The Same Clouds

I really don't know clouds at all
Joni Mitchell

Não, com nenhuma palavra abrirás a porta
Manuel António Pina

I start with the clouds. They are all I have. Three cotton-like clouds against a grey background. From each, two blue jets pour downward into faintly greenish puddles. I look back at the screen—my computer screen—and realize the jets are in fact pairs of legs. Suddenly, the clouds shift in meaning: they become torsos, walking in line, as if on a pilgrimage. Or maybe these legged clouds are tap dancing, framed by the ornate curtains of a stage that has just opened. I blink and refocus on the screen: Trees! The clouds are the canopies of three identical trees.

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When I was invited to write about Hiroshi Sugito's show, I was told I wouldn't have access to the works beforehand. Why, you ask? Just as I did. Well, first of all, Sugito is far away in Nagoya, Japan, and visiting his studio would be impossible. Moreover, the paintings are still in progress. However, he did mention that a 2008 painting, *Rain Clouds*, would be shown alongside the other, mysterious works.

I then delve into Sugito's catalogs: I go through four decades of the work of an artist who is both meticulous and bold, and seems particularly concerned with our ways of seeing, especially when he insists on the variation and recombination of elements—such as the play with frames and the recurring presence of curtains in his paintings, which underscore the fact that an artwork is always, at the very least, the image of an image.

I decide to write about imagination, because both the task of talking about something I don't know (and is happening right now across the globe) and Sugito's *Rain Clouds* seem to me to inhabit this domain: 'She's got her head in the clouds,' people often say about someone who is daydreaming, for clouds, like imagination, are 'the experience of openness.'[1] With their surfaceless bodies, in constant transformation and permeable to the atmosphere, clouds embody the fleeting and porous nature of this *wandering thought*, which forges images that exist only through their imminent dissolution– "a split second's enough/ for them to start being something else,"[2] wrote the poet Wisława Szymborska. In Sugito's work, as I see it through the screen, the clouds—typically associated with the unreachable skyward heights—are emphatically connected to the lower field of the painting through the meteorological occurrence of rain. There is, therefore, no binary opposition between sky and ground, cloud and puddle, the aerial and the earthly spheres. "Everything is in contact with everything,"[3] wrote Emanuele Coccia about the way in which what comes from above seeps into the Earth and makes life here possible.

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[1] Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1988).
[2] Wisława Szymborska, "Clouds" (*Chmury*), trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, in *Moment* (New York: Harcourt, 2002).
[3] Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, trans. A. L. Flyn (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

Similarly, I need to remind myself that imagination does not happen without the stimuli of sensory experience, nor without the influxes of memory. In her essay I*magens da Imaginação*, the Portuguese writer Tatiana Faia argues that "Imagination has, or seems to have, the same structure as memory, but it tends to surpass it in speed, pleasure, and anguish; one belongs in the past, and the other in the future."[4] When I list Sugito's many houses in his work, I immediately remember how I imagined the ruins of my own house. I don't know if I am heading toward the past or the future, but I do know that Sugito's houses, like mine, are a *kind of contagion: things drain toward them*. In their often illogical but always interconnected architecture, they seem to condense the passage of time — that which unfolds between before and after, but also time as a climatic phenomenon. In these houses, sometimes hollowed out, labyrinthine and impenetrable, I see a certain "nostalgia of chaos"[5] that governs the organic world: many have an adjacent tree, and houses are ripening even in still lifes.

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I step back for a moment and notice that I am piling up words as one lays bricks, precisely to talk about the work of a painter who once declared: "I begin to move my brush as if I were entering a forest, far from everything, and I want words and meanings to lose their power and simply disappear." Perhaps Sugito's resistance to the "kingdom of words"[6] is linked to a critique of interpretation, which, according to Susan Sontag, assumes that "something we have learned to call 'form' is separated off from something we have learned to call 'content.'"[7] Instead of the interpretative imperative, Sontag advocates for the recovery of meanings, so that more attention can be paid to forms, and one can "see the thing."[8]

I try to sharpen my senses as I gaze again at *Rain Clouds*. For a moment, I manage to stop seeing everything I had previously projected onto them—I allow the clouds to simply be clouds—or to stop being clouds altogether and become nothing more than white stains, losing definition as I zoom into the image. Now the clouds are like words repeated to exhaustion, becoming pure sound, devoid of meaning. Sugito's painting inhabits an interstitial zone between figuration and abstraction, and perhaps it is through this liminality that the artist acknowledges the failure of words, which somehow cancel themselves out in the back-and-forth between recognition and opacity.

I open my inbox to find the *Daily Poem* from *The Paris Review: The Cloud* by Jeffrey Skinner. The coincidence makes me smile, and one line from the poem feels especially fitting: "All words mingle, eventually, in the same cloud."

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[4] Tatiana Faia, "Imagens da imaginação," *In: revista Ouriço* 3 (February 2024), Belo Horizonte/Juiz de Fora: Macondo e Relicário.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Carlos Drummond de Andrade, *Looking for Poetry: Poems by Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Rafael Alberti and Songs from the Quechua*, trans. Mark Strand (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 32.
[7] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 5.
[8] Ibid, 14.

Just as I'm about to finish this essay, another email comes through—this time with the long-awaited images of the works Sugito will show. I hesitate to open the file—do I not prefer to remain in the aerosphere of imagination? I decide to move forward, and what I find is a series of untitled works that make my own bundle of words wither a little more. And yet, they are still all I have:

A house overtaken by the exuberant confusion of weeds. Another house, hollowed out, consumed by moss, blending into the background and the rock upon which it stands. Corners and fragments of houses, things adrift. I try not to interpret them, but to respond to them. And then, the clouds—again, but in a new way. And finally, two large linen canvases covered with countless sheets of paper, upon which the artist painted thin vertical rectangles—in shades of white, beige, and grey; in the other, in pink hues. The impression is of an endless cascade of paper strips falling downward: the atmosphere has taken on a profusion of surfaces. I imagine I've opened the windows, and outside it rains so heavily that the landscape is distorted or reimagined. I imagine, like Frank O'Hara, becoming "a landscape in a landscape," and then I, too, am distorted as I begin to fall. The storm slowly topples the houses now, drowning all imaginable words.

Julia de Souza