

ARTE FUSE

Mike Cloud's Bad Faith and Universal Technique at Thomas Erben Gallery

by TATIANA ISTOMINA on 10/07/2014



Image courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery

Mike Cloud's new works now on view at **Thomas Erben Gallery** are more like conventional paintings than anything he produced in several years. The Brooklyn-based artist has been known for his hybrid artworks made of diverse materials: fabric and clothes sewn into quilts, cut-up photography books, Color-Aid paper, plastic, and in some cases, potato chip bags. But even though his new works use only conventional art materials: stretchers, canvas, paper and oil paint – they do not resemble conventional paintings. Cloud's works are unwieldy constructions of stretcher bars joined at various angles into complex shapes, with the bars' exposed edges framing the canvas. Some of the pieces, such as *Paper Elysium* and *Lesser Evil*, take the form of irregular polygons, while others are more complex formations: *Dialog of Growth* consists of two trapezoids stacked vertically to create a structure resembling a coffin-lid, and *Removed Individual* combines



Image courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery

over a dozen of triangular and polygonal segments into the pair of conjoined Stars of David. In addition to these large works, the show includes several medium-size paintings on paper with perforated edge on top, and a freestanding piece titled *Traveling barricade*. Despite the change in the materials and technique, there is a strong sense of continuity between the new paintings and Cloud's earlier works, one of which – *Dick Cheney Paper Quilt* from 2010, hangs in the back of the gallery.



Image courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery

Painted thickly wet-on-wet, with confident and precise brushwork, and complex color schemes, the paintings have a great degree of formal sophistication, which is downplayed by the artist's casual attitude toward his works. There is a curious and pleasant contrast between Cloud's delicate sensitivity to color and textures, and his matter-of-fact handling of the pieces, with their crude frames covered by blotches of paint from the artist's habit of cleaning his brush on the edge of his paintings. The imagery of the works combines simple shapes with words and phrases, some of which seem to be random (*Dream Cabbage*), and others appear to convey a message, either personal (*Goddamit Cloud 2013*), or vaguely political (*BloodDiamond... Diamondcentrism*). The works abound with symbolic and historical references – the Star of David and the Confederate flag being the most obvious examples. Together with words and phrases, the references seem to imply that the paintings have some kind of deeper significance, which may be uncovered if the individual elements – the shapes, the colors, the phrases, are read in just the right way. This impression is false. Colors and shapes in Cloud's works may be politically significant, but in the end, they are simply shapes and colors. The words may be suggestive or evocative, they may wink and nod at the viewer offering her some kind of tantalizing hints – but they have no message to tell. The



Image courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery

paintings resist direct interpretation; they function on the sensory and aesthetic level, through visual rhythms and poetic associations.



Cloud is the kind of artist who has a great trust in the power of shapes and colors, the significance of the mark, the physicality of the objects, and our human capacity to relate to them on some organic level. Cloud's paintings are not simply experiments with materials; they are about something – identity, history, politics – though what exactly we may never possibly know. As the artist maintains in his interviews, painting is an unreliable tool of communication. Shapes, colors and marks mean something, he seems to be certain, but what it is, is unclear, and may never be completely understood, let alone expressed – unless through other shapes, colors and marks. This of course, should negate the artist's intention of communicating anything except the trivial formalist assertion that particular shapes, colors and marks may exist in some specific configurations. Still Cloud is no formalist, and all his works strain to say something – or if not say, then mumble, hum, or communicate mutely. There is an inherent contradiction in this position, which points to the “bad faith” of the exhibition title – the firm belief that painting's universal technique may be use to express something, despite our inability to ever know what is being expressed.

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Photography provided by the gallery and the artist



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