

MIKE
CLOUD:
FIGURE
STUDIES



Front cover: *Leibovitz Orange #20*, 2008

Mike Cloud: Figure Studies

April 28–July 7, 2018



(Upward Arrow) Yellow Field, 2017



(Star) White Square, 2017

FACE VALUE

By Lily Siegel

Executive Director and Curator

Figure Studies looks at the work of Mike Cloud (born 1974, Chicago; lives and works in Brooklyn, New York) and addresses how we read symbols, shapes, faces—even history. Nothing should be taken at face value. The title refers to the artistic exercise of creating preparatory drawings, often using live models, to most exactly portray the human form. The practice began in Western art in the 15th century as realistic depiction and mastery of skill became paramount and the hierarchy of genre in painting was being canonized by the academy with history painting ranking highest, followed by portraiture, genre (scenes of everyday life), landscape, animal, and finally still life.

During the Renaissance (14th–17th centuries AD), Roman mythology became a rich source of content for history paintings. One especially popular story was that of the abduction of the Sabine women by Roman men at the time of Rome’s foundation. The story goes that shortly after the establishment of Rome, the Romans needed women to marry and establish a bloodline. They approached their neighbors, the Sabines, to negotiate a partnership but were rebuffed. An elaborate plan was made to host a festival in honor of Neptune at which the Roman men would carry away the Sabine women and make them their wives. The moment of the abduction, referred to as the Rape of the Sabine Women, was depicted by many of the most well-regarded Renaissance painters—including Jacques-Louis David, Nicolas Poussin, and Peter Paul Rubens—to show their mastery of both male and female bodies in movement and grouped in moments of passion. Later, modern masters such as Edgar Degas and Pablo Picasso painted their own version of the scene based on Poussin’s and David’s versions respectively.

The exhibition is organized around Mike Cloud’s version of *The Rape of the Sabine*

Women, entitled *Cycle and Stable* (2015). Cloud does not follow in the tradition of history painting *per se* with his depiction. Instead, he insists on his subject through written language. As if striking out the work of those before him who broached the topic, a wood dowel affixed to the front of the monumental painting is inscribed with the phrase, “Racial mythologies and stories about money.” Scrawled prominently across a portion of the surface are the words, “Rape (but only)(+)of the Sabine women!” There is not a single human figure to be found. The body is represented, however, through language, a group of disembodied wagging tongues, and a set of furled stars and stripes evocative of a pair of spread-open legs. Language and allusion can sometimes elicit stronger images than expertly painted pictures.

For the Leibovitz Orange collages, 26 of which are included in this exhibition, Cloud mined Annie Leibovitz’s photographs for moments he could dissect and repurpose to question subjective systems of perception. He plays with ideas of celebrity and recognition in a poignant presentation of humanity. In one collage, *Leibovitz Orange #24* (2008), Jack Nicholson is shown in color smoking a cigarette, shirt open to expose his chest, and sunglasses obscuring his eyes. He is the macho character one has come to expect. But, Cloud subtly shifts this understanding by reconfiguring Nicholson with borrowed attributes from other black-and-white bodies—though there is a cigarette dangling from his mouth, his left hand foppishly holds a cigarillo, his legs are crossed tightly as he reclines in a plush leather chair. There is another headless (anonymous) figure in a lab coat spreading newspaper beneath Nicholson’s chair, medical equipment, and a computer monitor in the composition, as well. *Leibovitz Orange #26* appears to be an image of the Twin Towers tumbling down but with a closer look, the buildings are already gone, the two towers in the collage are just rectangular cut-outs of the smoky sky. Machismo is made tender and absence is given presence.

Two years after the Leibovitz Orange collages, Cloud created a series of paper quilts



Cycle and Stable, 2015

using Leibovitz's photographs, paint, and Color-aid paper. He returns explicitly to painting by way of photography. Color-aid paper was originally produced in 1948 for use as a backdrop for photographers. It was adopted a few years later by the legendary colorist and painter Josef Albers to teach color theory to his students at the Bauhaus in Weimar, Germany. Albers's teaching exercises of cutting and pasting combinations of Color-aid paper chips to understand the effects of color are now common practice for most first-year art majors. Cloud's quilts reconcile the two popular uses of Color-aid paper by incorporating them into complete works that fully embrace photography and painting. Color and figure vie for prominence. Each quilt is named after a recognizable individual from a Leibovitz image, but Cloud has cut up, painted over, or otherwise obscured them so that the viewer is left to scour the work for the titular personage.

Cloud asks us to question our assumptions and look at the way we look. The three most recent paintings in the exhibition, *(Star) White Square*, *(Upward Arrow) Yellow Field*, and *(Downward Arrow) Pink Square* (all 2017), are exactly, literally, what the artist tells us they are in the titles. However, the artist is asking us to focus our attention away from the shaped canvas, as implied by his naming structure using parentheticals, and instead asking us to look closely at the paint—white square, yellow field, pink square; it is, after all, just paint on a surface.

Cloud has said, "I was raised as a devout Christian and in my particular church we were taught that the Bible, being literally true, had no symbolic meaning. For us the story of Noah's flood, for example, didn't mean anything. It was just an event that occurred one day in the past and might (if we were bad) happen again by other means one day in the future."¹ For him, there is danger in symbolism, it must be deconstructed and distilled until one reaches the foundation without meaning. He is offering the viewer an opportunity to reconsider their truths.

¹ Mike Cloud, "The Form Giver: A Picasso Symposium," *Art in America* 103, no. 8 (September 2015): 85.



Leibovitz Orange #24, 2008



Leibovitz Orange #26, 2008

BIOGRAPHY

Mike Cloud (b. 1974, Chicago; lives and works in Brooklyn, New York) holds a M.F.A. from Yale University School of Art and a B.F.A. from the University of Illinois-Chicago. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago; P.S.1, New York; the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Danubiana Meulensteen Art Museum, Slovak Republic; Honor Fraser Gallery, Los Angeles; and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York. His work has been reviewed in the *New York Times* and *Art in America*, among others, and is featured in the publication *Painting Abstraction* by Bob Nickas, published by Phaidon Press. He has published his own words in *Art in America* and *Artforum*. His work is held in private and public collections including the Bronx Museum, Lincoln Center, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Cloud has lectured extensively on his work and contemporary theoretical art issues; he is currently an assistant professor at Brooklyn College/CUNY in New York. This is the first time Cloud's work has been shown in the greater DC area.



Body Builder Quilt, 2010



Jamie Foxx Quilt, 2010

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Leibovitz Orange (#1–3, 5–20, 22–27, and 30), all 2008

All collages on paper

6.75 x 10 inches

Body Builder Paper Quilt, 2010

Altered photography books, color-aid paper, and acrylic paint

60 x 66 inches

Jamie Foxx Paper Quilt, 2010

Altered photography books, color-aid paper, and acrylic paint

63 x 66 inches

Cycle and Stable, 2015

Oil on linen with stretcher bars, wood, and hardware

96 x 96 inches

(Downward Arrow) Pink Square, 2017

Oil on canvas

109 1/4 x 74 inches

(Star) White Square, 2017

Oil on canvas

80 x 70 inches

(Upward Arrow) Yellow Field, 2017

Oil on canvas

108 1/2 x 68 inches

All courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery, New York.



Leibovitz Orange #13, 2008

The mission of the Greater Reston Arts Center is to enrich community life by promoting involvement and excellence in contemporary visual arts.

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