

Dia Art Foundation
Readings in Contemporary Poetry
Major Jackson and Peter Schjeldahl

Tuesday, March 5, 2019

Dia:Chelsea
535 West 22nd Street, 5th Floor
New York City

Introduction by Vincent Katz

Major Jackson's books of poems include *Leaving Saturn* (University of Georgia Press, 2002), *Hoops* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), *Holding Company* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), and *Roll Deep* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2015). Jackson is the Richard Dennis Green and Gold University Distinguished Professor in the department of English at University of Vermont, Burlington, and a graduate faculty member of the Creative Writing Program at New York University. He serves as the poetry editor of the *Harvard Review*.

Many of the references in Major Jackson's poetry - e.g. "I better git it in my soul" - are known to me, and many others are not. They all intrigue me to know more.

The title of his most recent volume, *Roll Deep*, seemed to me as though it might come from football; I intuit a physicality there, a sense of simultaneous mobility and pleasurable stasis. *Deep* too as in profound. A more in-depth study revealed the phrase refers to the comfort zone of one's posse. In this case, Jackson extends that to his wife, Didi, to whom the volume is dedicated, and their children, and beyond, via quotes from Lord Byron, Langston Hughes, and others.

Jackson has always been extending, in his poetry, from his first book, *Leaving Saturn*, which established in vivid detail his North Philadelphia roots, to recent poems from the ongoing sequence "Urban Renewal," set in the Cyclades, Spain, Brazil, Kenya, and Italy. In the latter, lines blossom with a scale and languor akin to the grandeur of dactylic hexameter.

Yet, this limning of a progression is false: Jackson was born worldly and continues to be from where he's from. Music heard and thought about, danced to, is the essential connective tissue, the continuizing force, throughout Jackson's own musicality in verse. In section "viii. Block Party" from "Urban Renewal," published in 2002, Jackson writes: "Woofers stacked to pillars made a disco of a city block."

And further on in the same poem, sampling both *The Tempest* and James Brown, musing on the DJ's ephemeral art, and his own role in it all, at it all, comes this definition: "Song broken down to a dream of song flows / from my pen." Years later, in section "XXIII. Brazil," music in

the form of the berimbau incites musings on slavery's legacy: "you're the crisis / I hear when I bend to kiss my son, or when, / at a bar standing, see my brown face in a glass of rum."

Major Jackson has an uncanny ear and ability to weave a thought through innumerable subordinate clauses, keeping his goal firmly in mind and always returning to it. In his magisterial poem "Reverse Voyage," I am certain he intends us to hear the rhyme of "alleys" in line four with "valley" in line 41. This musicality underpins his humanist message. Please welcome Major Jackson.

Peter Schjeldahl was born in Fargo, North Dakota, and grew up in Minnesota. He dropped out of college and moved to New York City to pursue journalism. Schjeldahl has published the following books of poetry: *White Country* (Corinth Books, 1968), *An Adventure of the Thought Police* (Ferry Press, 1971), *Dreams* (Angel Hair Books, 1973), *Since 1964: New and Selected Poems* (Sun, 1978), and *The Brute* (Little Caesar Press, 1981). Schjeldahl has written on art for numerous publications, including *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Vogue*. He was the art critic for the *Village Voice* from 1990 to 1998 and has since been a staff writer at the *New Yorker*. His writings on art and culture have been collected in four books of criticism, including *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl, 1978–1990* (University of California Press, 1991) and *Let's See: Writings on Art from the New Yorker* (Thames & Hudson, 2008). He lives in New York City.

I should be writing the introductions to tonight's poetry readings, but Peter Schjeldahl's poetry keeps reminding me how poetry and life are inextricably intertwined — for everyone, although only some are aware of it. From his earliest poems, published in the 1960s, to his latest, published in the 1980s, a clarity about who he is, as narrator, informs their progress, down the page and across time. Schjeldahl is at his best when his poetry seems least experimental. Then he becomes the classicist, rare for his times, able to take in the big, even cosmological, picture, while always locating his specific human experience within it.

My life has been tedious

Confused and occasionally quite nasty

And hysterical

But I have never deliberately said anything

Without a lot of sincerity

(from "Release")

Oh, and did I mention hilarious? Because wit and intelligence are always make one smile. There's a certain timeless wisdom to the self-awareness in these poems. How does he do that? Did he study Horace? Juvenal? Sir Walter Raleigh? Yes, I am certain, all of the above.

But the language would never let you know that, as it is a carefully de-schooled version of how this mid-20th-century person actually spoke. In that regard, Schjeldahl, the poet, is very much part of a community, the second generation New York School.

But what really excites me is when the lines keep coming back to me, as they do repeatedly with Schjeldahl. I could quote the rest of "Release," it's all memorable, but you get the picture.

And not just memorable lines; memorable poems too are the stock in trade of the classicist, not to say the classic. Schjeldahl notches these up too, with ease. From the middle years, the hilarious and moving sequence "Dreams," some of which I hope he'll read tonight. But it's in his later poetry that Schjeldahl begins writing poems of remarkable depth and utility: "Dear Profession of Art Writing," with its list of contemporaries with one-line tags, some positive, some not so, "My Generation," and "Dear Art of Verse."

In his most recent book of poetry, *The Brute*, published in 1981 by Dennis Cooper's Little Caesar Press, which situated Schjeldahl in an edgier, younger group of up and coming poets, he has at least three masterpieces: "I Missed Punk," "I Remember Now Why I Left the Midwest," and my favorite, "On Cocksucking," whose final lines come to me often and give me a sense that life's possibilities are truly infinite. Please welcome poet Peter Schjeldahl to Dia.