

Na Kim's Magnificent Portraits of Clouds

by Sheila Heti

Clouds have many moods, as many moods as a person does. One can always find a cloud beautiful. But is a mood always beautiful? The shape of a cloud is always disappearing, while some other shape is always appearing. Is it the same with human feelings? Sometimes when I think I am sad, it feels like the same old sadness I have felt before. But how can it be? I am sad for a different reason. I have had more experiences since the last time I was sad. The thoughts I'm attaching to this sadness are slightly different.

Maybe there *are* clouds in a cloudless sky—they are just so diffuse we cannot see them—so maybe it's correct to see that we are in a mood, always. I wonder if there is no baseline mood. Or maybe the baseline thing we can say about moods is that a mood is always forming and unforming.

If a mood is a cloud, then is an entire sky of clouds the collection of all the moods of all the people in the room, or the city? Or is a sky of clouds best understood not as moods diffused across people, but as diffused across time: that a sky of clouds is all the moods I've had in a day, or a year.

I feel like I admire all these paintings equally, just as some skies aren't better than others, and yet I prefer some moods to others. Actually, maybe my favourites among the paintings are those in which a cloud hangs alone, surrounded by sky. Why do humans like things in isolation? There's something comforting about seeing something that has lots of space around it. It makes us feel like children. We can

identify a shape. It soothes us to see something contained. Maybe that's what happiness is like: a perfect shape, self-contained, with lots of space around it. Whereas sadness or unhappiness seems to bleed and blur: it extends in all directions and feels never-ending, like a thin sheet of clouds across the sky.

These paintings are so much about paying attention: about how one can return to the same subject over and over again, and if one is truly looking, the subject is always new. Painting is about the act of paying attention. It makes what would pass, stay. Making something stay is saying it has value. Yet the central thing about a cloud is that it cannot stay.

Looking at a painting of a cloud is a way of looking at a cloud, but it's also a way of looking at looking. It seems, from Na Kim's paintings, that we might never tire of looking. And anything can have value if you give it enough attention. If you don't give a thing attention, its importance and meaning shrink.

"I like how present you have to be to experience clouds," Na told me, "and seeing them almost always feels like a memory, because they're so transient and shifting from second to second, and I feel that way about being alive and being a person. Does it sound like nonsense?"

"If you keep looking, eventually you'll find something new," she said, "and to find something new you have to keep looking. This makes life a little more exciting. Am I saying too much?"

One senses the swiftness and ease with which Na Kim painted these, which suggests, also, a way of living: with swiftness and ease, but still noticing. For the artist to have looked at so many clouds, on so many days, means that none of the paintings are too precious. They show a way of being here, in time—with the things outside us, and our insides, both of which are always changing.

“In a way, painting allows you to see things for the first time every time. It’s like you get a new lease on life every day,” Na said. “You’re feeding yourself in these new ways just by looking. I feel that way about how you can be so attached to someone—and not—within seconds. Or you suddenly notice the shape of them, and you’re completely in love. We are all just clouds!”

I think the cloud paintings are self-portraits, and I think the faces look like clouds. If one was to make a simple diorama of human life, and include only a face and a cloud, that would be sufficient to tell us everything about our existence. A face hung next to a cloud means we are in nature, but also, we *are* nature.

I love these paintings, and each one gives me a completely different feeling, and they make my heart catch with wonder. When I take a walk after looking at these paintings, every object in the world comes forth to meet me: clouds and trees and the bricks of houses, and the glitter-flecked concrete of the street. I realise that everything around us has its own shape and its own way of being, and that everything is here only for a short time, even the houses which seem so steady. Even the houses are passing and dying.

“At the end of the day, they are just paintings, and there are a million paintings, but they are important to me,” Na said, “because they are an effigy of my inner life and each one transforms me.”

The paintings have grandeur and balance, and they shine with an uncanny sort of light. They contain all of the elements, both placid and raging: the sky, the land, the wind, the sea. Her clouds hover above the earth and confront us with their individuality. They complete the sea and the land, as if the real feeling of a landscape lies in its clouds—which are its face. It’s almost as if the human soul is hard as a gem, while the soul of a landscape is shifting and wild.

Na Kim quoted Henry Miller to me: “Have you ever noticed that the stones one gathers at the beach are grateful when we hold them in our hands and caress them? Do they not take on a new expression? An old pot loves to be rubbed with tenderness and appreciation.”

This show convinces me that we should rub—should pay attention to—all those old things that surround us every day. And what is older than a face we love? And what is older than the sky?

“That’s the philosophy I want to approach every day with,” Na said, “to approach the world with love. And in order to do that, you need to really notice it.”

One feels that she is fascinated by clouds because of their shifting beauty, but also because clouds represent so well a fundamental truth about our lives: that as soon as anything (an expression, a mood, a relationship, a thought) has come into being and

taken shape, it's already dissolving into something new. Nothing is more like that than a cloud, but everything is like that, really.