

Art Review: Nothing fluffy, white about piles of vapor in Ben Butler's 'Cloud Morphology'

BY: Fredric Koeppe

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In the matter of “Cloud Morphology,” an exhibition by Rhodes College assistant professor of art Ben Butler displayed through Nov. 1 at Crosstown Arts:

How much does a cloud weigh? According to scientists quoted by Heads Up, the Boys’ Life magazine website, the average cumulus cloud — whatever average means applied to clouds — weighs 1.1 million pounds. Think of that the next time you’re lying out on the grass of the backyard in suburban America or the grasslands of Mongolia and noting the clouds that look like bunnies and doggies and elephants and camels. Or the next time you’re in an airplane, drifting through gorgeous mystical ephemeral cloud kingdoms and shooting pictures through the little oval window with your iPhone. Clouds are heavy.

One of the criteria by which we judge the skill of landscape painters is their ability to convey the “gorgeous mystical ephemeral cloud kingdoms” that populate the upper air. How to reproduce the vaporous and transitory nature of clouds via a physical medium is a conundrum that has challenged artists since Leonardo sketched the atmospheric luminosities of the skies that dominate the backgrounds of his paintings. Considering the clouds of, say, Canaletto and Tiepolo, of Gainsborough and Constable enmeshes us in the paradox that art gives rise to, the mutability, even the transfiguration of materiality, that is, the world as we see it or imagine it and the material of the artist’s physical labor.

In the biological sciences, “morphology” is the study of shapes, both the shape and form of the appearance of an organism and the form and structure, even down to the molecular level, of the interior. Science depends on classification to maintain a grasp on the order of the physical world, while artists, who operate in wholly different creative and intuitive zones, tend to defy classification in pursuit of an imaginative truth. Yet Butler, in “Cloud Morphology,” seems to

want to work in both spheres, despite the fact — if we are dealing with facts — that clouds are the very souls of evanescence, however much they weigh, while art attempts to fix reality, however evanescent, into a permanent mode.

So at every point, we are confronted with a notion of paradox, the intellectual quality that lends depth and dimension to life as well as art. We may even say, since the “clouds” in this exhibition are fashioned from concrete, plaster and various kinds of wood, that word-play is implied; what verbal pairing could make a better oxymoron than “concrete cloud”? The examination is abstract and ennobling. The artist, through a kind of impeccable craftsmanship, gives us form and content simultaneously. Clouds are piles of vapor; he offers piles of plaster and concrete, intricate constructions of wood. Clouds can loom threateningly, fraught with shadows, so Butler’s cloud-forms are darkened with graphite. Reality balances the arbitrary attributes of art.

“Cloud Morphology” is — pun intended — a concrete exhibition. With only five works, it makes up for its spareness with a thorough grounding in the durability of medium, the weight of its artifacts. As in the old television commercial, Butler slices and dices clouds, exposing their inner workings, particularly in the major pieces, the floor sculpture “Cloud Morphology I” and the wall installation “Cloud Morphology II,” which more than any other work in the exhibition completes the paradox with its sensitive and poised elements of elegance and purity, dynamism and stasis.

Ben Butler, ‘Cloud Morphology’

Through Nov. 1 at Crosstown Arts, 422 N. Cleveland. Call 901-507-8030, or visit crosstownarts.org (<http://crosstownarts.org>).

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