them, *Grandparents* (1939, illus. in *Carroll Cloar In His Studio* [Memphis, Tennessee: Art Museum of the University of Memphis, 2014], p. 27), was inspired by photos of his maternal grandparents, Rhoda and Carroll David. It was selected to hang in the Art in America building at the New York World's Fair, the same building where Cloar worked as an attendant (see

anecdote, *Hostile Butterflies,* p. 26). *Grandparents* unmistakably recalls Grant Wood's iconic *American Gothic* (1930, Art Institute of Chicago). Cloar's lithographs, produced in Manhattan, fit comfortably into the category of regionalism, sharing the subject matter and realist style of the popular American art movement of the 1930s.

Finally, Cloar had finally found a way to attract positive notice for his art. The result was that, in 1940, the League awarded him a McDowell Travelling Fellowship. With Europe at war, Cloar packed his car and headed West with 20 lithographs among his luggage. He arranged exhibitions in Denver, Salt Lake City, and Salem, Oregon, swinging through San Francisco and Santa Barbara before heading through the southwest home to Arkansas. Cloar spent 1941 in Mexico, producing a few lithographs at what Guy Northrup calls simply "The Workshop" (p. 28). This was, in fact the influential Taller de Gráfica Popular, a left wing, anti-fascist cooperative founded in 1937 that welcomed foreign members and guest artists.

By this time the contours of Cloar's character and career begin to emerge. He was multi-talented, persistent, and ambitious, all cloaked in a self-deprecating apparently casual attitude, a down-home-boy persona convincing enough at a superficial level to fool people at first into underestimating him. But, with time and training his art spoke otherwise. He was genuinely an Arkansas farm boy. He was also a college graduate, bilingual and well-traveled, with as keen an eye for observing the foibles of the New York art world as he had for reading the folkways and traditions of rural Arkansas. The McDowell Fellowship was his first major recognition. After his year in Mexico he went home to Arkansas, expecting to be drafted. Cloar enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1942 and served until 1945. Trained as a radio operator and communications specialist, he wound up on the Pacific Island

of Saipan, where, in his spare time, he painted pictures of pin-up girls on the noses of B-29 bombers. After his stint in the Army, he won a Guggenheim Fellowship in the Fine Arts in 1946 and headed back to Mexico, where he again worked at Taller de Gráfica Popular. Back in New York in 1947, Cloar discovered casein tempera, a breakthrough that enabled him to work at easel paintings. Casein tempera remained his favored medium until 1967 when he switched to acrylic.

With New York as his base, Cloar traveled through Central and South America from 1947 until 1950. In 1948, he was featured in a *Life Magazine* spread that illustrated his Arkansas lithographs and ran with the headline "Backwoods Boy." Despite his chagrin at the typecasting, he was nonetheless appreciative of the attention. A journeyman easel painter, Cloar remained unsatisfied with his early efforts at painting and destroyed most of this work. In 1949, he made his first sale as a painter with *Abandoned Railroad Station* (*Hostile Butterflies*, p. 41 plate 3). By 1953, championed by Edith Halpert, Cloar was securely launched on what promised to be a successful New York career. That year he underwent abdominal surgery for ulcers. The sixth-floor walkup proved too much for his incision and he decided to recuperate at home. After a visit to Arkansas, he stayed with relatives in Memphis. Recovered, in 1954 he took an artist's tour through Europe. As he traveled through Europe, his thoughts clarified, and he realized that his natural subject matter was the places and circumstances of his southern childhood.

> When I went to New York to School in 1936, I thought I was gone for good.... Then [in 1954] I went to Europe for a year. I roamed about, very lonely most of the time, until I finally realized that I hadn't wanted to travel any more. I began to feel fondly of home. I sat one day at a sidewalk café in Venice and pondered my future. Where would I go when I returned to the States? New York had been a painful necessity during the formative years, but now I could go where I pleased. And there was no longer any place left I wanted to go in the world except home. I would go back to the land, the people I loved, where there was an endless of source of material for paintings where I would belong instead of being a transient

(undated typescript, University of Memphis Libraries, published in *In His Studio*, p. 66).

In 1955, Cloar settled permanently in Memphis, committed to painting the texture and memories of his southern boyhood. Cloar maintained his gallery relationship in New York. In 1953, he had gone with Charles Alan, Edith Halpert's assistant who left to establish his own gallery. The split was relatively amicable and Cloar, along with a group of Halpert's younger painters, followed Alan. Cloar maintained the relationship until 1965, and never entirely gave up New York representation.

Blood of the Maguey (La Sangre de Maguey) is among the group of paintings that marks the beginning of Carroll Cloar's mature career. Many of these have Mexican or Latin American settings, reflecting Cloar's post-war years of travel. Cloar credited Latin America with weaning him away from the black-and-white limitations of lithography to the sophisticated use of color. Responding to a question about "his most important lesson as an artist" (*In His Studio*, p. 14, from a 1964 interview with David Galloway), Cloar noted, "My color sense emerged in Latin America—seeing how people used color, or looking down a little street and discovering wonderful harmonies of pink and green and blue." *Blood of the Maguey* presents what seems at first to be a realistic scene. In the foreground a large male figure, dressed in white, stands with his back to the viewer. He is outside a building with unevenly whitewashed walls, looking through an open door. In the interior a seductively dressed young woman stands next to a spiral staircase, looking directly at the male figure and past him, toward the viewer. Over the door of the building, in large lettering, are the words "La Sangre de Maguey."

This lettering provides the only real clue to the meaning of the painting (a device similar to that used

notably by Stuart Davis). The maguey plant is a variety of agave native to Mexico. Its fermented pulp has been used for millennia to make an alcoholic beverage called pulque. The Aztec goddess of the maguey plant was Mayahuel, also associated with fertility, drunkenness, and specifically, pulque. Blood of the Maguey is, it follows, a descriptive name for pulque, referring to an Aztec legend that has the plant sprouting above the buried remains of the Goddess. Pulque was traditionally served in pulquerías, strictly sex-segregated (if women were allowed at all) semi-private clubs. La Sangre de Maguey was unsurprisingly, a popular name for such an establishment, a pulquería. Cloar's male figure peers through the open door of a pulqueria. What he sees is not the actual interior, but an eroticized vision of a young woman, summoning associations with both fertility and alcohol-fueled intoxication.

Cloar did not intend the viewer to mistake this for an actual street scene. Aside from its improbability, he arbitrarily inserts a painted a decorative flower design to the right of the door on the worn whitewash of the exterior wall. His examination of variations of the shades and textures of white have their art-historical precedent rooted in the work of the French impressionists. Cloar was no naïf. Though he became best known for his paintings of rural southern life, his easel paintings did not follow the path of his lithographs. He did not become a regionalist artist. *Blood of the Maguey* offers an early example of themes and techniques that remained a constant through all his oeuvre. To begin, Cloar's paintings are the works of an essentially lonely observer, a pervasive loneliness that is communicated to the viewer. "I was a very shy child who hardly ever spoke at all, but I was a keen observer" (*Carroll Cloar: Story Painter, Picture Teller*, exhib. cat. [Memphis, Tennessee: Museum of the University of Memphis, 1991, as quoted in *In His Studio*, p. 43). Critics noted this quality in his work and compared him with Edward Hopper, another twentieth-century American realist. But

Cloar's distance is spanned by sympathy, an empathy not present in Hopper. Though the racial divide in his Southern home is a constant in his work, Cloar was not an overtly political painter. A 1940 lithograph, *Cleavage*, comes closest to examining the personal pain that the Southern caste system caused. (*Hostile Buttterflies,* pp. 5, 22 illus.) As he described in accounts of his childhood, it illustrates how interracial playmates are separated as they grow to adulthood: Whites ascendant on one side of the drawing, Blacks removed and in socially inferior positions on the other.

Neither regionalist nor social realist, Cloar is best understood through the lens of Magic Realism. The phrase, originating in Europe, was introduced to America by an influential 1943 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art (For a useful overview of Magic Realism, see Robert Cozzolino, "'Magic Realism' and Modernism," introduction to *An Architect's Dream: The Magic Realist World of Thomas Fransioli,* exhib. cat. [New York: Hirschl and Adler Galleries, 2015], pp. 7–15.) In Alfred Barr's words, magic realism described "the work of painters who by means of an exact realistic technique try to make convincing their improbable, dreamlike or fantastic visions" (as quoted by Dorothy Miller, "Forward, in *American Realists and Magic Realists,* exhib. cat. [New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943, p. 5]). In Jeffrey Wechsler's words, "Magic realism does not invent a new order of things; it simply reorders reality to make it seem alien. Magic Realism is an art of the implausible, not the impossible, it is imaginative, not imaginary" (as quoted in Cozzolino, p. 9). Cloar's work was recognized as magic realist in 1952, when Lincoln Kirstein planned to include him in a never-realized follow-up exhibition devoted to Magic Realism The show would also have included John Koch, Dorothea Tanning, Peter Blume, Paul Cadmus, George Tooker, and Andrew Wyeth (Cozzolino, p. 15 n. 10). Since then Cloar's work has been regularly included in exhibitions focused on Magic Realism. While it may be tempting to lump Cloar into a provincial category, in

fact, it has to be remembered that from 1936 until 1954, he was essentially a New York artist, well aware of all the currents in the contemporary art scene.

Though Cloar kept his New York representation for years, he ultimately decided that New York gallery prices were beyond the means of his fellow citizens of Memphis and Arkansas who were his chosen audience. But that was not the case in 1952. Despite Edith Halpert's disclaimer that she sold art for "a growing group of enthusiastic adventurous, younger collectors who have neither the wall space no the means of acquiring works of art at high prices" (a standard letter from Halpert to new artists; Halpert to Cloar, October 1, 1951, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Halpert Archive), that does not describe the Halpert patrons who bought Cloar paintings. In 1962, in preparation for a Memphis exhibition, Cloar wrote to Halpert asking who had purchased his early canvasses. Among them were Robert Sarnoff, *Marble Players;* Mrs. J. D. Rockefeller, III (Halpert's friend, Abby Rockefeller), *Plaza Cusco*; Nelson Rockefeller, *Vista Guatemala;* and Mrs. Lawrence Rockefeller, *Futbolista*. In addition, Halpert kept two for her own collection. Joseph H. Hirshhorn was an early enthusiast, purchasing numerous Cloar paintings from the Alan Gallery. In 1966 Hirschhorn included ten Cloar paintings in his initial gift to establish the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.). An additional painting came with Hirshhorn's 1981 bequest.

Blood of the Maguey was purchased from its exhibition at the Whitney Museum where it was shown from December 1952 to January 1953. The buyers were Mr. and Mrs. Courtland Dixon Barnes, Jr. then living in New York. Courtland Barnes, educated at Groton and Yale, came from a New York society family. His paternal roots went back to colonial America. His parents owned a forty-room

mansion in Manhasset called “Nonesuch,” adjacent to the Whitney estate “Greentree.” This was no coincidence since his maternal grandmother was a Whitney. Katrina McCormick Barnes had a heritage that was Midwest and intensely political. Her great grandfather was William Sanderson McCormick (1815–1865), brother of Cyrus McCormick, inventor of the mechanical reaper. Her grandmother, Katherine Medill McCormick (1853–1932) was one of three daughters of Joseph Medill, who owned the *Chicago Tribune* and served as the Republican mayor of Chicago after the great fire. Her father, Joseph Medill McCormick (1877–1925) was a United States Senator from Illinois. Her mother, Rutha Hanna McCormick (1880–1940) was the daughter of Mark Hanna (1837–1904), United States Senator from Ohio, Chairman of the Republican National Committee, and close confidante of President William McKinley. Ruth Hanna was active in the struggle for women’s suffrage and served a term in the House of Representatives. Katrina McCormick’s godmother was her mother’s good friend, Alice Roosevelt Longworth. Katrina married Courtlandt Barnes in a splashy high political society wedding at the Washington Cathedral. In a *Life Magazine* article devoted to her cousin Robert McCormick’s 1945 wedding, Katrina Barnes was described as the “family rebel” A few issues later, *Life* amplified the description with a brief follow up sketch (January 29, 1945, p. 4). According to the magazine, Barnes had “sold all her inherited stock in the *Chicago Tribune* to Uncle Bertie for $3,000,000, all of which she has anonymously given away.” Katrina McCormick Barnes served on the boards of the Native American Rights Fund, the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Council of LaRaza and the Chicano Education Project in addition to endowing numerous higher education scholarships. Barnes had long spent summers in Santa Fe, as a consequence of her widowed mother’s second husband, Albert Gallatin Simms. At some point Katrina and Courtlandt settled permanently in the Southwest. Courtlandt Barnes, a serious avocational pianist, was the founding Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Music

Associates of Aspen, the modern organizational structure for the Aspen (Colorado) Music Festival. *Blood of the Maguey* remained in the couple's collection until Katrina Barnes' death in 2011.

Carroll Cloar's importance as a twentieth-century American artist is reflected in the presence of his work in major American museum collections. Among these are The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Brooklyn Museum, all in New York; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the High Museum, Atlanta; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas; and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington. D.C. When Cloar died in 1993, *New York Times* art critic Roberta Smith wrote in the obituary that "Mr. Cloar's Realism was sometimes compared to Edward Hopper's, sometime to Ben Shahn's and it also had a distinct Surrealist slant ("Carroll, a Realist Painter of Rural America, Is Dead at 80," April 13, 1993, Section B, p. 8).

Despite this, Cloar does not begin to have the posthumous reputation of Hopper or Shahn. Two quotations from Cloar's handwritten manuscripts in the collection of the University of Memphis Libraries bear directly on this circumstance. The first comment likely reflects Cloar's optimistic thinking shortly after he settled permanently in Memphis (both as quoted by Leslie Luebbers in *In His Studio*, p. 15).

> A seasoning in New York gives the artist perspective, depth, and a long view of the place of his origin. Once established in New York—which is now the art center of the world—the artist can live anywhere he chooses, or anywhere he may find the means to sustain himself while he is making his way. Living in Memphis today is not very different from living in Woodstock, NY. Or Greenwich, Conn. With shorter distances, instant communications, hardly anyone is a provincial anymore.

Memphis, as it turned out, was neither Woodstock nor Greenwich. Presumably sometime later, a wiser Cloar reflected that "to really be a member of the Establishment, one should be accessible to and mingle with art writers, museum people, dealers and big named artists." Cloar and his wife periodically visited New York, staying at the Algonquin Hotel and checking in on museums and galleries. But Home was always Memphis, where Cloar enjoyed a happy life and a productive career living and working as he pleased and where he pleased. Northrup concluded his "Introduction" with the astute observation that "it is a mistake to interpret his work in terms of regionalism, even though the temptation is almost irresistible." He described Cloar working in "a patois that is as distinctly American as Poe or Whitman or Twain or Wolfe" (*Hostile Butterflies,* p. 38). Most importantly, "Carroll Cloar never painted a picture that was not solely for himself." As the full spectrum of the richness of twentieth-century American art emerges from under the overwhelming presence of abstract impressionism and non-objective styles, Carroll Cloar's legacy requires a renewed examination and a well-deserved appreciation.

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