

TUSSLE

MAGAZINE PROJECTS ABOUT

The Deconstructed Self as Symptom

Mike Cloud: *Holistic Abstraction*

Thomas Erben Gallery, New York

by Gwenael Kerlidou, October 22, 2024

In Mike Cloud's eighth exhibition at the Thomas Erben Gallery, what is different from his previous one-person shows, is that the artist has traded his signature disjointed stretcher bars for broomsticks holding big homemade mop heads. Previously, the traditional stretcher was disassembled, and its separate bars were reorganized into large symbolic figures such as stars, arrows, or diamonds. Pieces of canvas were then ostensibly stapled to the front of the bars, instead of their sides or back. They were painted with multiple symbols such as eclipses, rainbows, snowflakes, and turkey hands, as well as scrolling text fragments referencing the names of people and website links.

In his earlier shows, the detached stretcher bars, as much as they were being reconfigured as a new symbolic whole, functioned both as a metaphor for the dismantling of the underlying pictorial and social structure of a flawed Patriarchal, Colonialist order and as a critique of Painting's cultural function in reinforcing that order.

As in the previous work, with a kind of horror vacui, a plethora of enigmatic symbols covers every inch of available space for painting, sending the viewer back to a "Primitive", non-Western spiritual cosmogony, updated to our specific historical moment by URL addresses thematically calibrated for each particular piece: For example, in this show, a link to a tent maintenance website for the "Teepee" shaped painting titled "How to clean a tent, 2024". The sheer abundance of prominent symbols, both in the superstructure and on the painted "surface", makes these works look like totemic ritual artifacts from an unknown tribe, adding an unexpected fictional dimension to the installation.

The switch to broomsticks and mop heads fashioned out of strips of slightly soiled bare canvas was precipitated by the artist's recent residency at the American Academy in Rome, Italy, and by the physical distance and change of perspective it provided the artist from his own historical and cultural context. While the new paintings retain the structural organization of the previous work, it might not be too far-fetched to see these new mop heads as surrogates for oversized paintbrushes, perhaps hinting, this time around, at Painting as a kind of mess to be cleaned up rather than just dismantled: paint brushes as cathartic cleaning tools rather than artistic ones.

The second change that the viewer might pick up in these recent pieces, is the new prominence of wood dowels holding the broomstick structures together. Made out of everyday wooden objects, such as pencils, or the handle of wood spoons, clearly belonging to the domestic realm, these dowels hold together the bigger structural contraptions, as if the domestic was keeping the holistic together. The irruption of a ritualized domesticity in the space of painting, ritualized by repetition from piece to piece, might also remind the viewer of earlier historical examples, such as Noël Dolla's iconic "Drying rack" pieces, from the early days of Supports/Surfaces, the French group from the late sixties, which questioned the elevated status of traditional painting mounted on a stretcher by confronting it to our desublimating daily chores, or of some of Janis Kounellis' Arte Povera pieces, where the "poverty" of unglamorous materials reflected an underlying class consciousness.



Image 1: *Tyus Jones Phoenix Suns*, 2024, Oil on canvas, wooden broom sticks and cooking spoons, colored pencils and canvas strips 94 x 74 x 6 inches. © Thomas Erben Gallery, photo credit: Fernando Sandoval/MW.



Image 2: *How to Clean a Tent*, 2024, oil on canvas, wooden broom sticks and cooking spoons, colored pencils and canvas strips 74 x 34 x 6 inches, © Thomas Erben Gallery

The new broomstick/mopheads contraptions are often superimposed on a background of stretcher bars which on a second look seem eerily arranged in the form of a guillotine. Like the leather belts hanging from wood pegs at the top of most paintings in the show, and sometimes looping in a noose, these ominous shapes are there to remind us of what is at stake. Their subliminal message alludes to an ever-present possibility of punishment. Interestingly, the guillotines are still fashioned out of stretcher bars, not out of broomsticks: they still belong to the score-settling phase of the work, more than to its mopping-up part. Perhaps echoing the welded chain links in Melvin Edwards' sculptures, these belts and guillotine shapes seem to convey the sense that looking at these works might itself be a sort of guilty and punishable activity, that Painting (or Sculpture) might at some level be a dangerous enterprise both for the maker and the viewer.

Victimhood, and the different degrees of a victim's guilt, are a big part of Cloud's discourse on his work. While addressing our collective guilt at forever misreading the ultimate meaning of these opaque symbols, and in so doing arousing the wrath of the powers that be, religious or political, what seems to be at stake here is more about a kind of totemic guilt transfer from the painter to the viewer.

In the hands of Cloud, Deconstruction, instead of the Structuralist exercise it was at the time of Supports/Surfaces, becomes the passage from the metaphorical through the symbolic to the symptomatic, as a loss of sense, of wholeness, a nostalgic longing for an unreachable unified narrative or totality, a critical dismantling of Painting as a subjective construct as much as a social one.

To get a better grasp on Cloud's approach to fashioning a narrative, we might need to look back to Sergei Eisenstein's concept of Montage in filmmaking of the early 1920s, as a way to generate meaning in a narrative: The juxtaposition of two unrelated images producing a third semantic proposition. Montage, rather than Collage or Assemblage, are two modernist categories that allow us to frame the relationship of everyday objects to Painting because Collage and Assemblage produce surfaces and spaces rather than narratives. Montage then, followed by Démontage and Remontage (my coining), dismantling the organization of a discourse's elements but keeping them reorganized in a different sequence. Where Deconstruction produced a critical discourse and a political rejection of the object of its critique, Remontage proposes an alternative narrative, a kind of "what if...?"; the production of a floating meaning, a breach in the overdetermined chain of signifiers, a playful fictional exit from the entrapments of utopia.

The dual nature of these elements, structural as well as metaphorical, the combination of the anxiety present in the symbolic structure with the repetitive, ritual chattering of the painted parts offers a glimpse into the semantic mechanics of Cloud's work and its constant shifting between the metaphorical and subjective symbolism and to the symbolic as a social symptom. Trying to breathe new life into a meaningless ritual called Painting, he proposes a kind of reconstructed fictional abstract narrative as

a symptom of our disjointed historical dead-end moment, rather than as a step towards a utopian future: Holistic Abstraction as social therapy.

It might be tempting to place Cloud's work in the historical perspective of earlier "Black" deconstructionists, as Cloud might seem to be walking in the footsteps of these pioneers. But I think he operates on a very different paradigm.



Installation view, © Thomas Erben Gallery, photo credit: Fernando Sandoval/MW.

A short parenthesis might be in order here to distinguish "Black Deconstruction" from "White Deconstruction" and to note in passing that in the last forty years, when mainstream American-type Abstraction mostly ignored European ideas about Deconstruction, on this side of the Atlantic, it seems that African-American abstract painters were the only ones to seriously entertain these ideas. While Supports/Surfaces was programmatically interested in putting as much distance between their work and the products of Modernist Idealism, be it from the School of Paris or American Formalism, here in the US, "Black" abstractionists (such as Al Loving, Sam Gilliam, Howardena Pindell, Joe Overstreet, Jack Whitten, Suzanne Jackson, Carl Hazelwood, Carol Harris and many others, the list is long) were trying to forge a path for Painting outside of the dominant "White" American formalist narrative, as well as outside of the "Black Nationalist" figurative painting discourse. What is worth noting is that in that instance this was done intuitively, subversively, in a non-programmatic way, without an intellectual support system comparable to what we now call the Poststructuralist thinkers of the French sixties.

What separates Cloud from his forebearers, though, is the way he negotiates the winding path between formalist abstraction, even deconstructed, and figurative identity-based narration. He bypasses the endless debates between modernism and postmodernism and stays clear on either the neo-primitive or the outsider artist discourse. He seems to be placing himself outside of most currently identifiable narratives.

For the last thirty years, Abstract Painting has been caught in an endless cycle of returns and reprocessing, revisions, and repetition, a historical phenomenon that will need its Lacanian interpretation at some point. It may take someone from a peripheral intellectual community, at least peripheral to the mainstream of the American historical ideology of Abstraction, to sidestep the blockage, offer a fresh perspective, and explore a new direction.

A unique voice in the landscape of contemporary painting, Cloud presents us with a new possibility, a new opening, for this "Obscure object of our desire", to paraphrase Luis Bunuel, an object both fictitious and inaccessible, that Painting has come to embody for us today.

Mike Cloud is a prolific artist with a Rabelaisian, protean spirit, with a Gargantuan appetite for references. His paintings come across as exuberant conundrums with dark undertones. With each passing show, he has been pushing his work's boundaries further into unexplored territories. Holistic Abstraction is a significant refining of his vision, which makes us all the more curious about what might be coming next.