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WEBEXCLUSIVE

MIKE CLOUD *Bad Faith and Universal Technique*

by William Corwin

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THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY | SEPTEMBER 11 – OCTOBER 18, 2014

A fellow spectator at Mike Cloud's recent exhibition described the largest painting in the show, "Removed Individual," (2013) as the "Buckminster Fuller one." Initially this seemed superficial, based merely on the construction of the piece as a network of visible intersecting stretchers. However, it became increasingly meaningful as the extent and variety of the show sank in. There are many intertwining gestures in Cloud's work and at times the paintings can be overwhelming. There is a high volume of historical detail and specific symbolism being corralled into these works. Despite the seemingly spontaneous expressionism of the execution, there is a layering of subtlety that compliments the comparison to Fuller. "Removed Individual" is the most Fulleresque, combining the symbolism of the six-pointed star with Fuller's Dymaxion map, but all the works exhibit an aesthetic and intellectual resourcefulness. The eccentric form of the canvas and the wordplay and the rebus-like use of imagery on its surface reinforce each other in the same way that the famed inventor's physical creations complimented his zany and altruistic worldview.

Cloud's paintings are entities of tension. The canvas is stapled from the inside surfaces of the stretcher bars, like a skin drying on a frame. The taught fabric becomes a structural force as the self-sustaining perpendiculars of the typical painting are exchanged for unstable acute and obtuse angles that require an outside vector of force to keep them in place. As a result, "Paper Elysium" (2014) an irregular trapezoidal shape, and "Lesser Evil" (2013), an irregular hexagon, both exude a troubling feeling of tensegrity (tensional integrity) that makes their construction very prominent. Indeed, it is this reliance on the very practical applications of stretcher bars that give Cloud's work a resonance with the ever-practical yet ever-fanciful Buckminster Fuller. The stretcher becomes a unit that underlies the growth and expansion of the picture plane.

In the painting contained on "Paper Elysium," thick rich brushstrokes happily lend themselves to reinforcing the notional tension of the form. The trapezoidal

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A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

"From the Crooked Timber of Humanity, nothing ever came out straight"



THE MIAMI RAIL



painting is covered corner to corner with a confederate flag, visually pushing the corners outwards. By contrast, “Lesser Evil” is supported by six lines of text that become lines of force emanating from a center point. By their rejection of the right angle, Cloud’s stretcher bar networks naturally fall into 2-D crystalline forms; embracing this, diamonds are frequent signifiers in his work. In “Lesser Evil,” the words function simultaneously as visual supports of the crystalline aspirations of the work, and as text they cycle through the associative meanings of phrases in proximity to the word diamond. “Blood Diamond,” “Pseudo Diamond,” and “Diamond Gate” are played off the visual pun of a paint, wood, and canvas diamond constructed by the artist himself—text metaphors vs. visual ones.

Beyond it’s construction, “Removed Individual” is a meditation on the symbolism of oppression, and an attempt towards the mitigation of the destructive underpinnings of those symbols. Two Judenstern stand next to each other, point-to-point: they are different colors, but some of the colors are familiar as National Socialist categories—purple meant homosexual and yellow meant Jew. Hands, feet, and male and female genitals are painted onto the stars, anthropomorphosizing them, and from the right star a small rainbow banner hangs like a shop sign. There is a humor that is both sharp and pained in its openness, (Are these stars self-portraits? Star-crossed lovers?) The two symbols have been bestowed with a personality the way that a corporate mascot can be generated by putting a pair of eyes or legs on any inanimate object or making a mouse or cat stand on two feet.

This playful addition to a very familiar and sinister shape has jarring and effective consequences: it is a taboo crossing of signals. The visual blow is lessened by thickly and painterly rendered text on the hexagonal body of the star. Two shopping lists are placed side by side, and a John-sian (as in Jasper) visual pun comes into effect. The contents of the list are written out in their respective colors: white rice/brown rice, green tea/black tea, etc. The artist muses on the very personal and rational judgments that go unnoticed when we choose food based on its color. Then, via the stark cruelty of the form of the Star of David armbands switches gears to the practice of color coding people or their religious or sexual associations, and even their skin color.

“Removed Individual” serves as an introduction to Cloud’s at times perplexing free-association of signs and symbols. His openness with some of our most powerful and feared signifiers is liberating. The shaped canvasses and stretched formations lend themselves seamlessly to a penetrating visual contemplation of meaning and shape. At times there is a surfeit of visual information, which can muddy the beautiful mystery that is generated from forms that have tangential but not obvious or overt relationships.