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Art in Review; Mike Cloud

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Mike Cloud is a young artist of the moment, with a project exhibition at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, photo-collages in "Frequency" at the Studio Museum in Harlem and new paintings in a solo show here. His work, and this show in particular, is a tough nut to crack. But rude, funny and meaty, it's well worth the attempt.

Mr. Cloud has recently played with systematic approaches to painting. In one case, he used mathematical formulas to turn old master still lifes into geometric abstractions. In another, he arranged paint strokes according to color-wheel hues or physical properties (toxicity, speed of drying). The idea was to dodge the whole "painterly" gambit, with its associations of virtuosity and subjectivity, not to mention transcendence. "Belief is a major obstacle in painting," Mr. Cloud has written. In the faith versus works debate, he goes with action: don't polish the car and pray that it runs; tinker with the engine, then step on the gas.

There's a good deal of productive tinkering here. Two series of paintings are based on linear grids, a classic visual signature of systematic abstraction. But in one series, the grids serve as support for plumelike explosions of color intended as abstract portraits. In the other, a grid cut from sheets of aluminum actually covers up an underlying oil painting, and is itself half-covered with pasted-on and half-peeled-back Color Aid strips, the kind used to teach theory in art classes. The reflection of the color from the peeling strips on the aluminum surface ends up being the "painting."

Several more recent pictures unite painted forms and objects in what could be Minimalist "combines." Each painting depicts a single linear maze made in a distinctive shape: a heart, a cloud, a pentagram, a lightning bolt. To each painting Mr. Cloud has affixed children's toys or board-game pieces.

A few paintings have been turned into sculptures. In one case, a pair of Star of David maze paintings stand upright, facing each other, at once separated and stabilized by the figure of a cartoonish plastic bird with outstretched legs.

Toys and mazes, hearts and lightning. Could there be a system of symbols, even a story, in play here? Mr. Cloud -- who, when he wants to, can shoot straight from the hip critically, as he does in his freakish collages of exoticized photographs of Africa at the Studio Museum -- is not saying. And while I can claim no clear idea of what he's driving at, I really like the way he drives, fast but in control, making lots of turns, and constantly leaving the highway for less-traveled roads.

HOLLAND COTTER

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