Paintings of clouds are just what the world needs right now

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By: Ian Brown

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When the earth feels like it's on fire, the sky – ever-changing, yet essentially the same – is a source of comfort and insight. Here's how the professionals try to capture its chaos in art

There must have been something in the, er, air. Vancouver's Polygon Gallery recently opened a show of hundreds of 20th-century photographs of clouds, all selected from London's Archive of Modern Conflict. They're stunning. Meanwhile the C/O Foundation in Berlin offers Song of the Sky: Photography and the Cloud, an entirely separate flock of cloud photographs. The National Gallery's collection abounds with clouds. Oh, and the newly reopened McMichael Gallery in Kleinburg, Ont., has an entire encyclopedia of clouds in both its permanent Group of Seven exhibition and the current display of the Sobey family's vast and astute collection of Canadian art.

Clouds are having a moment, baby. But why? There is more to be concerned about around the globe at this moment than water vapour scudding across the sky.

That might be the point. Quotidian, untouchable, impermanent and yet somehow always there, clouds remind us what it is to be materially of this world, when so much of what we see and know is mediated through a tiny rectangle in our palms. We store the data of our lives in the Cloud, but these are the real thing – up there in the sky, to which we have always looked to see what's coming.

Clouds reacquaint us with our carnal mortality and release us from it at the same time. They satisfy our greed for variety and change while offering the optimistic gift of sameness, of the familiar.

Even the same object is never the same object, clouds imply, because we who see it are never the same person, never just one thing, no matter what the fascists say. Clouds look like nothing, but they can mean anything.

Visitors explore Cloud Album, an exhibit at Vancouver's Polygon Gallery featuring photographs from the U.K.-based Archive of Modern Conflict.ALISON BOULIER/POLYGON GALLERY

The photos at Cloud Album range from natural scenes (like Carl Albiker's Cloud Study, Germany, from 1930) to the unnatural (a U.S. Defence Department photo of an atom-bomb test in 1946).POLYGON GALLERY, COURTESY OF THE ARCHIVE OF MODERN CONFLICT

Clouds have become a specialty of Ian Paterson, a Canadian artist in France. They are 'a perfect example of trying to get something right, knowing you can never get it right,' he says.IAN PATERSON

Gazing at clouds is one impulse; capturing them is another.

Cloud painters are cloud-obsessed in their own particular ways. Greg Hardy, the Saskatchewan landscapist, has been obsessed with the prairie sky since he was a boy in Saskatoon; he still spends hours outdoors sketching, most recently in northern Saskatchewan.

“It’s not like there’s a God, or anything,” he told me a while ago. “But there is something larger than oneself that happens when nature unfolds – like when there’s a big storm or the clouds are racing by at 90 miles an hour.”

Ian Paterson, the Brantford, Ont.-born photographer and painter who has lived in Paris for the past four decades, has been painting and sketching clouds for at least 20 years. He learned to speak French watching the weather report on TV.

He has hundreds of notebooks filled with clouds. He knows a lot about cloud art: he is, for instance, a fan of Tacita Dean, the British artist who creates spectral pictures of clouds over dry California, where she expected to find no clouds at all.

A Paterson cloud in ink and brush on paper.IAN PATERSON

When Nicholas Metivier, the Toronto gallery owner, saw Hartman's clouds – "we've been friends for 35 years and we've never had an argument," Metivier claims – he immediately thought of John Constable, the English landscape and cloud painter, and said as much to Hartman. (Full disclosure: Metivier asked me to write an essay for Hartman's show, from which this article grew.)

Hartman knew Constable's work, but hadn't looked at the Englishman's cloud studies in decades. Constable produced most of his clouds in 1821, after moving back to the sea-adjacent countryside he had known in his youth – a place whose geography, like that of Georgian Bay, incessantly creates ever-shifting cloud formations. (He was partly inspired by Luke Howard, the young Quaker meteorologist who had become wildly famous after identifying and naming three main cloud types – cumulus, stratus, and cirrus – over a decade earlier.)

“I should paint my own places best,” Constable wrote to a friend at the time. “Painting is but another word for feeling.” He was never financially successful, and wasn’t admitted to the Royal Academy until he was 52. But he was capable of making three cloud paintings a day.

By the same token, to view a cloud painting is not the same as looking at a cloud itself.

There is a promise of forgiveness hovering in every cloud painting: the viewer knows that the painter knows that this depiction of a cloud is a picture of only a single possible moment in time, an approximation of what the sky looked like. The more we idolize certitude and intellectual adamancy and all the other precepts of the illusion that life and society are purely rational, utterly organized, totally fixable, somehow perfectible – how’s that working out, by the way? – the more we secretly long for the painting or the sculpture or the work of art that lets us toss such orthodoxies aside.

A great cloud painting stops you for the moment it captures, and then releases you into an acknowledgment that nothing lasts. This is sad but also freeing. The longer Paterson and Hartman work on a cloud sketch, the more likely the clouds that inspired the picture will have changed or disappeared completely. So cloud paintings, by definition, stop time: this is how the sky looked before it changed and then changed again and became unrecognizable, as clouds and circumstances and people and life in general tend to do. Plus the cloud is vapour: It is there, you can see it, but it is not there, you can’t touch it. The Dutch artist Berndnaut Smilde’s installations create actual clouds in various spaces, which then dissipate: you have to be there, literally. Clouds, in other worlds, are a pretty handy visual stand-in for the changeable weather of human history. We’ve had seventy fairly serene years, the prime minister noted recently; now there are any number of storms darkening the horizon.

Paterson has been sketching and painting clouds for at least 20 years.IAN PATERSON

Paterson – a long-time admirer of the American painter Cy Twombly – tries not to look at the page as he draws his clouds. He doesn't want to create a break between what he sees and what his hand does. A few years ago he started to paint them with his fingers alone. "I let my eyes, my feelings, take over from my rationality," he said.

If he finds himself struggling or blocked in his studio, he drives to a spot ten minutes from his house and draws clouds for a few hours. "That's very freeing." It's not like painting a body in front of you, which actually has an outline, which means "you're looking so hard, and trying to fix things." Sometimes you can't fix things, and their unfixability is what best describes them. Think of Alberto Giacometti, who sculpted long human heads and bodies from life by building clay up and tearing it down and building it up and tearing it down over and over and over again, until he simply stopped, exhausted, whereupon that was left was the portrait. Clouds "are a perfect example of trying to get something right, knowing you can never get it right," Paterson said over the long-distance phone. "And that's alright. You just can't get it right. That's fine. It's like life."

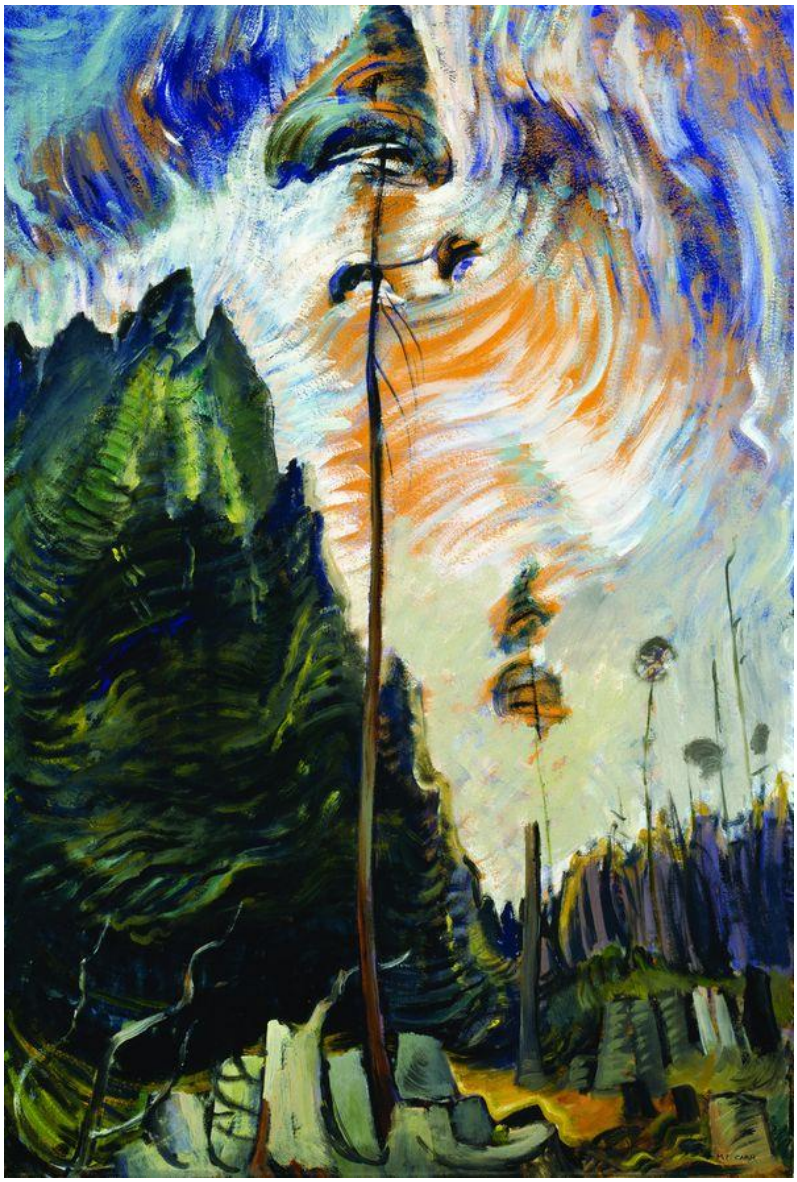
Having painted clouds for nearly two years, Paterson said he had moved on, and was now "drawing the wind. Or trying to draw the wind." He paused. "Chaos. But ordered chaos."

The heavens, Renaissance-style: The Disputation of the Holy Sacrament (1510), by Raphael.

I drove out to Kleinburg, to the McMichael collection, a few weeks ago – it was Family Day – to look at cloud paintings. I heartily recommend it. Go now. A few days later I called Ian Dejardin, the McMichael's executive director. Dejardin is one of those vastly knowledgeable English guys with a fantastic accent who as soon as I mentioned clouds was casting back to the Romans, who used them as decorative elements. But it wasn't until the Renaissance and Raphael that clouds took on a role of their own.

If Raphael paints someone on a cloud, it's a heavenly vision; no cloud, Dejardin said, "means the thing depicted is low down and earthbound." In Raphael's Disputation of the Holy Sacrament, for instance – painted in 1510 to decorate the Vatican's Apostolic Palace – a gathering of priests and philosophers are debating principles of religious doctrine on Earth. Meanwhile Jesus and the saints are having the same conversation right above them--"all sitting rather comfortably," Dejardin pointed out, "on a rather well-upholstered cloud, which is effectively like a kind of semicircular sofa." The pillowy cloud, Dejardin explained, serves two purposes: "It has to be sturdy enough to visually give the impression that it could support all the disputing saints. But its real role is to signify that the people who are arguing on the earthly level will never be able to see" – or fully understand – "as the people on the heavenly level do, because of the clouds in between."

By the time Constable starts to paint clouds three hundred years later, the scientific and industrial revolutions have lowered the gaze of mankind. “Constable’s specifically interested in weather,” Dejardin said. So was Tom Thomson, the Canadian landscape painter who inspired the Group of Seven. (Thomson’s skies are famous because their colours and tones so precisely convey a specific season and time of day and temperature – all the physical data you need to be completely in the picture.) “What he and the future Group of Seven are looking for is things that they can paint that are utterly characteristic of Canada.” The weather, and hence the sky, and hence clouds, are still central to our national identity.

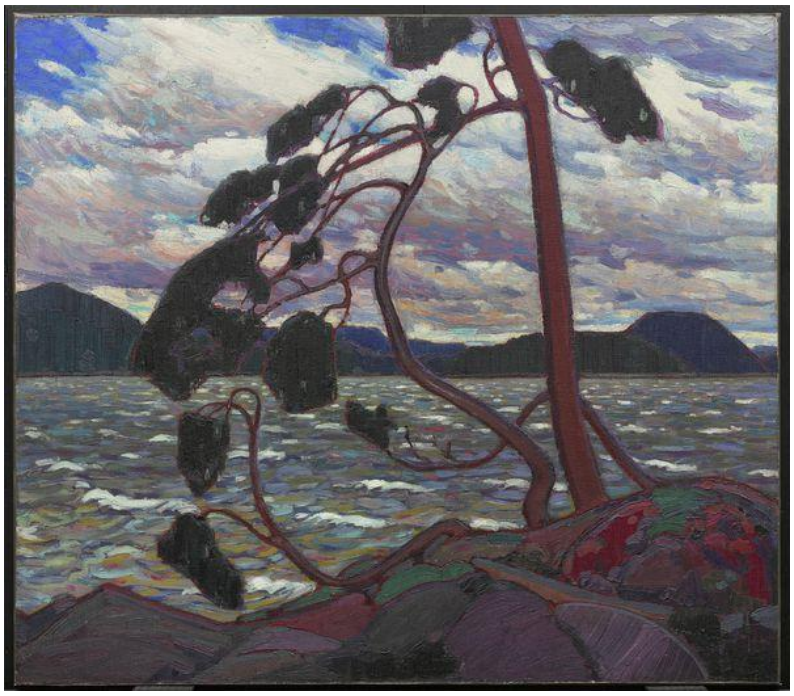


The heavens, Canadian-style: Edge of the Forest (1935), by Emily Carr.MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION (GIFT OF MRS. DORIS H. SPEIRS)

Emily Carr's skies, further west, pulsed with her yearning: commenting on a sojourn in London, she said "there was something about these big cities that these Canadians from their big spaces couldn't stand, it was like putting a pine tree in a pot." She renders skies sinewy or roiling or fractured. Whether they reveal the spirit of the land, or the state of her mind (helped along by the gasoline she mixed with her paints), or the point at which those two realms touch – she was, like Thoreau, a transcendentalist – is an ongoing question.

Clouds also had spiritual meaning for the Group of Seven, just as they do for Paterson and Hartman, as they did for Raphael and Carr. Tom Thomson was in his thirties and only just beginning to paint seriously when he visited Algonquin Park for the first time in 1912; by 1917, he was dead. His significant painting career lasted five years. The cache of astonishing work discovered in his cabin in Rosedale Ravine after his death revolutionized the work and techniques of A.Y. Jackson and the other members of what would soon call itself the Group of Seven. By then Lawren Harris and Arthur Lismer and Franklin Carmichael were also deep into Theosophy, the worldwide quasi-Buddhist philosophy that sought to find spiritual rejuvenation in art and dance and nature, among other places. "The Group of Seven wanted to see evidence of the divine, whatever that might be, in the landscape," Dejardin explained. "And very often it takes the form of extraordinary cloud formations. That's a huge leap, from the metaphorical spirituality of Rafael, where the clouds signify the heavenly realm, to the Group of Seven, where the clouds suggest the presence of God just in their physical format."

He paused. "So we've looked at clouds from both sides now," he said. He couldn't help himself.



Cloudy views from the Group of Seven and their mentor, Tom Thomson: At top, Thomson's The West Wind (1916-17); at middle, J.E.H. MacDonald's Sketch for Mist Fantasy (1922); at bottom, Franklin Carmichael's Hilltops (1936).ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, MCMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION, VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

At this point you are possibly saying, what on earth are you doing gazing at paintings of clouds in the sky when the earth is actually on fire? It's an excellent question. But there is a difference between looking at the details of the universe that others insist are important – often at great profit to themselves – and looking at the details that move you on their own. They can be the same details. The important question is, which ones do you actually feel?

That Hartman and others are painting clouds at this challenging moment in history is actually apt. "The Group of Seven are founded in March of 1920 in direct reaction to two cataclysms," Dejardin insisted. "One was the First World War, which attracted everybody's religious certainties, to a certain extent. And the other was the Spanish flu, which – just as the First World War is ending – kills off 50 million people. The Group of Seven were looking for purity and health in the landscape. That's why they travelled so far up north" – apart from the fact that they were too sad about Thomson to revisit nearby Algonquin Park – "for the purity of the air, and for the vastness of the landscape, the hugeness of the sky. Clouds are part of that impression of health and purity and fresh air. It's all tied together."

John Hartman's morning ritual, before he starts painting every day, is to read three newspapers: this one, the New York Times and the Washington Post. "By the time I'm through, I'm just slumped over," he told me. The relentless pandemic, the aggressive new war in Ukraine, the shouting fractiousness, the endless propaganda, the cancelling claims of what is true and what is not, to say nothing of the dumb unconsciousness of the way we all behave: it's exhausting.

But every once in a while, Hartman comes across something unexpected, "something really new to think about. That's so thrilling. And it's the same process of making these paintings. I just step out of all that. In other words, you have to forget everything to make the painting. And for that period of time, all the other crap falls off your shoulders. And it's just that thing in front of you." The multi-layered present moment – which is all we can ever clearly see and own, however fleetingly.

We spend so much time staring into our laps these days, looking desperately down into our smartphones and hungrily inhaling whatever the Internet has to offer. We live there now, down that dank, semi-real, untouchable and ultimately unknowable hole. But every once in a while, we forget it's there, and look up.