

IMPULSE

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Mike Cloud: *Suitcase Portraits*

Thomas Erben | 526 W 26 St, Floor 4, New York

September 17 – October 24, 2026



Installation view of Mike Cloud: *Suitcase Portraits*, 2026. Courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery; photography by Fernando Sandoval/MW.

Death punctuates *Suitcase Portraits*, Mike Cloud's ninth exhibition with Chelsea's Thomas Erben Gallery. Continuing his expansive exploration of painting, Cloud returns to his enduring link between the terminus and painting. Following the exhibition's opening, Cloud met artist Peter Halley for a discussion of Yve-Alain Bois's seminal 1986 essay *Painting: The Task of Mourning*—outlining the conceptual death of painting alongside the corporeal deaths within each object. In his essay, Bois claims, "The pure beginning, the liberation from tradition, the 'zero degree' that was searched for by the first generation of abstract painters could not but function as an omen of the end."¹ From modernism's inception, the idea that conceptual explorations of abstract painting could be optimized and directed towards a hypothetical endpoint tacitly anticipated the medium's eventual demise.

When thinking of the modernists and Mike Cloud, there is an easy link to the constructivists. His subjects often seem arbitrary—as with the constructivists, shapes, text, and colors are primarily at the service of composition and formal arrangement rather than specific conceptual function. Cloud, though, deviates from the constructivists as a storyteller; his distinctive narrative technique operates heavily through subtlety and mystery. His complex symbology begets associative provocations, sometimes dead ends and sometimes not. The levity of snowflakes and shamrocks evokes seasonal crafts or decorations. National flags charge paintings with the national, ethnic, and colonial histories of each country. The most prominent subjects are obliterated corpses. The titles of his paintings (e.g., *Unidentified Suitcase Portrait Nigeria* [2026]) and the inclusion of the aforementioned national flags disperse the disemboweled innards and decapitated limbs across the globe, as in the myth of Osiris's mummification. The store-bought handles attached to Cloud's signature asymmetrical stretchers evoke countless true crime stories culminating in decapitated corpses stuffed into suitcases and thrown into a river. These associations have varying degrees of relevance to the actual work, but are described to illustrate the painter's allusive storytelling capacity.

Cloud's interest in symbols is oriented primarily towards their function in a painting's composition. This imbues his subjects with a special sort of mundanity, poignant in itself. In depictions of abject worldwide violence, a sense of mundanity is crushingly timely. In the past, Cloud has painted URLs, a digital object that so inundates our contemporary visual plane that to see them painted lovingly by a human hand is undeniably jarring. For most people with smartphones, film and photographs of abhorrent violence through colonial warfare have now similarly penetrated our consciousness. The horrors of mass human suffering are now an unavoidable feature of the digital media landscape. By seeing this violence decoupled from the standard channels of digital image circulation, Cloud calls attention to the channels themselves: their function, the systems in place connecting them to us, to painting, to each other.