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CLOUD BASE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List Of Plates........................................................................................................... iv
Introduction............................................................................................................... 1
Experience............................................................................................................... 2
Explanation......................................................................................................... 4
The Reinsman ....................................................................................................... 7
The Chariot ........................................................................................................... 8
The Horses ............................................................................................................ 9
The Landscape ..................................................................................................... 10
The Clouds .......................................................................................................... 11
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 12
References.......................................................................................................... 21
## LIST OF PLATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gallery Entrance</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Signage</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Poem</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Cloud Base</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cloud Base</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Cloud Base</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Detail of Horse</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Detail of Figure</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

This is a two-part explanation of the M.F.A. thesis exhibition entitled "Cloud Base" by Cary Lathan. The first part reads as stream of consciousness, a poetic journey that the viewer may experience. The second is an explanation of the poetic journey. The idea from which "Cloud Base" was derived came from two things: the experience of paragliding just below the bases of the clouds and my own personal investigation to understand the core of who I am.

"Cloud Base" is comprised of sculptural forms, hand built and made of porcelain. Porcelain in this work represents a symbol of purity, and references the ceramic traditions of the East and West. The story of porcelain is historically rich, and its development through time, space, and society continues. Its use has not come to a final conclusion.
EXPERIENCE

Upon entering through the glass doors of the commons gallery, in front of the small dark opening to the left, is a poem painted on the wall. It reads

The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way;
The name that can be named is not the constant name.
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth
Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets. (Lao Tzu, n.d./1963)

From the outside, the inner room looks secretive. Cautiously, one enters. Dim, ambient light fills a small room. There is something hanging in the center of the room. I move forward, closer. What is it? In a pool of light, colors dance on a pure white surface. Still and silent, three horses, a chariot, and its reinsman are suspended in space, as if all of time has come to a halt. But there is something contradictory about this heavenly metaphor. To run, the horses have no legs; to steer, the reinsman has no reins to grasp. Arising from a uniform cloud base, the chariot’s canopy and horses look as if they are clouds, organic, moving, swirling through space, alive.

These forms (the horses, chariot, and the reinsman) are manifestations of the clouds and I have arrived at a cloud base, a new perspective from which to view the world. Yet, there is more. On every cloud I see a landscape, a place I have been before, it is the northeast side of the island of Oahu, from Kahana to Laie. It is one of only a few sites on Oahu to reach the base of clouds.

In this space my eyes change focus, they drift from the center landscape painting to the outer walls. Something dark catches my eyes. A thick blue line turns into a hill,
the hill turns into a mountain, which then becomes a landscape. I step back only to see
that I am, like these clouds, in a landscape. The same landscape painting on the clouds is
on the walls, so that existence becomes the reflection.
EXPLANATION

This interpretation has five divisions; the reinsman, chariot, horses, landscape, and clouds. Numerical divisions can be seen in both eastern and western metaphors of the world. However, these two metaphors present very different ways of interpreting one’s existence. Eastern thought places emphasis on personal intuition to study one’s awareness. For example in the philosophy of Tibetan Buddhism, Sogyal Rinpoche (1993) describes the mind

like a mirror, with five different powers or ‘wisdoms.’ Its openness and vastness is the “wisdom of all-encompassing space,” the womb of compassion. Its capacity to reflect in precise detail, whatever comes before it is the “mirror-like wisdom.” Its fundamental lack of any bias toward any impression is the “equalizing wisdom.” Its ability to distinguish clearly, without confusing in any way the various different phenomena that arise, is the “wisdom of discernment.” And its potential of having everything already accomplished, perfected, and spontaneously present is the “all-accomplishing wisdom.” (p. 153)

Each type of wisdom arises from having overcome a particular negative emotion. These five emotions are ignorance, anger, pride, desire, and jealousy. These wisdoms represent a path to understanding the differences between the ego and unattached awareness in eastern philosophy.

Western philosophy has another view to explain one’s state of being. Science categorizes in an effort to define the laws of life. It is these categories that create our awareness of how we fit in to the structure of the world (Capra, 1999). An example is
seen in the theories of D. Rudin’s (1998) book, *The Nature of the World*. Rudin states that the five divisions are not wisdoms, but are instead to be understood as physical laws that are, “a measurement of the individual’s total state at a given instant of time” (p.248).

Rudin, writing in *Getting it all Together: The World Program in Brief* (2000), further explains that the measurement is called the “gamma vector”. He describes what it stands for:

\[
\begin{align*}
G &= \text{group or political interests, } \\
A &= \text{association of dyadic interpersonal interests, } \\
M &= \text{material or economic interests, } \\
M' &= \text{mapping or intellectual interests, } \\
A' &= \text{aesthetic or sensory interests.}
\end{align*}
\]

The associated emotions for gamma are: \(g\) = power and a sense of awe, \(a\) = love, hate, and friendship, \(m\) = possession, \(m'\) = curiosity or frustration, \(a'\) = calm and security to fear and anger. (p. 3)

What eastern and western perspectives have in common is that they are two views of understanding the world. Western thought analyzes the individual as being within the world, whereas eastern philosophy wages the idea that the world exists within the person.

Capra (1999) notes that a second thing they have in common is that scientists “derive their knowledge from experiments, mystics from meditative insights. Both are observations and in both fields these observations are acknowledged as the only source of knowledge” (p. 7).

“Cloud Base” provides a visual metaphor of eastern and western experience based on five numerical divisions. According to Capra (1999), this is achieved through the idea that “mind and matter no longer appear to belong to two separate categories but are seen
as representing two complementary aspects of the phenomenon of life: the thought aspect and the structure aspect” (p. 8).

On the surface (as if leading the viewer from the outside in), the western philosophy of structured time and place is represented in the landscape painting. Just as the gamma vector categorizes who we are, we specify our world into specific time and place, hence Kahana Bay. The eastern philosophy of thought is seen within the sculptural entities (chariot, horses, reinsman), as form created by the clouds, bound by the world’s structure, yet unrestrained. In this work, form represents thought from the eastern viewpoint. The horse, chariot, and reinsman do not look specifically like the objects they represent because the forms (horse, chariot, and reinsman) are like looking at clouds and finding recognizable shapes. The point is that perception creates illusion, but one’s observation reveals consciousness. Capra (1999) quotes from Lama Anagarika Govinda’s *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism,*

To the enlightened man... whose consciousness embraces the universe, to him the universe becomes his “body”, while his physical body becomes the manifestation of the Universal Mind, his inner vision an expression of the highest reality, and his speech an expression of eternal truth and mantric power. (p. 305)
THE REINSMAN

The reinsman within the chariot shares qualities with Buddhist iconography.
(plate 8) For example, the urna (spot on the forehead), legs crossed in a seated position, and the positioning of the hands in a Chinese style of the dharma mudra, which symbolized Buddha’s first action of setting the Wheel of Law into motion, all come together to create an identity. Capra (1999) refers to the concept attributed to Nagarjuna, quoted in P.R.V. Nutri’s The Central Philosophy of Buddhism, that things and relations “derive their being and nature by mutual dependence and are nothing in themselves” (p. 138). This same concept of mutual dependence is an idea seen in the details of the reinsman.
THE CHARIOT

The Chinese viewed their chariots as moving metaphors of the universe, like ships on land. (plate 9) Christie (1986) wrote:

The sky (was viewed) as an inverted bowl rotating on its own axis above earth… Earth is still square, while the round sky revolves: the yang sky contrasts with the yin earth. The bowl…requires supports, and these supports in their turn required guy ropes to brace them. These fastenings are called by the same name as the lashings which fix the chariot platform to the chassis. Metaphors relating the structure of the world to the chariot are common: thien-kai itself refers to the umbrella over the chariot. The sky is considered as the umbrella on its pole, the earth as the body of the chariot. (p. 57)
THE HORSES

The horses in this triad represent the illusion of time, motion, and progression.

(plate 7) The forms of the horses are influenced by Chinese Tang Dynasty horses. Their swooping necks and arching backs allude to the feeling of movement. Their progression through time and space is acknowledged by the idea of, quoting Capra (1999), “Swami Vivekananda, ‘Time space, and causation are like the glass through which the Absolute is seen… In the Absolute there is neither time, space nor causation’” (p. 186).
THE LANDSCAPE

The chariot, reinsman, and the horses represent doorways, which lead to the idea that the reinsman does not move through the world of landscape; instead, he is still, and the landscape is a reflection of himself. (plate 5) The landscape painting seen on the surface of the clouds is created in a fixed, linear system of perspective. The emphasis on an exact place represents the western philosophy that the material world is not an illusion.

The triad (chariot, reinsman, and horses) is not in the landscape, nor is the landscape in the triad, but rather they are identical to one another, reflections of each other. The landscape is a reflection of the mind, and the mind is a reflection of the landscape. One never really moves through life (the landscape), instead, the movie of life is a reflection of our perceptions.
THE CLOUDS

From the clouds emerge the horses, chariot, and reinsman. (plate 4) This particular part of the work is symbolic of how one has been taught to separate the ego from the web of the world. The mind is so quick to find a chariot, horse, and reinsman but usually stops there, and does not take the time to realize that there is more to the world than what is just on the surface. One looks, but does not see, the web of interconnectedness out of which all things arise. The chariot, horses, and reinsman are forms produced by the clouds. The clouds move as one entity through the landscape. The clouds hang in the center as part of that whole. They are Tathata. They are the witness to the dance of thought and structure united as one, symbolic of the interconnectedness of eastern and western views. Our consciousness, like the clouds, is a visual manifestation of physical laws. Pagen (1992) states:

Controlled by temperature gradients, gravity and inertia; clouds are formed by rising air. While bases of clouds tend to be uniform (because of local air masses lifting uniformly), the tops vary greatly in altitude. This is because nothing definite determines how high the lifting process in the cloud can extend. Bullets of lift penetrate some clouds and carry the moist air much higher than its neighbors. (p. 29)
CONCLUSION

Capra (1999) writes:

I see science and mysticism as two complementary manifestations of the human mind; of its rational and intuitive faculties. The modern physicist experiences the world through an extreme specialization of the rational mind; the mystic through an extreme specialization of the intuitive mind. The two approaches are entirely different and involve far more than a certain view of the physical world. However, they are complementary, as we have learned to say in physics. Neither is comprehended in the other, nor can either of them be reduced to the other, but both of them are necessary, supplementing one another for a fuller understanding of the world. (p. 306)

On the surface, the western ideas of structured time, place, and categories are represented in the landscape painting. The eastern philosophy of intuitive thought is seen within the clouds as form ("bullets of lift") bound by the world's structure yet unrestrained. The unseen reins bind this metaphor of east and west together, guiding them to the same conclusion.

Close your eyes, turn your perceptions off, and ask yourself, "What is the core of your experience?"
GALLERY ENTRANCE
SIGNAGE

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M.F.A. thesis exhibition by [Signature]
The way that can be spoken of is not
the constant way;
the name that can be named is not
the constant name,
the nameless was the beginning of
heaven and earth.
Hence always rid yourself of desires in
order to observe its secrets."

~ Tao Te Ching
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DETAIL OF HORSE
DETAIL OF FIGURE
REFERENCES


(Original work published n.d.)


