



Mike Cloud

Cut and Paste: Editing and Assemblage in Mike Cloud's Works on Paper

Mike Cloud is consumed with the female perspective. Intent on gaining insight into the historically fraught notion of the "female gaze," he pays serious attention to the ways in which white women photographers capture and put forth images of others, primarily through the genre of portraiture. Taking photography books (the typically large-format, glossy type found on countless coffee tables across America) containing widely distributed images by such photographers as Diane Arbus, Annie Leibowitz and Mary Ellen Mark, Cloud cuts out and reassembles figures into hybrid creatures. Creating near-Frankensteinian amalgamations of bodies, Cloud's gestures can be read paradoxically as both nurturing and respectful, and destructive and violent, while his methods of de- and re-assembly both reveal and disrupt ideas of holistic subjectivity or intact representation. Interested in photography's historic capacity to establish type, Cloud's act of collaging together the parts of distinct people is intended to reduce the burden on any single individual to function as the archetype for any given group—"the midget," "the skinhead" or "the African," for instance. Through his complicated

African Ceremonies: Volumes I and II, 2005 (details)



combinatory material gestures, Cloud invokes and questions notions of uniqueness. These now-collective bodies seek to mutilate the potential for generalization found within photography's facile reproduction and circulation, and to spread the burden of representation from individual to group.

In the body of work presented here, *African Ceremonies*, (2005) Cloud uses the two-volume book of the same name as his source. With photographs by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, this anthropological endeavor compiles a large number of color photographs depicting traditional African rituals and ceremonies. In this series, Cloud's interest in photography's propensity toward the fetishization of the image and, in the case of portraiture, the body, is paramount. Like Sherrie Levine's appropriation of the works of male artists who came before her, Cloud's adoption of women artists' images is both homage and critique. Yet Levine keeps her original sources intact, while Cloud isolates elements and re-focuses emphasis. The formal articulation of transforming now-eviscerated source material into new bodies might be considered a morally suspicious act of fetishistic attention to isolated aspects of the human body. In Cloud's hands, each body part becomes deliberately exaggerated, the focus of undue attention, and triggers the familiar voyeuristic unease that often accompanies the viewing of a portrait. Cloud has described the editing process inherent to photography as "audacious" for its bold subjectivity often shrouded in a perceived "truthfulness" or "objectivity." By presenting both the two-dimensional collaged figures and the original books with the negative, cut-out spaces apparent (like topographical maps through which momentary views of the past are

visible), Cloud's editing process is a counterintuitive mode of additive production. He rejects the notion of exclusionary selection designed to locate a singular or quintessential image in favor of careful arrangements that highlight a continuous overlapping, blending and shifting of body, and by extension, identity.

Roland Barthes describes the relationship between the photographer and his subject as invoking a near existential crisis. In front of the camera, one struggles to exert an authentic subjectivity and yet the snap of the lens is akin to a small death in which the subject becomes a specter at the hands of his photographer, who "... himself fears this death in which his gesture will embalm me."¹ Barthes' discomfort perfectly articulates the moral dilemma inherent in portraiture and the profound power dynamic that exists between photographer and sitter. Cloud's work acknowledges the startling capacity of the photographic image to create meaning and influence opinion, which reached near-hysterical debate with such exhibitions as the Museum of Modern Art's 1955 *Family of Man* and the (ultimately censored) Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective of 1989. This power struggle is made visible, and even magnified, in Cloud's work, in which he appropriates not only an image, but also its fundamental questions of control and authority, further complicating the subject/object dilemma and the question of authorship.

By literally adopting the gaze of the white woman, rearticulating it and claiming it as his own, Cloud's artistic process plays out some of the dynamics of race and gender that mark American history and continue to saturate contemporary life around the globe.

As a black man, Cloud investigates a shared marginalization with white women, yet he also recognizes the intense ambiguity stemming from the cultural biases and ever-present stereotypes that have played such a large role in keeping the relationship between these two groups contested territory. This is, after all, a country in which the memory of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy who was beaten and murdered in Mississippi in 1955 after he whistled at a white woman, still looms large. "The parallel position," as Cloud describes it, shared by the artist and those he appropriates, is constantly thrown into complicated relief by the social history that provides a highly charged context for the work, and by the unique position of his referents as photographers whose images are embraced within both the artistic and commercial realms and enjoy such wide circulation as to be immediately recognizable to many viewers. To view Cloud's collaged figures is to become aware of his position as both subject and object of the work and then to feel implicated in the process... to recognize, as Barthes says, "I am the reference of every photograph."² These subtleties of continual renegotiation and their inherent politics resound acutely in Cloud's collages and for me personally—a white woman invited to comment on Cloud's powerful, provocative and troubling imagery.

ANNE ELLEGOOD

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981) 14; originally published in French as *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).

2. Barthes, 66.

