

Three Used Books

by Jon Raymond

One of the best garage-sale scores I ever had came in Brooklyn sometime in 2003. I remember the year because I'd just sold my first novel and was floating in that lovely, pre-publication fog of optimism, thinking maybe nothing would ever be the same. Maybe people will like it! Maybe I'll be asked to give a speech on my influences! I remember it was a warm day in Williamsburg, and I was still just getting used to not worrying about money for the first time in my adult life, when I came upon a stoop covered in old magazines for sale. Among them was an issue of *Art in America* dated July–August 1976. It was a bicentennial issue devoted to the theme of regionalism. As it happened, I'd been thinking a lot about regionalism lately. My book was about fur trappers and disinterred Native American bones, among other things. Maybe this old magazine had something to tell me.

I opened to the table of contents to find an essay by the art historian Lucy Lippard, one of my idols, documenting a trip to the Northwest to curate a show at the Portland Center for Visual Art. I knew about PCVA. A lot of friends of mine were artists back in Portland. I flipped through the thick, glossy pages for a closer look, and out spilled a mass of dried flower petals, bright magenta flecked with purple. They drifted around my fingers onto the sidewalk, and I knew the universe was talking to me.

The issue proved to be pretty amazing. There was a young Roberta Smith on the contemporary art scene in Texas, a young Peter Schjeldahl on his home turf of Chicago, and the young Lippard, journaling about her seventy-seven studio visits in three days for a show called *In Touch: Nature, Ritual, and Sensuous Art from the Northwest*. The strongest impression one gets is of her immense generosity and commitment to the task. The sheer magnitude of unfamiliar names she turns up is crazy. Orleonok Pitkin, Seth Tane, Joseph Erceg, Marv Bondarowicz. She also captures something immutable about these parts when she states: “The visible influences are from Northern California and Los Angeles more than from New York, as well as from some mysterious advocate of what I came to think of as ‘plaid painting’—an amalgam of Minimal grid and lyrical abstraction.” That grid really has staying power. Finally, as an extra treat, she quotes an unnamed artist making this observation: “There’s a sticks and rocks and feathers thing going on out here.” Add woolen blankets and pounded metal triangles and you could still be there.

The whole magazine was the kind of document that made me feel ignorant in the best possible way. So many unknown scenes, so many unfamiliar vistas of reality. The very obscurity of the artists was almost inspiring in a way, a redemption of my own unshakable obscurity. Needless to say, my book didn't sell many copies. But looking at pictures by all these forgotten artists is to remember I'm at least in good company.

I got lucky again in North Portland in about 2006 or so. I'd recently moved back to the West Coast, and my girlfriend and I were still getting settled. On our first trip into the antique shop in our new neighborhood of Kenton, I found an issue of *Northwest Review*, the University of Oregon's now defunct literary magazine, devoted to the regional art scene circa 1959. The cover alone was worth the \$22—a die-cut dust jacket in hues of bright orange, raspberry, pink, and persimmon, wrapped around a sturdy paperback imprinted with a traditional Inuit-style whale image. What is it about orange and pink together? They never fail. And the clever peekaboo of the whale's

eye in the window of the jacket was totally cool. The object spoke not only of the editors' incredible love and craftsmanship—not so hard to come by, really—but their taste, too—much harder.

The inside was almost as good. There was a story by H. L. Davis, and a rare story by William Stafford, along with some of his poems. And in the middle, a thick thatch of plates by the major artistic lights of the day: Hilda Morris, Carl Morris, Jack McLarty, George Johanson, and Betty Feves, among others. Overall, the painterly traditions are late Cubist, post-post-post-Impressionist, and AbEx in a Bay Area vein, with many black, calligraphic slashes predominating.

Most interesting to me now are the images by Robert Colescott, then a teacher at Portland State. The pictures predate his fame, documenting a period when his palette and facture were not all that distinguishable from those of peers like Michele Russo or Louis Bunce, artists who'd go on to live and die in Oregon: hazy, ocherous, earth-toned, with a presiding spirit of meditation and vague gravitas. In only a few years Colescott would travel to Egypt and open the doorway to the booming, uproarious artistic vision the world came to know, drawing into his frame the African sunlight, the cartoons of his Bay Area youth, many museums' worth of French painting, and most of all the double-consciousness of global black history itself. But back in 1959, he was still stuck under the clotted skies of Portland, adjuncting. One wonders: Would Africa have blown him away so hard if not for the deracinated backdrop of Portland? We'll never know.

I don't remember where I found *Northwest Harvest, A Regional Stock-Taking*, a compendium of essays about regional identity drawn from a 1948 symposium at Reed College. It shows up from time to time in thrift shops to this day, and features "Holbrook and the gang," as painter Mike Brophy calls them, convening in the last moments of regionalism as a broadly shared national conversation, just before postwar consumer prosperity and television turned the country's attention forever elsewhere. The voices of H. L. Mencken, Lewis Mumford, and B. A. Botkin whisper through the discourse, but mostly get lost in the mumble of chamber-of-commerce clubbiness and middlebrow cultural uplift.

Stewart Holbrook delivered a speech on his favorite subject, the logger, with all the jolly authority one might expect. Loggers are fun. Loggers hold a special place in local lore. But in this context, Holbrook goes on to speculate about current events, too, and as it turns out his politics are kind of terrible. The forest as factory, the heroic technological drive of logging corporations. "The modern thinking recognizes the fact that the old-growth stands of timber in the Northwest are gradually disappearing," he says, "and so they should, too, for they are ripe for cutting, overripe, and if man is to use them, then they should be harvested soon before disease and bugs and windthrow take them." One wants to chalk up his obtuse, scientific theories of the forest to the spirit of the times, a blind spot in the march of industry, but in the very next essay, a writer named James Stevens proves fully alert to the ecological and cultural catastrophe of Caucasian imperialism. There have always been environmentalists in the world, as there have always been antiracists and feminists. Holbrook, a crusty old booster of the lumberjack, wasn't one of them.

Overall, *Northwest Harvest* suffers from a certain midcentury clerical tone. There are some self-conscious attempts at homespun grit, likely due to the influence of Holbrook, who always managed to sound at once brilliant and regular, but earthiness doesn't come naturally to the other guys (all guys, of course) in the room. Many of the pieces are overly concerned with tradition-building and the ennobling power of cultural citizenship: stuffed-shirt topics. It's a good book, in part because of the lesson it imparts—namely, that merely being obscure and provincial and out-of-it isn't always enough.

At times I've contemplated giving the books away for birthdays or special events. I know people who'd like them. But I've never been able to make myself that generous. I want these spines on my shelf as reminders of certain ideas, certain voices in my head. They've become totemic objects in my personal collection, talismans of a personal history inside a regional history inside a national history, the ellipsis of my own jerry-rigged understanding of place. And in their best moments, they're a reminder of why one even commits to a certain place at all. In the words of Donald Kuspit in *Art in America*, 1976: "If one reads 'regional' for 'ethnic' one sees the situation: if there is to be democracy—and this is the all-American issue—there must be regional art. The minority environment must recover its nerve—the provincial spirit must endure, whatever its expressionistic permutations."

I say right on to that.



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