

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Painting Outside the Safe Zone

It is not so much what message is narrated or illustrated, but how the form of the painting is questioned in its realization.



Joe Fyfe October 26, 2019



"Mike Cloud: Tears in abstraction" at Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, installation view (all images courtesy Thomas Erben Gallery)

Paintings are social structures, which is why their inherited authority needs to be short-circuited as part of the artistic process. That is our job as cultural producers. Remarkably, most paintings that appear on the walls of the best galleries (and also the striving ones) aren't interested in doing that. Instead, we are awash in whole-hearted affirmations of this most canonical and retrograde of forms, the time-honored trophy of the oppressing classes.

So much personal fantasy, so many rectangles slathered on and sentimentally worked over, so many fascinatingly indecipherable methodologies. Painters are dancing as fast as they can. Fueled by low taxes, their purchasers' body temperatures rise perusing the sincerely intense surfaces, flourished brushstrokes, variegated

color (magenta is everywhere), mildly provocative content, and tasteful radicalism: they are getting their money's worth.

Isabelle Graw, in “The Value of Painting,” an essay from the book *Thinking through Painting: Reflexivity and Agency beyond the Canvas* (Sternberg Press, 2012) writes that the medium’s “capacity to appear particularly saturated with the lifetime of its author makes it the ideal candidate for value production.” It appears as if the system and function of art challenged by previous generations of artists has returned painting to a prelapsarian state, a safe zone where imaginative efforts can run free. The message of uncritical, work-ethic innocence is simple — there are areas of life that are beyond politics. Would that be so.



Mike Cloud, “Uehara 2011” (2019), oil on canvas with mixed media, 51 x 32 inches

Writing about British painters of the 1920s and ‘30s and their response to Picasso, the art historian T.J. Clark observed that painting has a unique vulnerability to its patronage:

[...] in art all rules are made to be broken, if the rule-breaker is good enough. Art has always had room for enormous talents that are forced to compromise, to speak the language they know their patrons will understand. If the talent truly is great, the compromise will come off.

His essay, “False Moderacy,” published in the *London Review of Books* in 2012, argued that British artistic culture in Modernism’s early years was too insecure, too genteel. British artists were constrained by “artistic good manners”. A similar insecurity may dominate painters at present. The viewer is not meant to be troubled but instead at best spellbound or at the very least entertained.

Mike Cloud, whose work I have been following since I first saw it at Max Protech in 2004, makes paintings that brook no compromise. In a January 2018 Artforum interview, he said that he tells his students, “To be an artist, you have to sacrifice your financial stability, social standing, personal relationships, and all sorts of things to make your work.”



Mike Cloud, "Reyes Portrait" (2018), oil on canvas, 34 x 34 inches

He makes this his practice even as he shows in galleries, teaches, and makes his living as a professional artist. Cloud uses painting to intervene creatively with the world. The viewer must make a sustained inspection of his work in order to be rewarded, then they very much are, but on different terms from those mentioned above.

Cloud demonstrates a belief in the politics that lies in acts of rearrangement. He is wary of latent potentials. The viewer needs to reflect upon the choices the artist made, the ordering principles that are upended.

It is not so much what message is narrated or illustrated, though this is ultimately what the work is about, but how the form of the painting is questioned in its realization. Risking incoherence, his work is discontinuous, open-ended, internally contradictory.



Mike Cloud, "Wan-Im" (2018), oil on canvas, 51 x 51 inches

In an artist's talk I attended a few nights after the opening of his current exhibition at Thomas Erben Gallery, [*Tears in abstraction*](#), Cloud recounted that he was not exposed to many paintings at all when he was growing up, and that when he came to painting it was through a how-to-paint instruction book and from reading theories of art. The subjects of the work in the show are, according to the press release, "noted or mundane individuals" who died by hanging or decapitation. The artist said that he sourced the victims from Wikipedia but also did additional independent research due to the tendency of most online indexes to skew toward white men.

Cloud thoroughly rethinks the conventions of the easel picture with each new series of works. He has used the drying times of pigments as a composing apparatus and children's pajamas as a support, to cite two examples. Here, stretcher bars are foregrounded as compositional elements that frame interior activity. They are often doubled and roughly carpentered into various geometric configurations: triangles, the Star of David, divided hexagons opening to sections of shag bath mat, evoking an uncomfortable domestic intimacy while functioning

as a kind of under-support. Several works sit on the floor, leaning against the gallery walls. All contain an impastoed area of painted “expression” that has been attached by staples.

Similarly, the some of the corners are adorned with small triangular patches of unbleached canvas inscribed with words denoting body parts: eye, neck, ear. Others works are completely abstract, save the names of the deceased persons and the online link to information about them, which are written in the thick paint, or lettered in ballpoint or pencil on the stretchers. Cardboard or another material, such as strips from Whole Foods paper bags, are carefully glued onto the stretchers’ interior slats.



Mike Cloud, “Cantanheade Portrait” (2019), oil on canvas, 70 x 70 inches

I thought certain aspects here felt intriguingly akin to elements in the work of Peter Halley. Like Halley, Cloud wants to avoid any metaphorical projection, on part of the viewer, that the paintings have specific meanings. As it turns out, Cloud had Halley for a teacher. Cloud’s choices are bewildering but also generic: death, Jewish symbols, pop culture, sports. Categorically, they do not fit neatly anywhere, a strategy at once gratuitous and opaque, that is, they do not reflect back upon the artist in any particular way. But as more time is spent with the work, the more it reveals itself.

In the same essay, Graw extends the idea of a painting as a “quasi-person” and proposes that the more the painter escapes a personal “handwriting” through various indexical negations, the more it is affirmed. But Cloud’s handwriting — the painted areas — appears at war with itself, alienated. Benjamin Buchloh thought that Gerhard Richter’s abstractions were parodies, an idea the artist resisted, but I think Cloud’s painted areas are in fact quite parodistic.

His paint handling resembles some thick but detached version of Van Gogh, or as others have mentioned, Alfred Jensen, and though it gives a first impression of muddiness, the color is quite articulate. Cloud favors rich, often dark paint that is built up then occasionally flushed with solvent, leaving color chunks behind. With the surrounding slats of wood seemingly paused in rotation, a feeling arises of a vortex or labyrinth. In sublime disrespect, most of the edges of the stretcher bars are smeared with clinging dabs of oil paint, as if he were using the edge to wipe his palette knife or brush: the painting as boot scraper.



Mike Cloud, "Shachko 2018" (2019), oil on canvas with mixed media, 83 x 25 inches

And then there is the painting as scaffolding. Many of the works feature short dowels cantilevered like pegs from the stretcher, their front-facing cross sections lettered with the initials of the doomed subject of each piece. On a noose-like loop from each of these pegs, Cloud had strung one or more of what look like women's belts, many with decorative sparkles or shiny surfaces. The association to lynching is both present and deflected, just like every other element here.

On my third visit to the exhibition, I began to appreciate, if that is the right word, the placement of the belts, passing over the gaps between the stretchers so that, from a certain angle, the wood seems to form a gallows trap. I wasn't searching for any particular associations here; it just presented itself. It was an unexpected encounter.

Cloud amply demonstrates that there is still much left for painting to do: how it can show the way an object, historically and ideologically produced, can be transformed, as can social realities. It can increase the individual's capacity for aesthetic experience, removing expectations and value judgments derived from entertainment and commercial visual media. With these tools, viewers can be challenged to reflect, critically, on how visual information is communicated to them. Other than concoct novel ways to manipulate the viewer, the artist can investigate the peculiar givens of the painting object to demonstrate that life, like art, is a changing, discontinuous process.

[Mike Cloud: Tears in abstraction](#) continues at Thomas Erben Gallery (526 West 26th Street, 4th floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 9th