



Mike Cloud Paints the Abject in “Suitcase Portraits”

The artist's exhibition at Thomas Erben Gallery in New York disgusts and intrigues as painting takes on the form of Day-Glo entrails.

BY CHARLES VENKATESH YOUNG | OCTOBER 16, 2026



Installation view, “Mike Cloud: Suitcase Portraits”/Photo: Fernando Sandoval/MW

I've been accused in the past of beating a dead horse—or, to use a more fashionable term, “Clem-bashing”—for finding certain sixties and seventies abstractions revolutionary for their rejection of Clement Greenberg's painting-as-medium absolutism. This much I'll admit to: whatever hegemonic power Greenberg held in his heyday was all but gone come the nineties, and is next to nothing in our present age. It has become aesthetic dogma to regard his go-to criterion for quality—a painting's ability to engage with the irreducible qualities of its medium—as conservative and outmoded. In spite of this, an equally compelling theoretical alternative has yet to present itself. Though critics and artists alike seem to agree that the ideal abstract painting should hold some contingent, worldly qualities—that is to say, it wouldn't exist in a vacuum the way Greenberg's preferred works do—Jackson Pollock's blistering all-overs have yet to meet their match in the post-Greenberg era. Among those currently vying for that spot, however, Mike Cloud appears to be the frontrunner.

Aesthetically, Cloud is like the rebellious son of Richard Tuttle, deliberately inverting the seasoned postminimalist's innovations until he came to his own discoveries: if Tuttle showed that three-dimensional sculptures can make ravishingly cogent pictures when viewed in two dimensions, Cloud reveals that the distinctly two-dimensional medium of painting, if arranged with the proper contrivances, can constitute brilliant sculptural works in three dimensions. In Cloud's current show at Thomas Erben Gallery in New York (the artist's ninth), the gnarly underbelly of painting is laid bare once more: stretcher bars, staples and store-brand stickers are plainly visible, treated not as means to an end but sculptural adornments in their own right. Yet here, Cloud's symbolic constellations have been imbued with an uncharacteristic viscosity, as each of the show's “Suitcase Paintings” references a specific discovery of human remains in a suitcase worldwide.



As formal exercises, they're hard to place. Cloud possesses the structuralizing gaze of one who sees the physical world as nothing but a collection of symbols, which, when combined with the prodigious facility he possesses as a painter, typically lends his work an economy of mark and rhetorical self-awareness that can't help but be impressive: he produces formal zingers which vacillate between irreducibly flat canvas on the one hand and irreducibly complex language on the other until the two come to some fraught reconciliation. Faced with the abjectness of human viscera, however, Cloud's usually deft mark-making appears at best facetious, and at worst repulsively morbid: Day-Glo intestines knot along contrived paths, with the odd bone or severed limb thrown into the mix.

These victims are anonymous, known only by speculative signifiers of their former lives. (Cloud has incorporated the flag of the country in which each suitcase was found, granting the victim a putative nationality.) No traces remain of the former sufferers' humanity save for their blood and guts. Perhaps that's why they're so easily assimilable into Cloud's formal mission of reconciling material with language, and why his doing so has a tendency to render viewers queasy: we're human, and we want to be more than mere mutable agglomerations of flesh and bone. Cloud isn't exactly a nihilist on this subject, but these works are certainly shot through with the awareness that they are just as transient as their subjects: one day, they too will decay, and nothing about their artist will be known except through vague conjecture. Entropy will always win, but that's no reason not to create paintings today—and Cloud's are damn nice to look at. Don't let him out of your sight for long—if his works' Pollockian stature and steadfastness are any indicator, painting itself may not be the same when you check back.

"Mike Cloud: Suitcase Portraits" at Thomas Erben Gallery, 526 West 26th Street, New York, New York, through October 24.