

## Chicago Spleen

### Mike Cloud at Corbett vs. Dempsey

by Gareth Kaye | March 25, 2025



As with all forms of inquiry, there is a necessary coefficient of redundancy that attends the best art. Mike Cloud's feverishly provisional paintings certainly embraced this truth some time ago. Malformed canvases, amputated wooden spoons, winding, mucilaginous URLs, and hand turkeys branded with floating signifiers are mischievous confirmations of an awkward inoperability that has befallen painting's representative horizons as of late.

Circle Chat, Cloud's current exhibition at Corbett vs. Dempsey, locates the artist's practice at the ambivalent—but resolutely probative—axis between representation and abstraction. Unable (or uninterested) in pivoting beyond this juncture, its cumulative effect characterizes painting as an inconvenient hostage to an intemperately communicative digital culture. But Cloud is quick to signal a history that won't just go away. Painting has other plans, ones that hinder the frictionless passage of

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information by injecting a capacity for estrangement into an otherwise perfect flow of consumption.

Cloud's approach to representation appears less driven by images-as-such than by a combinatorics of letters, names, and totemic figures. Perhaps the most semantically fecund of the bunch is the Kingdom of Luang Phrabong, a freestanding, bifold object comprised of a patchwork of canvas and interlocking stretchers resembling an off-kilter room divider. A rafter of hand-turkeys is assembled across each of its faces and is bedecked with injured hearts or names that enigmatically refer to celebrities or historic figures relevant to the minor feudal dynasties alluded to at multiple points.

One section marked "Beylik of Candar," citing the thirteenth-century Anatolian dynasty that collapsed after brothers Ismail and Kizil Ahmed (both of whom are represented by a respectively wounded turkey) came into conflict. Around such tantalizingly enigmatic names and places floats a miasma of viruses, shamrocks, and googly eyes, each of which is a common icon for Cloud and can be found throughout the show. They could be here for multiple reasons, but if disease, luck, and history are anything, they occur where they will.

The discursive and technical schemes that Cloud judiciously applies seem reciprocally ill-suited to support one another. Paint, text, and additional agglomerations of material are each adhered in portions that one might liken to an appetizer prefixed by "loaded." Their discomfit productively reveals an abasement of information vis-a-vis its excesses, foregrounded by the material and symbolic glossolalia that bubbles on every surface.

Titled after the comet whose collision with Jupiter provided the first observable instance of interstellar collision, Shoemaker Levy is a dodecahedral arrangement of several jaggedly adjoining tableaux. Four of these depict a spiralized URL against a nebulous field of color, pertaining to the comet in question. The grouping of all five is reminiscent of Hubble telescope images showing the constellation of galaxies at the edge of our own; the context of each link loosely reveals what it may, or may not, expose.

As the deep reaches of space mark the limits of our comprehension, the URLs may mark the limit of what a painting can or cannot represent without occluding its subject. Some links are from NASA or another Wikipedia, but the largest begins: "<https://reddit.com/r/spaceporn/comments...>" One can only imagine what might exist on the other side of obscurity.

Not all of Cloud's constructions are reducible to their encyclopedic glut. Commercial Grade Diamond is easily the most trim of the group. But where it lacks in symbolic addenda, ribbons, or the letter sequences that furnish its cohort, the painting adopts their totemic strategy by shaping itself into its namesake. The phrases blood diamond, pseudo diamond, simulated diamond, conflict diamond, and finally, commercial-

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grade diamond have been crammed into a strip of canvas, vying for semantic dominance. There is also Erik Lensherr, a pared-back arrangement with a single hand-turkey that identifies its titular figure—the civilian name of Magneto from the X-Men comics—as an FJC “fictional Jewish character.” Surrounding it are different alphabetical fragments cascading in permutation down bands of canvas.

If you’re arrogant enough to try and decipher the higher schema Cloud seems to be hinting at, it might be wise to recall how Glenn O’Brien neatly summed up Sarah Palin’s own way with words: “They are not ordered logically but biochemically, forming a rhetoric of subconscious rhapsody.” In using painting’s empiric strengths to exacerbate its epistemic deficiencies, Cloud reaches the proverbial “eureka!” by way of negation. This tactic spots an instructive break between painting and its screen-based foils. Cloud plays painting as a kind of noumenal mirror that suggests the actual material of knowledge is beyond our sight, off-screen but equally at-hand.

Mike Cloud is on view at Corbett vs Dempsey until April 26. I highly recommend you see it. The Arch Connelly show is also great, but I’m not writing a review.