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A Cloud Withdrew from the Sky: On the Nebulous Sculpture of Pam Lins

A Cloud Withdrew from the Sky

Superior Glory be

But that Cloud and its Auxiliaries

Are forever lost to me

-Emily Dickinson, from poem 895

Let's start with this, a fragment from a cloud poem, or, perhaps more aptly stated, a fragment from a poem toward a cloud. Dickinson's economic lines pose dense questions: How does a cloud withdraw from the sky, and what would its auxiliaries be? Perhaps most importantly, why is the cloud necessarily already lost even as it is perceived? These cloud-questions have much to do, I think, with the sculpture of Pam Lins, whose works, for some years, have taken on the literal and figurative quality of the cloud—that discrete structure which is at once empty and full, material and ephemeral, formless yet deeply iconic, melancholic but just as often comic.

At the time of the writing of this essay, Lins's exhibition was to include five sculptural wall-pieces and one freestanding sculpture: a large, upside-down plaster cloud that would occupy the center of the gallery and penetrate the wall dividing the gallery from its project space (not formally unlike the cult-inspiring mountain in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*). The conditional nature of this sculpture is telling: Whether or not the bulbous inverted cloud is built, whether you are stepping around it while reading this text or not is a strangely inconsequential detail. Because of its liminal, both there-and-not material condition, the cloud that Lins is forever working with, working around, working toward is already inscribed as the absent center that both is there and needn't be. In this way, Lins might be seen as a kind of whether/weather girl, who occupies herself as much with what is conceived of as what's actually seen.

In his 1972 book *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, Hubert Damisch marks a radical position for the cloud as a signifier in the history of western painting since the advent of linear perspective. For Damisch, the cloud is the necessary and disruptive supplement to a naturalized, analyzable code of one-point perspective. The cloud as auxiliary is the messy, unruly outside of an ordered, orderly mode of painting. Lins, in her five sculptural works here, employs the supplemental un/logic of the cloud in order to approach painting, to approach photography, to approach the gallery wall - to aggressively plot the circumference of art history and its institutions while deferring, indeed refusing, central occupation of them. (In a video piece done some years ago, Lins literalized this approach by strapping plungers to her feet and constructing a scene in which she scaled the walls of the white cube.) Lins makes all of her pieces from one form of processed wood or another, from plywood to Formica, and has honed a telling method of construction- she makes a piece, breaks it, and then fixes it, altering the original shape by reassembling it according to

the logic of the cracks and cuts she's made. Here, and in much of her previous work, her primary template-shape is that of a vent, the industrial, rectangular, usually aluminum tube that hovers from the ceilings of so many 50s-era public buildings, whether courthouses or elementary-school gymnasiums. Lins capitalizes on the unexpected, even contradictory, beauty of this shape, one that snakes into clunky, impossible J-shaped rectilinear curves to make it around corners; one that, most significantly, is designed to direct the flow of air and thus, is conceived, above all, to contain and tame an absence.

If Lins's sculptures are as much about the (presumably empty) spaces they mold themselves around, they necessarily give rise to an unusual relationship with their audience. They elicit a kind of bodily desire to see (and to seek), whereby the craning neck, the squinted eye at the crack, the up-on-tiptoes-to-peek, renders ineffective any instilled conventions of polite, distanced viewing. The body doesn't appear in any of the images Lins incorporates in her pieces; but, indeed, the body is interpellated at every turn. Indeed, the paintings Lins cobbles here to her reconstructed vents are copied after snapshots from her personal archive, one whose images, nonetheless, resonate uncannily for most of us. One is a simple landscape of a barren park, patchy with green grass and inhabited only by a red Igloo cooler and two cop cars cruising in the distance. Another painting is schematized wood grain—the formal swirls and knots of expensive wood applied (without any real intention to fool the eye) to a square of cheap plywood, looking for all the world like a Home Depot "how-to". A third painting shows the deserted parking lot of a Petsmart, in which a drainage vent has taken on startling large proportions. Instilling a kind of Buster Keatonesque instability to the most banal figure of architectural infrastructure—the venting system—Lins rends it from its utility and, as a consequence, re-tethers its throwaway aesthetic to a vehemently artistic tradition. Indeed, it's possible to read Lins as appropriating strategies from artists as disparate as Jasper Johns (infusing the familiar with the mysterious), Marcel Duchamp (constructing a withholding architectural space), Eva Hesse (gendering Minimalism), and Roy Lichtenstein (though his clouds, it's true, served a very different purpose.) Lins recognizes, even celebrates, that the cloud is not to be held onto, no matter how many vessels one builds around a void. It's interesting to remember that Michael Fried, in 1967, degraded Donald Judd and Robert Morris's Minimal sculptures by naming them "hollow" (while carefully emphasizing the double-reading of that word). Now, some forty years later, Lins herself underscores just how full the empty can be.

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