

Carroll Cloar: *The Flowers We Gathered*

January 9–February 15, 2025

Andrew Edlin Gallery is pleased to present *The Flowers We Gathered*, a solo exhibition by Southern artist Carroll Cloar (1913–1993). The presentation features fourteen paintings and drawings mostly from the 1960s and 1970s and is the artist's first New York solo show in nearly thirty-five years.

Carroll Cloar was born in Earle, Arkansas, where a boy who always wanted to read, draw, and paint was an anomaly. He studied writing and the visual arts at Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes College) and trained at the Memphis Academy of Arts. He moved to Manhattan in 1936 to pursue a career as a cartoonist. (he hoped to get a *New Yorker* cover). His dreams of a successful comic strip featuring a clever, well-spoken rustic from the Arkansas Delta besting and bemusing jaded New Yorkers never came to fruition, but he found his way to the Art Students League. Decades after he left New York, its rich teachings and artistic influences are beautifully reflected in *The Flowers We Gathered* (1978). In it Cloar tempers joyous childhood memories with the weight of Southern masculinity and balances shimmering pointillist surfaces with sharply delineated figures.

The Art Students League, with its open approach, gave him a chance to experiment and to learn from a variety of artists. Cloar recalled that his teacher Ernest Fiene (1894–1965) "...would look at my work, shake his head, sigh, and say 'Color, color, color.' He had no hope for me." But Cloar persevered, and many of his paintings—including *Charlie Mae Looking for Little Eddie* (1969)—echo Fiene's acidic palette and tonal experimentations. The League also introduced Cloar to lithography, an unforgiving medium that pushed him toward the sparing but evocative images of family and country life that became crucial to his later works. In his *Day Remembered (Study)*, Cloar distilled figures from family photographs into essential compositional elements, often detached from their backgrounds. Cloar's lithographs—all in black and white—liberated him from grappling with color and gave his style a new clarity. His series of lithographs, printed by Will Barnet (1911–2012), was featured in *Life* magazine. One of them hung in the American Art building at the 1939 World's Fair in New York—where Cloar worked as an attendant. In 1940, he received a MacDowell Fellowship which took him to the American West, Mexico, and South America, where was immersed in revolutions, both literal and artistic, and a rediscovery of color. The decade also brought the Second World War, in which Cloar served, more travel in Europe, and a Guggenheim Fellowship.

During his time in New York, Cloar perfected the craft of painting. Throughout his career, he meticulously planned and executed his works, creating sketches of figural elements and compositions before combining them into finely finished graphite drawings. Highly detailed, like the lovely maze of leaves and blossoms in *Twilight Flowerscape* (1962), these works on vellum could then be pressure transferred to prepared Masonite panels for painting.

Cloar's exposure to the city's museums and galleries plays out in *Little Known Blind Bug of the Inner Ear*, a cheeky homage to the mystical, trapped-in-amber canvases of Morris Graves (1910 – 2001); *Mama, Papa is Blessed* wittily lampoons the brooding surrealism of Yves Tanguy (1900-1955). Most amazingly, his *Pale Hose, Pale Writer* irreverently references Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980), Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1914), the Book of Revelation, and Cloar's fascination with baseball. Cloar's often humorous take on these artists underscores his ability not only to effectively emulate their works but to riff upon them and their associated movements. His own paintings and drawings share a kinship with the creations he gently mocked. His flowery fields, backwoods roads, or evocations of family members and familiar ghosts have surrealist and magical realist roots and share in a wider web of Freudian dreams, Gothic fantasies, or Biblical visions. Drawing widely from modernist impulses, Cloar translated sacred myths and folk memories into uniquely powerful, poignant images. His drawing of *Brother Hinsley Wrestling with the Angel* (1960) evokes the Old Testament tribulations of Jacob; *Paul Peterson's Conversion* (1965) transmutes Saul on the road to Damascus into a fallen Southern hunter; and *Joe Goodbody's Ordeal* (1962) makes one man's descent into insanity into an image of mythic, universal pathos.

In 1951, seeking recognition and commercial success, Cloar paid a visit to Edith Halpert (1900-1970), the pioneering founder of the Downtown Gallery. Impressed by his works, which she felt were modern and yet had an old-fashioned quality that dovetailed with her taste for American nineteenth-century painting, she signed him. Cloar may have seen the work of Ben Shahn (1898-1969) during his time with Downtown. Many of Cloar's paintings echo Shahn's spare approach and edgy color; In *Sunday Morning* (1969), with its detached, distant view of Black men and women, Cloar's debt to Shahn's powerful explorations of social inequity is evident.

By the 1950s, Cloar had settled permanently in Memphis. Close to family and his source material, he always acknowledged his debt to Manhattan, noting, "A seasoning in New York gives the artist perspective, depth, and a long view of the place of his origin." It was that distance—and the vibrancy and experimentation of the mid-century New York art scene—that empowered Cloar to fully flower as an artist.

— Stanton Thomas, Ph.D.

Carroll Cloar is represented in the collections of museums such as the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, among many institutions. The gallery thanks David Lusk and Stanton Thomas for their insights into Cloar's art and life.