

Art in America

JANUARY 2015

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Mike Cloud:
Removed Individual,
2013, oil on canvas,
120 by 240 inches; at
Thomas Erben.

MIKE CLOUD

Thomas Erben

Mike Cloud lays it on thick—in his paint application and in his symbolism. Layers of chunky oil paint cover every inch of canvas in the nine works that were on view here. Jewish stars, blood diamonds, the Confederate flag and at least one swastika mixed and mingled with coffins, genitals, detached hands and feet and painted statements about impotence. Cloud staples canvas to the inside of stretchers, instead of stretching around them, so all the pieces are “framed.” His conspicuous brushstrokes, often roughly the width of a human finger, emphasize the directness of a body’s forceful, persistent touch.

Much of the painted text, in particular, looks like it was carved with a finger into cake frosting. The words “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité” are painted along the three sides of a small triangular canvas in *Traveling Barricade* (2014), a freestanding object with one canvas perched like a sail on top of others laid flat. Here, the French national motto has a hand-painted protest sign’s awkward combination of vehemence and provisionality—necessary, but only for the moment, as though it might easily be smoothed over, blended in or otherwise reabsorbed into the opaque surface. This feels appropriate for a phrase with a history that reads like the ultimate semiotic soap opera: political-philosophical interests wrangle over the evolving meanings and implications of three words. It’s the initial instance of fickle symbolism that this Chicago-born, Brooklyn-based artist took up in “Bad Faith and Universal Technique,” his first solo exhibition at the gallery and his seventh in New York.

The paintings come in a range of sizes and shapes. Triangles, trapezoids and hexagons become increasingly complex through repetition and distortion; two trapezoids resemble the lid of a coffin in *Dialog of Growth* (2013), for instance. Elsewhere, triangular

canvases multiply into stars and diamonds, creating works that reverberate between the shaped supports and the painted content.

Everything converged in the 10-by-20-foot *Removed Individual* (2013), multiple canvases arranged to form a double Star of David. The perfect center is the diamond-shaped negative space between the stars, where Cloud has a canvas painted so that it resembles a gemstone with jagged facets. In rich sky blue over a ground of reds, yellows, pinks and oranges, the diamond shows off its “fire.” The stars themselves—one red, pink and white, the other yellow, brown and black—are inscribed with a grocery list of foods rendered in their respective colors: oranges, milk, ketchup, honey. Cloud’s awareness of the trouble with such tight identification between hue and object is manifested through his insistence on using color in an ever-fluid spectrum. From his inclusion of actual color scales (tones of blue in the lower left; a rainbow panel on the lower right) to the blending that occurs when wet paint of different hues meets (emphasized by globs wiped on his stretcher bars), one color is always becoming another.

Not unlike the star, the diamond is a prime example, for Cloud, of a natural form that also serves as a shape, a symbol and a commodity. The last role is explored in the painting *Lesser Evil* (2013), an irregular hexagon suggesting a cut stone. Written where the edges of the facets would be are compound words referring to the mining and selling of the gems to finance war (“blooddiamond,” “diamondgate”). With this exhibition, Cloud revealed the range of significations that can be connected to a single shape as well as the way diverse symbols are constructed from the same geometric material.

—Becky Brown