

Sophie Ruigrok

Rapid movement over a landscape

Still, it appears to transmit messages. A text message from an ex you were literally just thinking about can easily feel divinatory, descending from the dislocated nowhere of the heavens. While art historians study the skies of Renaissance paintings and sense foreboding, satellites gather data daily by the hundred-some terabytes and replace bygone techniques of scrying. Satellites stud night's dark sheaths and masquerade as the stars.

A cloud is a rarefied form that mostly belongs to the sky. It is best understood at a distance because when you're in it you're enmeshed with it, as it is, with its surroundings. Our reading of clouds depends on its density and diffusion, what we call atmospheric, though we resort to analogy with more concrete things: damp rags, foggy veilings, heavy duvets. It is, of course, the cloud's innate logic of emergence and dissimulation that makes it almost impossible to capture with description, the very autopoiesis by which we differentiate being from becoming. All this nebulosity is probably why clouds have a bad rep. Cue the scene when you, a window-gazing pre-teen, are accused of having your 'head in the clouds'. Student reports called you ungrounded, lofty, all because you were caught watching the simulation that is the sky. Carl Jung, 1976, writing of the after-effects of a near-death experience: 'the view of city and mountains from my sickbed seemed to me like a painted curtain with black holes in it, or a tattered sheet of newspaper with photographs that meant nothing.' So it seemed to you too, though Jung was already long gone and you were not yet aware of him.

All that was before camera phones; before infinitely reproducible images; before personalities were informed by algorithmic suggestion; before the word 'cloud' also referred to a storage space in the ether. Given the cloud's historical role as intermediary between material and non-material worlds, it is little wonder that it finds itself the model metaphor for technology's pervasive ambitions. Before, everyone wanted to get into your mind, they wanted active participation so they could be assured you were with us. Before, attention was yours to give. Now, there's so much of you floating about out there, from fleshy shreds of love affairs withstanding deletion to the odd thing that fascinated for reasons unknown: a photo from a Reddit threat or archival footage of a festival from the 1990s so low-res that the pixels of one person

bleed into that of another. Lossy fragments on the loose. Atomisation, dispersion, spirit in short supply.

When you decide to take a digital detox or get really high at a party, however, you begin to recognise the profound mystery that is the world around you. You take solace in the small things; you marvel at the big things. You feel yourself infinitely extending, the narcissistically looped interiority turned outwards and breathe. You think to yourself that this must be what your brainy friend calls 'the Kantian sublime', and that though the words 'detox' and 'high' appear a contradiction of terms, this is all a much healthier way to relativise the ego than the schadenfreude of binge-watching on-demand true crime. Granted, you were maybe rushing too hard last night on that incredible feeling of loving everyone but needing no one: I don't have the words to describe it right now, but I feel like we really connect.

We all just want to connect. Sigmund Freud adopted the phrase 'oceanic feeling' from a letter his friend Romain Rolland addressed to him in 1927. In it, oceanic feeling is described as 'a sensation of "eternity" ... being one with the external world as a whole'. You're not exactly sure what is meant here; perhaps simply that landscape is a continuation of experience by other means. You can only assume that it's close to being in a flotation tank, where you ritually go for some internal peace but especially if you're hungover. You observe: how funny it is that the pod is egg-shaped and that when you close its lid it's like you are committing yourself to a tomb, and are momentarily severed from the rest of the world. Suspended in a body of water in an ancient sort of dark, you imagine you resemble John Everett Millais' ablated suicide-bride Ophelia and enjoy, for one expensive hour, the experience of your soul trailing. Only recently had the professionals come up with the term 'dissociation', a survival technique wherein a mind under duress slips out for a ciggy-break during the scene of trauma, and then begins inadvertently doing so.

That's where all your best thoughts come from. Not ciggy-breaks, the moments when you feel amputated from space and time. Moments like that one afternoon you spent analysing Théodore Géricault's Study of Hands and Feet with morbid, child-like fascination on your small, touch-screen phone and realised that, actually, for a palette to convey

deadness it has to be earthly and hot. You saved the image thinking about this 1.6GB scrap of data that will outlive you. Contemporary wills should include a clause that states that when we're dead, the virtual bits and pieces of ourselves need to be gathered, downloaded onto a hard drive, eradicated from the worldwide web and buried with us, so our souls can be freed. You leave the egg-tomb having registered something slippery and in excess of words. Suddenly everything looks obvious if not elementary in the most beautiful of ways: archetypes, stock photos, the cyclical nature of history, the fashions of painting.

You continue on your way as we all do, using the mercury of weather to excuse yourself for moodiness or lateness. Your friend listens with patience, even though a rambling remark on the mugginess of air quality and the drama of the skies, as usual, precedes your hello. As much as it was when you were younger, the sky is a giant screen upon which we cast our projections. This is nothing new; in fact, it has become a commonly accepted kind of knowing, one fortified by the reading of novels that liberally employ pathetic fallacy, and all those religious scenes painted directly into the vaulted ceilings of churches in Italy. Your expensive hour of internal peace is well and truly up, but you are not quite finished with metabolising reflection through unusual imagery, apparently. While your friend launches into a tirade about the ex that literally just texted, you catch yourself thinking about how many moons from now you will cease to exist, except as tears or as rainfall. Consciousness evacuated and then scattered, a tiny piece of sky falling headlong into the embrace of the earth.

*

Sophie Ruigrok's exhibition *Rapid movement over a landscape* engages ideas of subjecthood and, alighting from her fascination with out-of-body experiences, encounters with the extra-ordinary that impel the destabilisation and virtualisation of it. Finding analogy between human consciousness and naturally-occurring forms, Ruigrok intersperses paintings of both crowds and the partialled body with dramatic skies and sweeping landscapes, drawing from an array of visual sources. Of these sources, personal memories of Italian summers and cold Dutch seas play their part, as much as digital images, psychoanalysis and Constant Permeke. Clouds are a

poetic choice of motif that recurs throughout, chosen by the artist not only for the volatility of their forms and their proneness to evanesce, but also their art historical and social significance as a medium to signal changes of weather or fortune. Considering the meeting and gathering of material and non-material worlds, the works comprise instances in which these different states intersect, shift, or are upturned by the experiences of the non-ordinary kind. Here, the crowd becomes a stand-in for collective consciousness; the solitary man adrift becomes one with a body of water; two showering figures allude to the first man and woman. As such, even the most arcane references reveal their inherent ability to become transpersonal, universal, archetypal. Scale is important, insofar as Ruigrok employs varied canvas formats to invoke the bigness or smallness of a certain observation, thought or feeling, and its unique yet interconnected placement within a broader constellation. Scale is, at the same time, a function of the sublime: what is essential to experiences of awe and reverence that, in turn, render us cognisant of our own fragility.

– Elaine ML Tam, November 2024

Sophie Ruigrok (b. 1992) lives and works in London. She received the Bloomberg New Contemporaries Prize in 2020 and the Royal Drawing School Trustees Prize in 2019. In 2024 she took part in the Palazzo Monti Residency in Brescia, Italy. Recent solo exhibitions include: *today I feel relevant and alive*, The Sunday Painter, London, UK (2022). Recent group exhibitions include: *Imaginary Lines*, Daniel Katz Gallery, London, UK (forthcoming); *Home and Away*, Curated by Matt Carey Williams, Gallery 2, Seoul, South Korea (2024); *Stilled Images*, Tube Gallery, Palma, Spain (2023); *In Three Acts*, Huxley-Parlour, London, UK (2023); *It's Better to be Cats than to be Loved*, Tabula Rasa Gallery, London, UK (2022); *Parallel Universe*, Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal, Canada (2022); *Dream Baby Dream*, Fitzrovia Gallery, London, UK (2022); *Love is the Devil: Studies after Francis Bacon*, Marlborough, London, UK (2021); *Bloomberg New Contemporaries*, South London Gallery, London, UK (2021); *A Grain of Sand*, The Sunday Painter, London, UK (2021); *Art on a Postcard*, Auction for International Women's Day, online (2021); San Mei Gallery, London, UK 2020; *Onward & Upward: Art in Times of Uncertainty*, Droog, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2019).