

Cloud Study

Joanna Fiduccia

Summer seemed to pass Europe by. After a pittance of glorious days in July, the continent slipped through a seasonal wormhole. Gutters gurgled, leaves fell steadily on damp streets, and foul clouds trooped across the sky, stopping only to dump their dreary loads. Nick Oberthaler was in Brussels, a city notorious for its meteorological mood swings; even there, the locals admitted that this was a particularly grim summer. From his studio on an upper floor of the old Wielemans-Ceuppens brewery, in an industrial strip of land alongside the train tracks, Oberthaler had an unobstructed view of Brussels' cloudscape. The abstract paintings on paper that came out of that studio suggest landscapes *in situ*: gray scumbled surfaces, accented by the dusty pink of an urban sunset or the blue strip of naked sky.

Yet those surfaces, and the mood that vibrates from them, have been part of Oberthaler's work since well before this summer. His paintings shift from densely applied grounds to diaphanous, dusky washes within the space of a pencil line; as one approaches them, slivers of vivid color, expressive brushstrokes and finely drawn lines emerge out of his overcast palette. He layers his media as eclectically as his references: India ink, gouache, watercolor, wax crayons and pens, Jasper Johns and John Constable, Hans Hartung and Gaylen Gerber, to name but a few. Some works include small photocopies or clip-pings, stuck to his works like snapshots tucked into the corners of mirrors. He paints in intense bouts of action, followed by equally intense contemplation – intervals enforced as much by his temperament as his support (Oberthaler works on paper, easily wimpled or damaged if too much is done at once, and unlike canvas, indelible).

That is, Oberthaler works like a Romantic, with hours of concentration and distraction fomenting creative outpours. (You might also say he works like a cloud.) His paintings absorb this rhythm; they, too, are concentrations of energy and movement. The regular rectangular grids or striations in some of his works might recall minimalist painting, but their effects could not be more different. If a gesture repeats itself in one of his works, it seems to do so not to negate its expressive potential, but to expose its suppressive function. Philip Glass once stated in an interview that minimalist composers had sought to subtract emotion from their works in order to figure out what emotion really was.¹ The irony of this is not lost on Oberthaler: Acts of subtracting, repeating or repressing generate emotion; at its most radical, extreme rationality is extremely irrational. Where some painters of his generation have responded to this lesson through phlegmatic design, whose superficiality may have been the missing component all along (but at what cost?), or witty vandalism of the canvas, which substitutes attitude for both emotion and its lack (but to what end?), Oberthaler embraces the moods that a certain mainstream abstraction didn't desire – or didn't think – to evoke.

The German word for "mood" is *Stimmung*, a term that refers to atmosphere as well as temperament. From *Stimme*, or voice, it implies more than shifting humors. It speaks out of, or into, the self. It resonates. For Heidegger, *Stimmung* is this resonance, an attunement of a state-of-mind with the world. Like the weather, *Stimmung* "wraps" the body lightly; moods are the "least pressing [...]"

concrete encounters that our bodies can have with the material environment."² Mood is not just a feeling – it is the convergence of that feeling with the elements. You can get lost in a mood, but you can never be absent from it. It is the figure *and* its environment, the lone subject staring out at the ocean or the mountain range, *and* that vast ocean, *and* that foggy mountain range.

Romantic painting is populated by these encounters – *Stimmung* in its fullest sense – from Caspar David Friedrich's iconic *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), to Georg Friedrich Kersting's domestic scenes where figures linger near open windows. Friedrich has his window scenes as well: *Woman at a Window* (1822), for one, which was the publicity image for the thematic exhibition "Rooms With a View" at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The open window, along with the storm-tossed boat, is a key Romantic motif, an expression of yearning that typifies the romantic sensibility.³ The open window reflects this psyche, like a mirror to the studio in which the Romantic artist surveys the vast world from a distance ("In the distance everything becomes poetry," wrote Novalis. "Distant mountains, distant people, distant events, etc., everything becomes romantic."⁴).

Occasionally, the window stands empty. In Friedrich's sepia drawings *Left Window of the Artist's Studio* and *Right Window of the Artist's Studio* (1805–6), the window is half open in the foreground, giving out onto a blank sky and faintly limned boats in a harbor. The viewer takes the position of both the painter and the image's absent figure, gazing out at the landscape caught in the cross-hairs of the windowpanes. The perspectival grid that had been used for centuries to master the landscape's

infinitely unfolding distance fuses with the grid of the windowpanes; the desire to apprehend, to reach and record the view merges with the desire to escape into it. The rectangular grid in Oberthaler's paintings also fuses a formal world with an imaginative one. The grid, which has long since liberated itself from landscape painting, still claims a concrete, schematizing role in abstraction, while "abstract" – literally, to draw away – still suggests escape. Whereas at abstraction's height, that escape may have been transcendental, in Oberthaler's work, full absorption is countered by the variations and quirks in each painting that call for the constant attunement of one's attention. The subtlety of these surfaces demands that you come into them, as into a fog. You can get lost, but you can never be absent.

Some more recent works substitute for the grid, or the windowpanes, individual rectangles of paint that seem to float just above or cut slightly into the surface. But even detached from the grid, these rectangles keep similar proportions, which are, in fact, not necessarily those of windowpanes at all. Oberthaler works on paper, and the proportions of his paintings – from the substantial to the more intimate, suggest the standard proportions of paper, from A4 to poster-size. Paper, in fact, is not only the support for his paintings, but the support for Oberthaler's other activities. Romantic in temperament though he may be, Oberthaler is also connected to the somewhat less romantic world of print culture. In April 2011, he organized the group exhibition "Wallpaperism," in which all artist contributions took the form of wallpaper; detail shots of each work were collected into a publication with

tear-away pages, so readers could later recompose their own wallpapers. Oberthaler also co-directs the curated "artist-fanzine" *Black Pages*. Conceived like a series of artist's books, *Black Pages*'s monthly releases balance the casualness of a staple-bound zine with the preciousness of a small publication.

In addition, the images that appear in his works, from snapshots to found pictures, constantly refer back to the standards of printing and copying. Run an image through a Xerox machine enough times, and it acquires its own scumble of photocopy-static. Grainy photocopies of a choppy ocean meeting a cloudy sky, or of a man standing at the tide's edge, are no less instances of a romantic motif as illustrations of how that motif is reproduced and circulated. Combined with Oberthaler's finely drawn ink lines, they suggest the continuity between contemporary techniques and their lithographic origins – a nod to older mediums and older adepts. A tribute to Odilon Redon's series of lithographs *Dreams* (1891) reproduces Redon's composition, a dark interior framing a window, however Oberthaler replaces the Asiatic tree in Redon's lithograph with an offset rectangle striated with fine horizontal bars. Smudged with ink, the lines suggest a blank page maculated by the printing plate. This "page" is furthermore edged with an I-shaped strip of pale blue, peering out like the sky behind window blinds, or behind the clouds. As space of possibility on a sheet of paper recalls the dreamy space of clouds: mutable, blank surfaces, floating in the great yonder.

How to depict mutability is an old conundrum for representation. For Hubert Damisch, it is one reason why clouds constitute an important station in the history of painting: as part of the celestial continuum, they drift on the threshold of the "perspective code," revealing its limitations to depict what is both conceptually and practically unbounded. The illusion of depth in painting, Damisch explains, derives from the adjustment of proportions according to divisions made on the painted plane; clouds defy these divisions, if not *disegno* altogether. Thus a cloud resists drawing, Damisch notes, due to "not so much its shape, but rather its instability and evanescence."⁵ Painting, on the other hand, could handle "cloud's" mutability; the task of portraying it aligned with painting's push beyond a signifying function to a medium of color, light and movement. One thinks of Constable's landscape sketches, where the suggestion of a distant landscape and stormy sky is obliterated by several broad, expressive brushstrokes where the paint (or the rain) sloshes out of the clouds.

Oberthaler's work, as a painting practice executed with drawing media or as a drawing practice executed primarily through painting, slots itself somewhere between drawing's order and painting's movement. In fact, it dramatizes their tension, as paper – that medium of records and indelible marks – is worked and re-worked like canvas. His drawn lines and painted accents sharply focus the eye on painting characterized by its cloudlike instability.

In his book, Damisch narrates the technical and conceptual inventions for representing this instability. One of these is Brunelleschi's mirror experiment, a device anticipating a reversed camera lucida, used to

view a painted scene against the real, depicted space. Brunelleschi places his eye at a hole in the back of the painting, drilled at the scene's vanishing point, and holds a mirror out before him, aligning the reflected image of the panel with the real scene before him. All constructions on the panel would be thus locatable, everything accounted for by the "perspective code." Everything, that is, except for the clouds. For these, Brunelleschi inserted a cutout of dark silver that would reflect the clouds in the sky at any given moment – a mirror, in other words.

"To paint is to grasp or embrace a surface entirely," writes Damisch, "the surface upon which the painter works (*that* surface) or, equally, the surface of the mirror that serves to guide him."⁶ As Narcissus can tell, the mirror is a spectral surface; everything it holds is unstable and evanescent, and as fleeting as the heavens. Painting is the only reflection that, in its materiality and immobility, can be seized. The perspective lines wrap its surface like a net out of which the mutable elements – the weather, our moods – are bound to spill. The thin grids in Oberthaler's work cannot catch a cloud, but approach them as you would a window on a fog, and one might well catch you.