

Mike Cloud

Layering is always present in the work of Mike Cloud, something that both obscures and, paradoxically, reveals by obscuring what is underneath – and at times if only because he makes us reconcile visual and textual information: what we see and what we read. He is an artist who doesn't believe that the physical and the conceptual are in opposition, who trusts as much in logic as in intuition, and who makes no real distinction between the object and the subject. While most of his paintings have a rough, messy facture, and he lays bare their materials and supports, the underlying structures are squares and grids, and Cloud often relies on mathematical equations, on algorithms and Venn diagrams, to calculate his initial procedure. "The appeal of systematic painting," he says, "is that it nails down the subject."⁸ And what is his subject, or, since his work has taken on various appearances over the years, what are his subjects? One of his earliest groups of paintings is based on reproductions of old master still lifes. Each work has the same dimensions as the original but has been divided into a grid of 256 equal rectangles, for which he created a palette of 256 colors. In his abstraction *Paul Gauguin: Still Life with Sunflowers* (2002), as one might expect, there are no flowers and no signs of anything remotely recognizable: Cloud has transformed the original into a geometric still life. With his "color chart" and "film quality" paintings, Cloud considers the toxicity of his lead paints – from mild to moderate to severe – and their drying speeds in relation to colors and paint film quality. In the "Color-aid" paintings, strips of Color-aid paper have been affixed to, and some partly peeled away from, a silvery aluminum surface that reflects them, while the painted ground is visible behind the paper and the aluminum. Because Color-aid comes in fixed increments, he says of these works, "The phenomenological experience of color is also algorithmic."⁹ In 2005, Cloud began a series of portraits that would not at first glance seem to belong to the genre, although we identify them as such because of the artist's designation. He refers to the paintings as "caricatures," opening up some leeway in terms of representation – allowing for exaggeration and distortion. Even so, they are, in visual terms, wholly abstract. All the paintings have either a white or dark grid composed of squares that have been painted freehand and a vertical or square orientation, as a portrait would have. On top of the grid he adds another layer, an expressionist outburst of forms that is a kind of spontaneous combustion. He paints quickly and directly, with no pretense to virtuosity, and again the support appears vulnerable (like a person, in fact). These abstract portraits may not offer the viewer a recognizable human subject, but each represents an individual. For Cloud, there is the presence of each person – and perhaps their energy – and even if we don't see them, he painted them, and he does. Cloud's overriding subject is painting itself.

At the same time that Cloud was making these portraits, he began to incorporate toys and parts of children's board games in his paintings, experimenting with abstract/pop combines that didn't look like anything he had done before. Once again, he would take a visual path that seemed unrelated to those previously explored, and yet he did not significantly diverge from his basic concerns or from a consistent way of working. Nothing is precious; all the layers are visible, as is the canvas and stretcher; he always uses humble materials; and the paint is paint even when it registers or delineates an image. In some of the first works, the title identifies the painted image as a maze: *Mule on Cloud Maze*, *Duck on Lightning Bolt Maze*, *Elephant on Heart Maze* (all 2005). The animals are plastic toys that have been attached to the

canvas with a painted-over support. The plasticity of the toys combined with the intentional crudeness of the paint application creates a hybrid object that is easily read but uneasily received. This is exactly the juncture at which Cloud wants to place not only the viewer but also himself. "I'm interested," he has noted, "in how the compression of an essentially random world, through the mediation of art [and] popular culture, has altered my perception of both images and objects."¹⁰ In 2007–08 Cloud upped the ante with new combine paintings that he called "quilts." For these works, he built shaped stretchers with the bars extending beyond the canvas like multiple spokes and sewed infants' and children's clothing onto them to create a dissonant surface on which to paint. The clothing has imagery, mostly of animals – cute tigers and bears and dogs – as well as language, all of which is legible, albeit obscured by paint that could have been applied by the children who might have worn these shirts and jeans and socks. They could be mud-stained or chocolate-spattered, the evidence of an unruly, unsupervised playtime/paint-time. The works can be humorous and they can be disturbing. But are they the product of a rational or an irrational mind? Or of both?

- 1 *Untitled – Fairie* 2008
oil on plastic
50 × 52 × 1 1/4 in (127 × 132 × 3 cm)
- 2 *Purple Circle Geometric Quilt* 2007
oil and clothes on canvas with stretcher bars
96 × 96 in (244 × 244 cm)
- 3 *Caricature Portrait M.C.* 2005
oil on linen
72 × 62 in (183 × 158 cm)



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