# *Centering Modernism: J. Jay McVicker and Postwar American Art* by Louise Siddons (review)


Amy Von Lintel

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teachers knew that to say too much might prove disastrous for African American students and their teachers. This reality becomes clear when reading the very short but powerful epilogue to *Becoming an African American Progressive Educator*, as Mrs. Lawson (a character from *High School Was Like This*), Prim, and Parker describe in their own words what an interviewer had asked and had not asked them during the post-interview process following the end of the Secondary School Study. Lawson states how she expected to hear "the desegregation question" but never heard it (p. 210). Parker's emotions sum up best her feelings about the experience when she states, with a teary eye, "We were respected and we cared . . . and we spoke for a common good. What we did was important, and we told it our way" (p. 210).

North Carolina Central University SEAN C. D. COLBERT-LEWIS SR.

*Centering Modernism: J. Jay McVicker and Postwar American Art.* By Louise Siddons. The Charles M. Russell Center Series on Art and Photography of the American West. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. Pp. xiv, 313. $45.00, ISBN 978-0-8061-6033-7.)

The title of Louise Siddons's book, *Centering Modernism: J. Jay McVicker and Postwar American Art*, is both bold and appropriate. Not only is her Oklahoma subject at quite literally the geographic center of the continental United States, but Siddons also shows the state to be a perhaps surprising aesthetic center of mid-twentieth-century modern art. Rather than serving as a decentering of American art that simply refocuses readers away from the predominant "New York–centricity" of the field, Siddons's work removes the very necessity of a center-periphery argument, offering a remapping based not on a roots-and-branches model but on a rhizomatic, or horizontal and unhierarchical, model (p. 29). Such a mapping system allows places in middle America—in "so-called flyover country"—to emerge as deeply networked to the coasts and not as the expected isolated cultural backwaters "from which progressives have continually been in flight" (pp. 7, 4). Siddons demonstrates that the "coastalization of American art," which we now take for granted, was not predetermined in the post–World War II era, but rather was actively constructed by art markets, critics, and historians based on the coasts (p. 2).

This carefully researched and clearly written account centers on a single little-known artist—J. Jay McVicker—who constructed his art career from his home base in Stillwater, Oklahoma, at Oklahoma State University, the institution where Siddons herself is currently employed. McVicker was a painter, but also a printmaker, watercolorist, and sculptor—working in media that are severely sidelined in canonical accounts of modern American art. But one question that readers must ask is whether McVicker's art is worthy of such a monographic study, or if the rich archive that Siddons deploys so skillfully merely offers a forum for undermining existing art historical narratives. Though the latter is still a useful project, Siddons has also convincingly argued that McVicker's art is indeed "outstanding" and can hold its own in comparison with the many renowned modernists she also discusses in the book (p. 3). *Centering Modernism* is beautifully illustrated with large full-color images so that readers

can evaluate this claim for themselves, while the author's close readings of McVicker's works further help readers see his value as an innovative modernist.

Another strength of Siddons's book is that it provides a needed biography for McVicker though the work is not limited to biographical methods. Rather, the author employs period theory—the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for instance—as well as histories of relevant technological developments, such as the rise of the aviation industry in middle America, to show that McVicker's life can be a lens through which to understand the United States at midcentury, rather than as only an end in itself. She also brings in the period term *schizoid*, which allows her to explore how an artist like McVicker could be both geometric and biomorphic, or organic, in style, both painterly and hard-edged in technique, and locally inspired but not regionalist in the reductive sense of the word. Indeed, *schizoid* operated as a kind of zeitgeist for the postwar era, according to Siddons, where contradictions and paradoxes counteracted ideologies of purity. For example, she quotes a period writer, stating, "The paradox of American art is its un-Americanness," and she shows that, while New York synecdochically stood for America in the art world, U.S. art was in fact more broadly international, especially with its pan-American connections (p. 135). Finally, Siddons argues that coastal cities like New York and Los Angeles were as much regions of art as Oklahoma. She reminds readers that, given the archival evidence in middle America, we have only scratched the surface of our understanding of a truly transcontinental and international American modern art.

West Texas A&M University AMY VON LINTEL

*God with Us: Lived Theology and the Freedom Struggle in Americus, Georgia, 1942–1976*. By Ansley L. Quiros. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Pp. xvi, 292. Paper, $29.95, ISBN 978-1-4696-4676-3; cloth, $90.00, ISBN 978-1-4696-4675-6.)

Integrating theology into history requires formidable resources. At minimum, a mastery of theological nuance and a means of integrating belief with politics, society, and economics are necessary. If writing from an intersectional framework, the task only becomes more complex. Ansley L. Quiros models how to engage in such a demanding historical enterprise. Her examination of the theological skirmishes over civil rights in Americus, Georgia, deftly weaves together the stories of Clarence Jordan and Martin England's Koinonia Farm, local white segregationists, and black congregations in the area. Rigorously researched, passionately written, and historically nuanced, *God with Us: Lived Theology and the Freedom Struggle in Americus, Georgia, 1942–1976* contributes to our understanding of the religious forces at play in the South during the mid-twentieth-century phase of the long black freedom struggle.

Although other scholars have explored similar territory, Quiros moves the conversation forward by braiding the perspectives of segregationists, integrationists, and the black church into a microhistory. Likewise, she is particularly adept at employing the "lived theology" framework to explore those various perspectives (p. 5). Quiros's explanatory powers are evident throughout. When explicating her framework for analyzing religious forces, she states, "Simply put,