

## Mike Cloud discusses his offbeat and self-referential painting practice

The American artist talks semiotics, collage-making and non-traditional framing formats, in an interview with STIR.

by Manu Sharma | Published on : Jul 14, 2024



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Mike Cloud is an **American artist** who explores the topic of **painting** itself. Cloud's collages feature large amounts of found media, and occasionally fabrics. The artist often paints over **photographs** and magazine cutouts he uses, and sometimes eschews collage altogether, instead working from observation and memory to create pictorial tapestries entirely out of paint. He also repeatedly breaks away from traditional framing formats, which reshape the relationship between his works and the spaces they are placed in. Cloud joins STIR for an interview, discussing his richly layered practice



*Dick Cheney Paper Quilt*, work on paper (collage, double-sided), 2010, Mike Cloud

Cloud calls his paintings “signs that are made of signs”, telling STIR, “I make them out of recognizable icons, obscure cultural codes, legible gestures and material facts.” One of his works, *Dick Cheney Paper Quilt* (2010), features a photograph of the former Vice President of the **United States** taken by famed **photographer** Annie Leibovitz. The piece also features several other photographs by Leibovitz, along with the photographer’s name scrawled repeatedly, both on the front and the back of the composition. As Cloud explains, he created an expressionistic composition that runs all over his paper “quilt”. It purposely presents the viewer with too much, too fast (often without a discernible point-of-entry), wholeheartedly encouraging divergent interpretations.



*Bomb Bambuti Pigmy*, oil on canvas with stretcher bars, 2021, Mike Cloud

*Image: Courtesy of Mike Cloud and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York*

Cloud regards the symbolism in his **art** as being quite different from the everyday signs we are familiar with. His works are highly layered and are meant to stimulate the viewer’s mind in a striking way. He tells STIR, “My desire to make signs that are immediate and sensual separates my paintings from everyday signs. Everyday signs are more easily recognized through acculturated habits of interpretation.”

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It is a theft and an escape. Collage turns my large, conceptual problem of influence and transcendence into a small, technical problem of visual transformation.

– Mike Cloud, Artist





*Lesser Evil*, oil on canvas, 2013, Mike Cloud  
Image: Courtesy of Mike Cloud and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

When discussing collage-making practices, the question of ownership often comes up: who owns an image that is composed of several images? Cloud has a rather provocative and humorous take on the matter, likening his own work to a "heist film". The **visual artist** says, "It is a theft and an escape. Collage turns my large, conceptual problem of influence and transcendence into a small, technical problem of visual transformation." The artist works with his materials extensively, to such a degree that it often becomes difficult to pinpoint where they were originally sourced from.



*Rabbit, Rainbow and Sun Quilt, oil and clothes on linen with stretcher bars, 2007, Mike Cloud*

*Image: Courtesy of Mike Cloud and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York*

The dimensions of Cloud's canvases are dictated by the relationships he wishes to create between his **visual art** and the spaces it is placed in. When the artist wants a painting to blend into the room, he uses a traditional rectangular frame to echo the larger rectangle that the wall presents. He elaborates on this, saying, "When my canvases are rectangular they function as false windows to alternative worlds. That is how mirrors, posters [and] family portraits function too." Cloud also uses unconventionally shaped canvases to undermine the relationship of his work to the wall or room it is placed in. As the artist explains, "[The works] occupy the space in a sculptural way rather than an architectural way. They sit somewhere between a portal, a shadow, a wall, a sculpture and a free being."



*Removed Individual*, oil on canvas with stretcher bars, 2013, Mike Cloud  
Image: Courtesy of Mike Cloud and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

Cloud's artworks carry a distinctly naive sensibility that feels at odds with the involved and canny nature of his artmaking. The artist seems to approach his practice with a great degree of consciousness regarding the construction and presentation of his works, and yet his output feels quite raw and immediate. This is perhaps what is most interesting about Cloud's work, and what sets it apart from the practices of so many of his contemporaries in **American art**.