

# Thomas Erben Gallery



Mike Cloud in his studio, Summer 2019.

## **Mike Cloud** *Tears in abstraction*

September 12 – November 2, 2019

Thomas Erben is very excited to present artist Mike Cloud's fourth exhibition with the gallery, *Tears in abstraction*. In these works, Cloud speaks to the suffering of a series of named individuals, addressing their trauma within the language of abstraction. Collecting his new *Hanging* and *Beheading Paintings*, the show further elaborates the artist's continuing exploration into painting's intrinsic relationship to death. Cloud uses abstraction to offer the viewer an aesthetic account of individuality, death and the empathic space of communion in absence of the political mechanisms of personal, racial, cultural and gendered identification.

*Continues...*

# Thomas Erben Gallery



Installation view, west wall.

*Tears in abstraction* finds the artist, for the first time, embracing the individual subjectivities of notable and mundane contemporaries, connected only by the physical circumstances of their deaths. The key question Cloud asks is what type of knowledge does a viewer need in order to connect with a particular individual's worth, suffering and reality.

# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Cantanheade Portrait*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 70 x 70 in.



# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Reyes Portrait*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 34 x 34 in.

# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Wan-Im*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 51 x 51 in.



# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Uehara* 2011, 2019. Oil on canvas with mixed media , 51 x 32 in.

# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Bourdain* 2018, 2019. Oil on canvas with mixed media, 97 x 40 in.

# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Shipman 2004, 2019.* Oil on canvas with mixed media, 65 x 57 in.

As in his previous work, Cloud builds irregularly shaped canvases that wed the frame and painted surface into an entangled whole through sculptural strategies. By combining his conceptual approach with a material richness and a sensual handling of wet-into-wet technique, Cloud continues to reveal the range of significations connected to shapes, surfaces and symbols in an infinitely malleable, direct and forcefully abstract mode.



# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Shachko* 2018, 2019. Oil on canvas with mixed media, 83 x 25 in.

# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Bennington 2017, 2019. Oil on canvas with mixed media, 83 x 25 in.*

# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Spade* 2018, 2019. Oil on canvas with mixed media, 42 x 16 in.



# Thomas Erben Gallery



Installation view, east wall.

# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Stratton Portrait*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 41 x 41 in.

In one *Beheading Painting*, *Stratton Portrait*, Cloud stacks two square frames one atop the other to create an eight-sided star. The subject of the painting is a Playboy Playmate infamously murdered in 1980. The star shape lends the canvas a twinkling, spinning appearance, which is intensified by an undulating rainbow of color that encloses the chaotic void of thickly painted texture at the work's center. Strips from Whole Foods grocery bags collaged upon the stretcher bars and hand painted text spelling out the subject's name are the painting's only legible features. Here destruction allows the artist to create, in his words, an avant-garde portraiture not bound by the rules of anatomy, but instead by purely expressive compositional and aesthetic goals.

# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Untitled*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in.



# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Untitled*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 68 x 68 in.

# Thomas Erben Gallery



Installation view, east and south wall.

In comparison, Cloud's *Hanging Paintings* are more fragmented and broken than his *Beheading Paintings*. On one level they are small shrines—triangles made from pairs of parallel stretcher bars, the lowest of which is broken in half and opened downward to create a triangular framework for a small, rectangular abstraction. Adorning the upper bar are several pegs on which the artist has hung individual, looped belts. The resulting tableau unmistakably evokes the works' titular act of hanging and of suicide, but these rows of pegs also bring to mind hat-racks and gathering places. Displayed as a group as they are in *Tears in abstraction*, these *Hanging Paintings* lose their feeling of isolation. The names of the deceased are inscribed on cardboard plaques glued onto the stretcher bars along with additional titles (e.g. *good-natured certainty*), connecting them to an even wider set of references.

# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Ryan 2017, 2019. Oil on canvas with mixed media, 97 x 20 in.*



# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Khan* 2013, 2019. Oil on canvas with mixed media, 42 x 19 in.

# Thomas Erben Gallery



*Ames 2017, 2019. Oil on canvas with mixed media, 96 x 26 in.*

Cloud sees the age we live in as an age of destruction and contempt for compromise: “We hurt the Other, the Opposite Number, the Opposition. Before we attend to our own happiness, we need to find destruction for the other. From a metaphysical perspective, all human beings are created equal and it is possible to identify with all of our suffering. That possibility is called Religious Love. Without that religious love we cannot hope to identify with the non-identical suffering of the world. In my paintings I make space to contemplate the other, their suffering and their reconciliation to their world.”

# Thomas Erben Gallery



Installation view, east and south wall.

**Mike Cloud** is a Chicago-based artist whose work examines the conditions of painting in its contemporary life among countless reproductions, symbols and descriptions. After studying at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Cloud earned his MFA from Yale in 2003. His work has been extensively shown, at venues such as **MoMA P.S.1**, **Marianne Boesky Gallery**, **White Columns**, **Max Protetch**, **Apexart**, and has been included in group exhibitions, such as *Frequency* at the **Studio Museum in Harlem** and **Honor Fraser Gallery**. In addition to numerous reviews, his work was part of *Painting Abstraction* by Bob Nickas, Phaidon Press (2009). He has been awarded the inaugural *Chiara Award* from the Headlands Center for the Arts, CA; a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship and residencies at the Meulenstein Art Centre in the Netherlands as well as the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program in New York. Cloud is currently an Associate Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This is the artist's fourth exhibition with the gallery, including a solo presentation of his work at Art Basel Miami Beach, 2016.



## 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 9<sup>th</sup>



# ARTnews

ARTISTS

## Mike Cloud Invents a New Kind of Portrait Painting

BY *Anne Doran* POSTED 10/31/19 10:11 AM



Mike Cloud.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST

For over 15 years, in paintings, sculptures, and collages, Mike Cloud has conducted a sustained examination of how images are presented and received, both in the realm of art and in the larger world. Although the Chicago-based artist, now in his mid-40s, refers to himself as mostly an abstract painter, his work is profoundly political.

“What makes Mike different from many other black artists his age is that he is really resistant to putting images of black people in his paintings,” the writer and artist Christopher Stackhouse told me. “What is consistent in the work though, is that he’s constantly interrogating Western thought—its ideals, its history, its prerogatives.”

A consideration of the respective roles of viewer and subject—both within and beyond the context of art—is at the center of Cloud’s current solo exhibition at Thomas Erben gallery in New York (on view through November 9). Comprising two related series of canvases—the “Hanging Paintings,” devoted to people who have died by hanging, and the “Beheading Paintings,” about people who have been decapitated—the show asks what form a painted portrait might take



Mike Cloud, *Bennington* 2017, 2019, oil on canvas with mixed media.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

In a recent talk at the gallery, Cloud told the audience that his impetus for making these new works was the controversy surrounding Dana Schutz's 2016 painting *Open Casket*. Based on a photograph of the mutilated body of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old African-American boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 for supposedly whistling at a white woman, the work—by a white artist—stirred an impassioned public response when it was shown in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. Visual artist and writer Hannah Black called for it to be [removed from the exhibition and destroyed](#) and artist/activist Parker Bright's protested in front of the work wearing a shirt reading "Black Death Spectacle."

Cloud pointed to [Schutz's stated motivations](#) as part of his issue with the piece. "Someone asked her why she painted that painting of Emmett Till," he said. "And her answer was Till's mother and her love for her son. She explained that she has a child that she loves, and that allowed her to imagine the grief that Till's mother felt. She then used that imagined mourning as the emotional impetus of the work. [Her] empathy (as distinct from sympathy) [did] not require that she feel love for Till but only that she be able to imagine that someone might feel such a thing."

Cloud believes that was why Schutz's painting made people so angry. "One of the things about black people in America is that our suffering is something one sees on TV," he added. "It's a mediated event. Hegel mentions the concept of reconciliation. When a painter paints a portrait, they must reconcile themselves to the subject of the portrait. I felt that if Schutz had proposed to actually make a painting of Emmett Till, proposed a reconciliation with him rather than a photograph of his suffering, that people would have been more open to it."

He paused, and added, "So the question is, how do you paint people as real, as suffering, without exploiting them emotionally?"



Mike Cloud's *Cantanheade Portrait*, 2019, oil on canvas.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Since his debut solo exhibition in 2004 at Max Protetch Gallery in New York, Cloud has drawn from the culture at large to question aesthetic and social conventions and hierarchies. For a 2004 series of collages based on pictures taken by such women photographers as Diane Arbus, he cut up and reassembled some of their most iconic images into works less easily parsed. And in his shaped “Quilt” paintings from 2008, the artist sewed new children’s clothes—some with the tags still on—to canvases and then added painted words and images in a kind of call and response to the clothing’s mass-market vocabulary of rabbits, snowmen, and superheroes.

Words and symbols have likewise served as productive starting points. For his first show at Erben in 2014, for instance, Cloud produced *Removed Individual*, a 10-by-20-foot painting in the shape of a double Star of David with, at its center, a color chart offering a selection of blues paired with a list of grocery-shopping conundrums (“Green vs. Black Tea,” “Red vs. Green Cabbage”)—mundane choices that conjured the far less mundane judgments represented by the star, used by Nazis to identify Jewish prisoners.

“I was wondering how to make a very big painting that was not about how awesome a big painting is,” Cloud told me. “I was trying to get around modernism and the victory of abstraction. I was thinking that in color theory, colors are considered either weak or strong. And I was thinking about the politics and emotions tied up in Bauhaus and Cold War formalism, so I made this giant Star of David painting. And nobody experienced it as being triumphant.”

This pursuit of multiple lines of inquiry at once, and the blurring of painterly and conceptual concerns, can make Cloud’s work difficult to categorize—which may be the most political thing about it. “I think he is an important artist of my generation, especially in the way he addresses mythmaking, both in his painting, which is discursive in its own way, but also in his writing,” artist Leslie Hewitt told me. “He writes quite extensively, not always for publication, and he has a very strong voice and an understanding not only of art theory and art history, but of the frameworks from which they arise. At the same time, his ways of working with material and space challenge all my assumptions as a viewer, which may be why it’s hard for people to read his work—all those things are present in it all at once.”

Or, as the artist Peter Halley noted, “What I admire about Mike’s paintings is how they can be so conceptual, and at the same time so tactile. When I look at one of his canvases, I think of Barnett Newman’s works from the early ’40s. Like Newman, Mike is an intellectual provocateur.”





Installation view of "Mike Cloud: Tears in abstraction," 2019, at Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY, NEW YORK

As is usual for Cloud, his new works—arrangements of exposed stretcher bars and paint-slathered canvas—are as much relief sculptures as paintings. “I’ve always felt that there was a really strong formal noise created by the format of painting,” Cloud told me as we walked through the exhibition. “If you have a big, rectangular, unbroken surface, no matter what you put on it, it’s always about a certain kind of order. Dealing with that formal noise and trying to harness it or subvert it is something I’ve always done.”

The “Beheading” series is conceived as a mathematical progression, beginning with a work in the shape of a six-pointed star and ending with painting made from two hexagrams, one laid over the other. The canvases are largely nonobjective, though several feature crudely drawn eyes, noses, and mouths. In some, pieces of terry toweling and strips of Whole Foods grocery bags add found color. A few bear the names of their subjects, as in the piece titled after Dorothy Stratten, a *Playboy* playmate murdered by her boyfriend.

The “Hanging” paintings are even more abstract. Each consists of two stretcher bars nailed together lengthwise, with the bottom bar snapped in half and hanging down to form a roughly triangular frame. From the pegs on the top stretcher bar dangle cheap belts made into nooses, while a URL scrawled in pencil links to the subject’s history and the story of their death. A few of these people—including fashion designer Kate Spade and celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain—are famous, but many are obscure. Most are suicides, though some are victims of murder made to look like suicide or even accidental autoerotic asphyxiation.

Cloud finds the names by scouring Wikipedia’s lists of people “who have died in extraordinary ways,” he explained. He makes sure to include subjects from different countries, as a way to avoid re-inscribing “a digital bias toward white males.” “In these paintings,” he said, “I’m trying to reconcile myself with the subjects of the portraits in a way that’s consistent with a religious love. When you look at the painting you can’t see the people. You can only see my reconciliation to those people. But if my reconciliation is of the right type, it can be communal.”

Whether or not a portrait consisting of a URL is any less exploitative than an image of a suffering body remains an open question. But open questions are Cloud’s stock in trade. “Mike has genuine faith in the prospect of communication through painting,” Stackhouse said. “He believes in it. And everything else is a kind of dismantling. It’s quintessential trickster stuff.”

# BOMB

## Painting As Portal: Mike Cloud Interviewed by Sheryl Oppenheim

*On suffering, beauty, and utility.*

Oct 23, 2019

[Interview](#)

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Mike Cloud, *Untitled*, 2019. Oil on canvas. 68 x 68 inches. Photo courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery.

At a time when honest and empathetic communication, and the ability to understand the experiences of those around us (and beyond), feels absolutely critical to the survival of humanity, abstract painting may not seem like an obvious place to look for encouragement. Yet Mike Cloud's new paintings in his current exhibition [Tears in abstraction](#) at Thomas Erben Gallery take on the work of connecting to the suffering of others across differences in time, place, and identity. Connecting with another, with an other, is often coded, messy, inexact, and subject to misunderstanding to the point of failure ... not unlike painting. Formally, Cloud's paintings are strange and funny, with looped belts hanging off trapezoidal canvases and strips of Whole Foods bags pasted to exposed stretchers, with lovely palettes and gestures frozen in thick oil paint. In looking at them one is reminded of the many difficulties in trying to communicate clearly, and the rewards of trying anyway.

—Sheryl Oppenheim

Sheryl Oppenheim In your current exhibition, the wall as a space for death seems important, coupled with the title of the two series on display, *Hanging Paintings* and *Beheading Paintings*. Can you talk about how your interest in death and painting has grown or changed as you worked on these paintings?

Mike Cloud In the past three or four years I've been thinking about death as a meeting place and as a gateway to a broader subject matter in painting. In these new works I'm trying to use death as a gateway to widen my understanding of identity. People are so different that there could never be anything like a "human nature" to bind us together, but there's an identical "human condition" or set of conditions that we all labor beneath: we're born into a world already occupied by other people; we are identified and put to work by the people who already occupy the world; we all engage in large and small acts of unexpected freedom and creativity; and we all get sick, tired, and die.

To me, painting tends to resemble death in its transcendent, portal-like qualities, but it also resembles some of the conditions of my life. Painting is particularly expressive of my experience of freedom, specifically, my boundless capacity to behave unpredictably within an apparently narrow set of options and to create new things out of old choices, which is a form of forgiveness. In a lot of ways painting is a very narrow field for me even though I can never predict the sensual effects of every combination of support, surface, composition, and subject. The variety is not like the variety of rolling a die. In painting the outcome has to be meaningful, urgent, expressive, and humane as well as unlooked for.

At forty-five years old I look at painting, eating animal products, and having lots of children on a constantly warming planet as things that can only be justified by reference to freedom, emotion, and an appeal to instinct. The hope is that their instincts and creativity will lead our children out of the trouble they led our ancestors into.



Mike Cloud, *Bourdain* 2018, 2019. Oil on canvas with mixed media. 97 x 40 inches. Photo courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery.

SO Each beheading painting corresponds to a death that you found on the internet. How did you select the deaths, or perhaps the dead, that you chose for the paintings?

MC Wikipedia provides many running lists of subjects who died in extraordinary ways. I only edit the lists in the interest of creating diversity in gender and nationality. I also choose people who have died recently. I know that people who have died recently lived postmodern lives. Whether they were jihadis, Bollywood stars, or Trumpsters, I know that they were concerned about global warming, they had seen one of the Avengers movies, and they had been vaccinated for measles just like me. I tried to create diversity in gender and nationality because I assumed that there would be a "digital divide" bias toward white, male victims that I did not want to reinscribe.

I chose beheading and hanging as subjects for painting because they are situations where the form of the painting and the body of a human being might correspond. Portraits often isolate and distort the head and neck of the painted subject in the way decapitation isolates and distorts. Hanging is, of course, the natural state of a modern painting.

Hanging and fragmenting are both formal situations that are commonplace in pictures but extraordinary and destructive in life. Our bodies are essentially sculptural and not pictorial. I need to propose some sort of correspondence between my work and the subject; but I don't look at photographs, and I never think about what they looked like. I'm not interested in depicting their large noses or ruddy complexions—nothing sensual in that way. The correspondence is purely situational in my work, but a purely situational sensuality does exist in painting. The elements of color and gesture are left then to me as my own expression.





Mike Cloud: *Tears in abstraction*. Installation view. Photo courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery.

SO How can painting critique our conversations around suffering, and how identity informs it?

MC We talk about suffering and death: mass shootings, police shootings, drone strikes. We talk about empathy: the ability to imagine how the sufferer feels. And we talk about sympathy: our being able to feel a reciprocal pain that drives us to ethical action on the sufferer's behalf. What we do not talk about is the utility we gain from other people's suffering, and painting's ability to depict that utility as beauty.

Every person who dies is one less person who might cure my cancer and also one less person who might murder me. In my lifetime, the number of people who have committed murder far surpasses the number who have cured cancer, and so, statistically speaking, the death of every person I do not have a sensual use for has a tiny bit of utility for me. When an asylum seeker and his daughter are drowned crossing the border, when a suspicious-looking boy is shot by the neighborhood watch, when a man and his daughter are killed in a drone strike in some café in North Yemen, my job prospects, my family's prosperity, my navy discharge date all incrementally improve, and I feel a tiny amount of secret joy. That joy is a secret that painting can tell for better or worse.

The currency of painting is beauty. Good painting about suffering is beautiful. A painting about a suffering subject can be beautiful because of its palette, or its composition, but it can also be beautiful because of the utility the sufferer's suffering has for the viewer. The suffering of a slave, a criminal, a woman, an artist has a social utility that painting converts into beauty. Something like this is what I read in Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell's writing on art in the 1990s and the recent essay "Black Bodies, White Cubes: The Problem With Contemporary Art's Appropriation of Race" by Taylor Renee Aldridge.

Painting reveals the utility and the pleasure we derive from other people's suffering and death, and that is something that needs to be brought into our conversation. The currency of painting is beauty; if there was no beauty in suffering, it could not be painted.

SO Can you speak a bit more about the idea of the "unlooked for" and why this surprise, this strangeness, is so important to painting?



Mike Cloud, *Stratton Portrait*, 2019. Oil on canvas. 41 × 41 inches. Photo courtesy of Thomas Erben Gallery.

MC I find it very difficult to be fluent and resistant to premature closure at the same time. To be fluent in something, like Latin, hockey, or geometric abstraction, I need a clear set of limits that I can practice and improve within. To resist premature closure, I need to resist obvious, immediately recognizable limits and search for limits that might exist further out or not at all. Resistance to closure is simply openness. By roaming restlessly across the surface of painting in search of its most distant borders, I can create things that are novel and surprising, but I also neglect the deep, narrow digging that results in fluency, facility, and mastery. For me it is worth sacrificing a reliably deepening signature practice for the possibility of change.

When I learned to paint fifteen or twenty years ago, the dominant ideology was late modernism. In that ideology, painting was a territory where each painter staked a small aesthetic claim. There was room for all the painters because we dug downward in search of formal riches rather than moving outward into one another's territories. So one painter was a stain painter, another a line painter, another a blur painter, another a drip painter. Through downward movement I could approach mastery, at least within my limited oeuvre; and because downward is a linear direction, it was possible for work to progress in a historically and critically legible way. Work could "develop" rather than simply change because "deeper" was a legible trajectory. But the actual trajectory that was happening in my studio was not reflected in that ideology, and I tried to visibly break with it. I wasn't satisfied with what I was finding in my downward investigations and started moving roughshod in and out of other aesthetic territories.

I am also suspicious of the politics involved in staking a claim within the territory of late modernist style. Gerhard Richter is well known for his revolutionary, photo-based, and abstract smear paintings; but a decade earlier, Jack Whitten, a less well-supported African American painter, was exhibiting smear paintings to universal disinterest. Richter became late modernism's official smear painter and benefited from the capital and notoriety he mined from that gestural location. Smear paintings today are seen as homages to Richter not Whitten. I have serious doubts that a marginalized painter, working within the territory of pure gesture, pure abstraction, could stake a formal claim that would hold up in the court of art discourse. Style, consistency, development, mastery are worth sacrificing when it helps transcend unworthy ideologies.

[Mike Cloud: Tears in abstraction](#) is on view at Thomas Erben Gallery in New York City until November 9.

Sheryl Oppenheim is a painter and paper marbler, as well as BOMB's Development Associate.

## ART REVIEWS

# New York Galleries: What to See Right Now

Elisabeth Kley and Tabboo!'s botanical beauties; Mike Cloud's "hanging and beheading paintings"; Karl Lagerfeld's sculptural works; and Janine Antoni's symbolic images.



Mike Cloud's "Dorothy Stratton," from 2019, in the exhibition "Tears in abstraction." Mike Cloud, via Thomas Erben Gallery



## Mike Cloud

Through Nov. 9. Thomas Erben, 526 West 26th Street, Manhattan; 212-645-8701, [thomaserben.com](http://thomaserben.com).

Abstract painting has been tied, historically, to utopian, spiritual or ecstatic inspirations, but in his show “[Tears in abstraction,](#)” at [Thomas Erben](#), the Chicago artist [Mike Cloud](#) links it to death. He explores a death drive, calling his work the “Hanging and Beheading Paintings” and titling them after people who met untimely ends.

Among the extraordinary assemblages here, fashioned with wooden frames and brown bags from Whole Foods, and festooned with belts and bits of fake fur and leather, are paintings dedicated to the one-time Playboy playmate Dorothy Stratton, the chef and television personality Anthony Bourdain, the Japanese TV idol Miyu Uehara and a Chilean murder victim, María José Reyes. Mr. Cloud scribbles the addresses of informational websites along the frames and adds thick impasto brush strokes as well as his signature, inserted on a piece of cardboard.

The paradox is that Mr. Cloud’s paintings are so captivating and inventive that they feel anything but morbid. He transgresses all sorts of formal boundaries, binding together cheap materials with craft and precision. The paintings might serve as memorials and reminders of horrific events — or, as Mr. Cloud says in the gallery’s news release, how “we hurt the Other, the Opposite Number, the Opposition.” But these vigorous, rigorous works virtually and metaphorically raise the dead.

*MARTHA SCHWENDENER*