

MIKE CLOUD: Your parents understand that you are gainfully employed, and on the way to the happy life. But are they art people? Do they understand the transformation of your interest in art into what it is now?

SAMUEL JABLON: My mom is an artist, so she understands, and they are both creative, business-oriented people. They understand the evolution of building my career as an artist. My mom founded and runs a glass tile studio. So, I've grown up around a glass studio my entire life. I understand its material aspects, and use it to enhance the painting. I have the same kind of relationship with glass as I do to painting. When I grab a tube of color, I follow the same logic as when I grab a handful of, say, mirrored tiles.

CLOUD: That sounds like how one might say that one paints with light. Do you paint with the tiles? Could you tell me what your logic of that, and of paint, is?

JABLON: For me, it starts with thinking about what colors and what material am I using, how thin I want the paint, and whether I want it to be transparent or opaque. The backgrounds are definitely more intuitive, and there's a lot more chance involved. I'll mix a lot of water in the paint, pour buckets of water on the panel, and throw a fan on it and let it dry overnight. Then I will look at it the next morning. I'll do layers of that. Then the next step is the lettering, which has a different logic, and then the glass and the mirrors. Throughout, I'm considering what would make the composition most interesting or most jarring. I decide if I want the painting to be monotone, or if I want it to have an aggressive color scheme that sort of jumps at you. The tiles and the paint work together, and that's also part of the logic.

CLOUD: Some people might think that you were using the tile against the paint, like two enemies in the work. But the way you're describing it, you say they work together. I imagine that they work together against a third?

JABLON: Part of it is the language, what the words are actually saying—that might be the third. It's not a clean, easy read. I want them to be difficult to read. So that's the third: the poem, the text, or the phrase. Meanwhile, all the failures are in the background. For instance, that painting [*Fine as Wine*, 2016], was, at one point, orange. That's gone now, just another hidden layer.

CLOUD: Color is sort of, erased without regrets?

JABLON: Yes. The colors change almost daily.

CLOUD: So color can be obliterated. How about the surface?

JABLON: I'll sand it down. Or sometimes I'll even chisel it out, if it gets too thick. Or the tiles I'll have to smash out with a hammer and screwdriver. There are always traces left. There's always that history.

CLOUD: You place these statements at the center of all of the paintings. Are you proposing anything about those statements, or are the statements the complete meaning of the painting?

JABLON: Both, in a sense. This one [*Life*, 2015] says "everything living dies," which is a somber phrase, yet the painting has a bit of pop to it. So, there's that duality. I'm interested in that tension between what the phrase is saying and what the painting is doing. I think that creates multiple ways of reading and seeing. There is no one clear way to read it. The paintings create multiple words within themselves. The viewer, whoever is looking at this, can read this, whatever way they read it, and their eyes are going to create extra words, words I didn't intend to depict. But they might see them there. That's part of it, that wordplay. To me, that's where the poetry comes in, in a visual way. This black one [*Beautiful*, 2015] says, "what a beautiful time," and it almost looks like it's covered in tar, and the phrase is upbeat and positive. To me, that tension is really important.

CLOUD: Are they absolute truisms? Or absolute empty predicates that you could not disagree with because they propose nothing? Or do they propose things that are disagreeable, or agreeable?

JABLON: They propose things that I think are disagreeable and agreeable. But with phrases like, "everything living dies," it's absolute.

CLOUD: You couldn't disagree with it.

JABLON: You can't really. Once you've read it, that's what it says. You can disagree with the color, though there's no way around the statement. Obviously, everything living dies. The show is titled after the painting *Fine as Wine* [2016], which reads, "life is fine." When you look at it, you might think, "well, is life fine?" Because all the mirrors are smashed. The phrase says one thing and the painting says another thing. The show takes its name from the title of a poem by Langston Hughes, "Life Is Fine." It reads like an internal monologue of the narrator, who goes back and forth between feeling as though everything is amazing, but then, rediscovering that life is actually horrible and hard and messy. This person is convincing themselves that life is fine, to the point where they believe it. Then that painting reads, "life is fine," but is it really fine or is it really shit? The painting asserts both.

CLOUD: So, the viewer could look at life to prove to themselves that the painting false. But if they look at the painting itself, they are presented with your questioning of the phrase?

JABLON: Definitely. I mean, there are autobiographical elements, with certain decisions determined by whatever is going on in my life. I'm also interested in where these paintings sort of fall in terms of engaging the viewer, and what sort of questions they give rise to. I hope people disagree with them, and don't just look at them and accept them for what they say, and then that's the end of it. I would hope that they bring an alternative read or alternative view in interpreting the text within the painting. That's where the elements of poetry enter the work. That's how poetry functions, or, at least, that's how I read a poem.

CLOUD: Is there a joke about metaphysics, in this confusion between the read and understand? You mentioned that a poem can be difficult to understand. But it's not because the text is smudged. There's a metaphysical difficulty.

JABLON: The smudging, and the difficulty of reading are one thing, but the words are definable. You can define the language. But there is an emotional intelligence that you have to bring to it, to interpret the obscuring and breaking down of the language.

CLOUD: Do you think of time, as recorded on the surface of these paintings, as being very different from typical painterly time? And how do you think of time in general, in the work?

JABLON: Time is not linear in these works. I'll work on one for several months, then leave it alone. I usually leave the histories of the marks. I rarely go through and completely sand everything down. Because I think that's important to keep all the marks and textures that build up. It's time being recorded as the works change. The histories of everything are there, but some are invisible, and they become the end painting. Those histories kind of create the painting.

CLOUD: Can you talk about the place of the work in social reality, or how social reality made certain works? Like how you can read Dutch still life paintings and understand things about Dutch culture at that moment.

JABLON: That's a good question. I'm aware of different social realities. In the middle of my preparing for this show a few months ago, the events in Paris happened, where all those people were shot in that nightclub. That's when I was working on this painting [*Beautiful*, 2015]. It occurred to me, "Oh, you can be having an amazing time, and all of the sudden, it can flip, like that, to a completely horrible time." Within a minute. That's what I was thinking about, and that is why this painting says, "what a beautiful time," and it's really dark and really black. It represents that reality for me at that moment.

CLOUD: Overall, does the decorative, does the declarative, does it say something about this larger moment?

JABLON: Well, "everything living dies" came out when someone I was very close to died. They were way too young to die. I was just like, "Well, that's real." It comes back to this idea of "life is fine." You have to keep on living, no matter what, if there's someone getting shot in Paris, if your friend dies, whatever. You have to keep going. So there are elements in all this work that are connected to the social realities of this moment. It's almost a wanting to distance yourself from this moment, maybe. This one says "obliterate yourself if you don't know." And this one says, "loving," backwards, and the under-text says, "I'm love-in it." We're products of our time, so it's impossible to be completely removed from it. There's definitely an awareness in the works, especially in the show.

CLOUD: How about, cynicism? "Obliterate yourself if you don't know." I say, I disagree. But the painting already disagrees. So all of this ideology, is it already operating on a cynical level? Where it's already disagreeing with itself, and therefore it's pointless to disagree with it?

JABLON: There's definitely a level of cynicism. There's also a level of optimism. "Everything living dies"—it's sparkly and fun. "Obliterate yourself if you don't know"—to me, that one is more sinister. But, if you don't know what? Obliterate yourself if you don't know what? There's a humor to it. When I was making that painting, I was thinking more of humanity; if you can't tell that we're both just people in the world, just living, and you have to find differences in people, then just obliterate yourself. That's where the idea of that painting came from, which is sort of hidden, but it's there.

CLOUD: With horror in the work, is the work you? Are you responsible for the bad things in the work? I'm thinking about a story of Picasso during the German occupation of France. Picasso's in his studio and the Nazis are constantly harassing him. There's a picture of *Guernica* on his desk. A Nazi picks it up, and he says, "Did you do this?" Picasso says, "No, you did it." Did you do this? Or did ISIS do it? Do you know what I mean?

JABLON: He's portraying the reality. That is something artists do. They tap into what's happening in the world and they express it. I don't think they are responsible for that, but they are living through that and they are a part of it. So I would agree with Picasso. No, I don't think I did that, by being in here making that painting.

CLOUD: Is that liberating?

JABLON: It's always a process, being an artist. I find that part to be liberating. I feel like most artists have been through something hard. It's not easy living life as an artist in New York. I feel like that's where, a lot of times, artists express something. That's where they're expressing things from. That's the reason they're artists, maybe. They need to process, or they need to work through something, maybe create something. And I don't think that they are responsible for that.

Mike Cloud is a painter living and working in Brooklyn, New York. He earned his M.F.A. from Yale University School of Art and his B.F.A. from the University of Illinois-Chicago. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at P.S.1, NY; the Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; Danubiana Meulensteen Art Museum, Slovak Republic; Honor Fraser Gallery, CA; Thomas Erben Gallery, NY; Good Children Gallery, LA; Marianne Boesky Gallery, NY; White Columns, NY; Max Protetch, NY; Apexart, NY. Cloud has been reviewed in the New York Times, Art in America, Art Review and featured in the publication *Painting Abstraction* by Bob Nickas, published by Phaidon Press. He is currently an assistant professor at Brooklyn College/ CUNY in New York.