

CHICAGO WORKS

MIKE CLOUD

WORLDLESS
OBSTRUCTION

MCA CHICAGO

ERRANT FORMS

As a visiting lecturer at Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, Mike Cloud opened his presentation with two slides featuring twenty-one questions. To compile the list, Cloud had scrutinized two reviews recently published about other artists' exhibitions in *Artforum* and extracted the questions the critics had asked about the artists and their work. Ranging from the biographical to the stylistic, these questions included, "What is the artist's socio-political background?" "How do the work's formal elements point to its deeper purpose?" "What systems of display and exchange are subverted by the work?" After reading each question aloud, Cloud shared that he often asks these questions of his own work, assuming no one else will.¹ This admission—delivered with Cloud's characteristic balance of irony and earnestness—reflects a core concern of his artistic practice: the anticipation, subversion, and frustration of questions posed about his work. Crudely constructed and densely packed with symbols, Cloud's paintings operate with an acute awareness of the conclusions we yearn to glean from works of art, actively swerving around interpretations, playing with assumptions, and insisting upon irresolution. As the curator tasked with translating the artist's practice to the MCA's audiences—a responsibility that increasingly demands brevity and clarity—I willfully admit that the slipperiness of his work has posed a challenge. Shifty and indeterminate, Cloud's paintings are errant objects that refuse to cohere into easy, stable readings. Instead, they persistently evade, disrupt, and toy with conventional ways of analyzing artworks, muddying connections between their provocative subjects, naive forms, and unexceptional materials—all the while obscuring biographical information about the artist, who remains distant and ambiguous.

1. "Mike Cloud, Visiting Artist Lecture 2025," Skowhegan, July 11, 2025, 77 min., 19 sec., <https://skowheganart.org/library/mike-cloud-visiting-artist-lecture-2025/>.



Poison Arrows South Africa, 2026.

Chicago Works | Mike Cloud: *Worldless Obstruction* consists of seven new paintings. While these works continue the format of Cloud's earlier paintings—canvases thickly layered with paint and stapled to configurations of wooden stretcher bars—they mark a sculptural development in Cloud's painting practice, which recently began to engage both the wall and the floor. "Worldless Obstruction," the exhibition's subtitle, alludes to this protrusion into three dimensions and underscores the works' disruptive physical presence. This sculptural turn in Cloud's practice was inspired by barricades, particularly those featured in Eugène Delacroix's oil painting *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), an immortalization of the July Revolution that removed King Charles X from the French throne (fig. 1).



(Fig. 1) Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830. Oil on canvas; 8 1/2 x 10 3/4 ft. (2.6 x 3.3 m). Musée du Louvre. Image © 2024 GrandPalaisRmn (Musée du Louvre) / Rabeau/Didierjean.

Like the barricades shoddily constructed from stone and wood by working- and middle-class Parisians in Delacroix's painting, Cloud's roughly built structures feel improvisational and raw, as if they were urgently assembled and left in the process of becoming. While "obstruction" connects these works to barricades physically and functionally, "worldless" references their utopian aspirations, framing them as abstractions belonging to another realm. Barricades without context, Cloud's paintings adopt the forms of protest while leaving their content

open-ended, urgently communicating an idea that remains elusive and opaque.

This ambiguity is compounded by Cloud's configuration of stretcher bars into shapes that hover between discernible symbols and abstract structures depending on their presentation. This exhibition includes paintings that resemble five shapes, ranging from the mundane to the politically charged: an arrow, a fish, a hexagram, a teepee, and an "X." Like each shape that the artist selects, "X" carries multiple associations, including the letter of the alphabet, the mathematical variable, and the social media platform. Although these shapes are legible when the paintings are exhibited on a wall, they become increasingly unfamiliar when the structures are folded and installed on the floor, underscoring the flexible nature and shifting resonance of symbols and forms. For instance, two hexagram-shaped paintings are included in this exhibition, one hung from a wall and another installed on the ground. While the wall-based painting readily registers as a hexagram—conjuring associations with the Star of David, the Creator's Star, and the Shatkona—the floor-based painting, folded using metal hinges and held upright with pegs and rope, takes on a more amorphous silhouette, appearing less as a discernible symbol and more as an abstract configuration of hard-edged shapes. Always provisional, the configurations of the works can change each time they are presented. The multivalence and shape-shifting capacity of Cloud's paintings preserve their open-endedness and allow for multiple interpretations, refusing impulses to impose sweeping, dogmatic readings upon them.

When constructing his paintings, Cloud intentionally leaves the support structures visible, allowing the viewer full access to the paint-splotched wooden stretcher bars stapled to his canvases, as well as



Poison Arrows South Africa, 2026.

the pegs and rope keeping his sculptural works balanced and upright. Their amateurish structural mechanics laid bare, the works possess a DIY quality that emphasizes both their makeup of everyday store-bought materials and their physical precarity. Not only do Cloud's structures—and the symbols to which they allude—possess multiple resonances and adopt multiple configurations, but they also threaten to fall apart at any moment, their structural integrity as provisional as any fixed symbolic meaning ascribed to them.

Cloud's canvases are animated by painted motifs that recur throughout his oeuvre—clouds, snowflakes, rainbows, clovers, hearts, and hands among them. While several of these elements relate to landscapes, they do not coalesce into discernible representations of a place. Instead, they congregate in tightly compacted clusters, forming intricate



Poison Arrows South Africa, 2026.

designs in which the symbols, like the structures of Cloud's paintings, linger between recognizable entities and abstract forms: clovers approximate clumps of brush strokes, rainbows resemble concentric lines of color, and clouds waver between bulbous fields of paint and speech bubbles. The artist's use of acrylic paint, like his crude treatment of the stretcher bars, is intentionally rudimentary, yielding naively rendered forms that resonate with his own description of his works as "unschooled images"²—a paradoxical characterization given his MFA in painting and over twenty years of exhibition history and teaching experience. However, Cloud is not interested in straightforward displays of painterly virtuosity. Instead, his work actively obscures his education and training and eschews any biographically driven readings of his work, evading questions about his identity and sociopolitical background.

This impulse to obscure meaning also informs Cloud's artistic approach toward the human body. Forms such as emojis and hands allow him to suggest the presence of a figure without displaying a body in full. Just as he refuses biographical specificity, Cloud abstains from realistically representing the body—a subject that invariably incorporates identity and forecloses the ambiguous and open-ended signification to which his work aspires. Similarly, hands that recur throughout Cloud's compositions imbue his paintings with a corporeal presence without complete presentations of a figure. Equipped with twig-like line drawings, bird heads, and bones, these motifs simultaneously approximate the hand turkeys that children make as a Thanksgiving craft, birds themselves, and anonymous people of any age. These connections continue both the shape-shifting quality of Cloud's symbols and his whimsical use of forms. Ranging widely in hue, these hands reflect the browns, beiges, and pinks of skin colors in some instances while adopting

decidedly inhuman neon greens, navy blues, and pale whites in others. By fluctuating between naturalistic and unnaturalistic tones, Cloud plays with the viewer's expectations of skin color and its resonances. Just when one expects a painting with a human-shaded hand to offer commentary on race, Cloud presents another painting in the same series with a decidedly synthetic hue, frustrating interpretations underpinned by identity-based categories.

Although the vibrantly colored symbols recurring throughout Cloud's paintings carry a playful cheeriness, this lighthearted aesthetic frequently belies complex and controversial histories associated with the URLs found in his works. To select a URL, Cloud searches a term describing the painting's shape on online news outlets, typically *The New York Times*, and selects the first result. He then embeds the URL of the most recent story into the work, either by painting it directly on the canvas or on a piece of tape affixed to a stretcher bar. Given the politically charged nature of these shapes, Cloud's queries have the potential to surface stories of war and colonial legacies, though this chance-based process can also yield narratives of other kinds. For instance, *Poison Arrows South Africa*, a painting in this show, includes a URL leading to the story "Scientists Discover Oldest Poison, on 60,000-Year-Old Arrows," published by *The New York Times* on January 7, 2026. Cloud's search of "arrow" yielded this story, which informs both the title and the subject of a painting paradoxically animated by emojis, hands, clouds, snowflakes, and clovers rendered in a bubbly, iridescent palette of pastel yellows, blues, and pinks. While Cloud claims this story of the poisoned arrows as the subject of the painting, its abstract constellation of symbols, colors, and gestures muddies this statement, highlighting a dissonance between the work's ascribed subject and its perceived composition. Paralleling his approach



Poison Arrows South Africa, 2026.

to other symbols, Cloud's use of URLs circumvents impulses to read paintings empirically, prompting viewers to forge alternative connections between the forms of his work and the stories they claim to hold.

Cloud cites the 1993 Whitney Biennial as one of the most formative exhibitions for his practice. Staged at the Whitney Museum of American Art, this show remains one of the most controversial and influential presentations of contemporary art in the United States for its uncompromising focus on themes of identity and representation, which were primarily articulated through installation, sculpture, and photography. Given the obfuscation of biography and prevalence of painting in Cloud's practice, the overtly political 1993 Whitney Biennial initially feels like an unexpected choice. However, the biennial's resonance with Cloud's work does not necessarily



Poison Arrows South Africa, 2026.

reside within a shared artistic sensibility. Rather, the biennial's impact on art criticism, and particularly its insistence upon race, gender, sexuality, and class as central concerns of interpretation, generated the questions that Cloud's work now aims to circumvent. Indeed, Cloud's paintings gesture toward socio-political issues—the symbolically loaded shapes of his paintings, their connection to the news cycle, their citation of barricades—only to refrain from taking legible stances and to instead present open-ended elements: shape-shifting structures, multivalent symbols, and dissonances between form and content. The paintings refuse fixity at every turn, their lexicon of images as slippery as their wooden structures are flexible in form.

Within a cultural climate that privileges legibility, visibility, and immediacy, Cloud's work insists upon abstraction and ambiguity, subverting the desires we bring to works of art: our longing for clarity, our want for quick explanation, our yearning to connect an artist's biography to their work. Lush and opaque, Cloud's thickly painted and crudely constructed works expand the function of the barricade into conceptual terrain, obstructing pathways toward empirical conclusions and forcing interminable detours through other modes of interpretation.

Nolan Jimbo
Assistant Curator

Mike Cloud was born and raised in Chicago. He earned a BFA from the University of Illinois Chicago (2001) and an MFA from Yale University (2003). He is currently Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Art, Theory, and Practice at Northwestern University. Cloud speaks openly about teachers who have influenced his practice, including Mel Bochner, Peter Halley, Byron Kim, Kerry James Marshall, and Jessica Stockholder.

Cloud's solo and two-person exhibitions include *Story Structure, Pt. 2*, The Neubauer Collegium, University of Chicago (with Nyeema Morgan, 2026); *Hammer Projects: Mike Cloud*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2026); *Circle Chat*, Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago (2025); *Called Ahead*, Fahrenheit Madrid (2024); *The Myth of Education*, Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago (2018); *Bad Faith and Universal Technique*, Thomas Erben Gallery, New York (2014); *Systems*, Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln (2006); and *Special Project: Mike Cloud*, MoMA PS1, New York (2005). He has also participated in group exhibitions at Artists Space, New York; Xavier Hufkens, Brussels; Good Weather, Chicago; White Columns, New York; and The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Cloud received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2024, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts' Richard Pousette-Dart Award in 2023, and the Jules Guerin Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome in 2023.

Chicago Works | Mike Cloud: Worldless Obstruction
May 2, 2026–Feb 7, 2027

This booklet was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Chicago Works | Mike Cloud: Worldless Obstruction*, organized by Nolan Jimbo, Assistant Curator, and presented in the Turner Gallery on the MCA's fourth floor.

Images, pp. 2, 5, 6, 9, 10: Mike Cloud, *Poison Arrows South Africa*, 2026. Acrylic on canvas and hinges; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery. Photo: Colleen Keihm.

Major support for *Chicago Works | Mike Cloud: Worldless Obstruction* is provided by Newcity.

Free admission for anyone 18 and under is generously provided by the Lefkofsky Free 18 and Under Fund.

NEWCITY

Generous support for *Chicago Works | Mike Cloud: Worldless Obstruction* is provided by the Sandra and Jack Guthman Chicago Works Exhibition Fund.

The MCA is a proud member of Museums in the Park and receives major support from the Chicago Park District.

The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. The museum is generously supported by its Board of Trustees; individual and corporate members; private and corporate foundations, including the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; and government agencies. The MCA acknowledges support from the Illinois Arts Council.

© 2026 by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means including photocopy, recording, or any other information-storage-and-retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.