Neither Here nor There: The Equivocal Status of the Cloud in Contemporary and Historical Thinking

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Image as Space; Clouds as Masks and Boundaries.

Landscape in its genre in painting is tightly bound up with assumptions about three-dimensional space and the technique of linear perspective. The components that go into the perspective construction – the horizon line, the viewing and vanishing points – are all tropes associated with landscape. This converging of landscape and perspective has occurred in spite of perspective's initial purpose in the painting of 14th-century Italy being the depiction of bodies, especially architectural ones, and not to do with 'space' per se at all. As an artist interested in how images shape our ideas of space and landscape, this inconsistency intrigues me, and much of my research involves the thoroughly non-perspectival scenes that fill the backgrounds of early perspectival painting. These fragmented landscape forms offer the opportunity to think landscape differently and can inform the reconfiguration of how we understand objects and space in a digital world orientated towards the screen.

Recently I have been developing works that use clouds as means to examine the spatial assumptions that lie behind perspectival image technologies. In this essay I will discuss these works, exploring the cloud as a figure that not only enhances the realism within landscape painting but that simultaneously interrupts it, pointing to other spatial configurations at play within the surface of the ostensibly 'realist' image. What are understood as representational images – images that represent 'real space' to a greater or lesser degree of accuracy – rely on the visual construction of three-dimensional space in two-dimensional form. The ambiguity of the cloud figure has helped me to think through the inconsistencies of this construction – inconsistencies that are not immediately apparent, but that are significant nonetheless – not only pictorially, but also in that this technological paradigm is central to the spaces within which we live out our lives. Landscape, the city, the digital spaces of the screen, have all been shaped by perspective and the visual technologies that subsequently developed under its influence. Clouds have accompanied perspective since the beginning of this kind of painting, intensifying the sense of space receding beyond the horizon and outside the frame. In this way they augment perspective while not being intrinsic to it. As such they are a useful vehicle with which to consider how space is imagined, how our visual technologies shape this imagining,

and how contemporary characterizations develop their equivocal status further – as 'Anthropocenic' forms.[1]

Understanding the cloud as a body that enhances perspectival and representational visuality but that also escapes this can help us to contemplate the nature of the image and of the technological and material realities that shape contemporary experience. The cloud as a pictorial figure may indeed be a useful aide to the technologically constructed images that mimic 'natural vision' and that have shaped the history of the western visualising of space, and yet as this essay explores, this cloud's instability and the problems it poses have enabled creative advancements that move beyond realism. French philosopher and art historian Hubert Damisch argues that the /cloud/ can be seen as a facilitator of new visual space; I will examine this idea, while also exploring the idea of a masking or boundary figure that signifies the presence of multiple spaces in landscape images that might otherwise appear spatially regular.[2]

Early Landscapes, Digital Space

Di Paolo Blue Wilderness takes an early Renaissance wilderness landscape and situates its rocky outcrops within a digitally produced blue space. The work comprises hand modeled clay landscape forms derived from the painted images of Giovanni Di Paolo's mid 14th-century landscape image, *St John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, (National Gallery, London), which have been photographed and then removed from their physical surroundings so that they can be incorporated into the digital space of the image. This process sees them undergo a series of changes: from their original painted forms, into physical, sculpted objects, and then into a photographic image placed in a virtual, nondescript digital environment. The modeled hills form two parallel lines while a clay cloud sits above them. The work refers back to the original painting and to the regime of perspectival technologies through which we understand landscape and representational images. These visual technologies have come to be thought of

[1] The Anthropocene is a term that has been in general use in scientific circles since the 1960s but has recently been used to describe an era shaped by the indelible traces left on the earth's geological, atmospheric and ecological systems by human activity. Scientists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer popularised it in their article "The Anthropocene" in 2000, suggesting it be proposed as a new geological epoch that has now replaced the Holocene.

[2] In the *Theory of /Cloud/* Damisch indicates that he understands the cloud to be a sign rather than an object by placing the word between forward slashes. This idea is explored here throughout the text. Damisch *Theory of /Cloud/*, 2002.

as generating images that are somehow understood as an equivalent for space itself. However, neither the original painting nor my digital image is convincing within these terms. Indeed, they both (very differently) suggest incongruity: the painting in terms of its incompatible singular space, durational time and irregular sense of scale, and the digital image in terms of its mismatched background and forms. Whilst referring to the regime of representational landscape painting, this work simultaneously disavows it. The cloud, a flat, solid shape appears collaged; the light that falls on the objects has no bearing on the background, the blueness of which that might signify 'sky' permeates the ground too – so that the illusionistic techniques that usually accompany images of landscape are questioned, the scene becoming a dissonant 'non-space' instead. Although it maintains a sense of naturalism, this is not the realistic 'view' that we are accustomed to understanding landscape by. And what was once an image of wilderness that reinforced the spiritual journey of the Saint has become a wilderness shaped by the material conditions of the digital. In this way, the work explores the history of landscape image-making; how we think about the experience of space and the implications of landscape, and the relationship of this to visual technologies and images today.

Henrietta Simson, *Di Paolo Blue Wilderness*, 2018, 50 x 36cm, digital image, oil on clay

Henrietta Simson, *Magic Lantern: Cumulus Formation*, 2018, 44 x 38 x 91cm, lenticular image, found museum display case

Realism and Illusion

Magic Lantern: Cumulus Formation is a work that reflects on the so-called "naturalness" of the landscape image, and on the characteristics of representational images more generally, through the use of photography and museum display. Both are ideological constructions that present an objective image of the world, and in doing so hide their constructed natures. I created a lenticular photographic image of passing clouds and placed it in a discarded museum display case (a diorama). I wanted to focus on the overtly visual construction of space and on the technologies that enable this, and on the framework of scientific rationalism that informs this kind of image and this kind of museum presentation. Based in photographic realism, the work looks at the boundary between the technological image and the spatial realities it seeks to emulate, probing at this visual experience that presents itself as "natural."

The image of clouds appears objective, shaped by its photographic framework and the scientific, rational context of the museum display case. However limited (in today's terms) the realism of the lenticular image is, the viewer still understands it in terms of 'real clouds',

and as they walk around the work, it's 'flipping' from one scene to another generates a kind of clunky illusion of clouds passing. The diorama, which was originally invented in the early 19th-century, was also known as a 'magic lantern' and through a technique of painting both sides of a piece of canvas, and lighting these at different times, would produce a visual trick whereby one scene would change to another by the adjustment of positioned light. The work alludes to this early form of moving image in its title, and by implication to the inherent illusionism within the representational image. It also alludes to the classification and taxonomy that is part of the history of the museum and of the rational and scientific developments of the 18th- and 19th-centuries. This close studying and categorizing of nature affected the way landscape was seen. The English landscape painter John Constable (1776 – 1837) worked within this naturalistic framework, and while the influence of the Dutch landscape tradition and the classical landscapes of Claude Lorraine can be seen in his work, his cloud studies were made from direct observations of nature, and with their precise labeling of time of day, date, place, are imbued with the scientific ethos of the time. This culture of objective observation of the natural world (and of the body and its operations) extended perspective's reach by producing images through a variety of machines made possible by the technological advances of the 19th-century. Dioramas, stereoscopes, and early lenticulars were part of this cultural and visual development that included the photographic camera, and *Magic Lantern: Cumulus Formation* explores the play between the artificial and the natural, between scale and illusion, ideas that are also intrinsic to traditional landscape painting and to linear perspective.

The Problem with Clouds

If these 19th-century developments formed the basis from which our own naturalizing tendencies of visual technology have grown, the relation between the natural and the constructed image that developed in the early Renaissance marks another, earlier beginning. In 1470 Antonio Manetti wrote *The Life of Brunelleschi,* which included an account of the architect's original perspective experiment. It describes how in 1425 Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1448) painted the Baptistry in Florence using his newly invented technique of linear perspective, a technique that was to flourish and establish the paradigm of the visual whose terms we still operate within today. Brunelleschi made a small panel painting, constructed in such a way so that it was possible to test the accuracy of the technique's effect with the use of a mirror. The perspectival image of the Baptistry painted on the panel was viewed from

behind via the mirror through a hole made at the vanishing point of the painting. This meant that, when standing in front of the Baptistry on the spot where the panel was painted, and looking through the hole, the image in the mirror could be compared to the view of the real building by simply moving the mirror away. And yet, according to Manetti, the sky and its clouds caused Brunelleschi difficulties, for they did not conform to the linearity of the perspective construction – clouds being unable to work effectively within the rules of perspective because of their lack of linearity and geometric angle. So Brunelleschi let them remain in their natural state by applying burnished silver to this area of the panel, thus creating a reflection of sky, removing the problem and inadvertently heightening the perspectival illusion:

And insofar as he had to show the sky, that is, where the painted walls stamped themselves against the air, he used silver burnished in such a way that natural air and sky were reflected in it, and even clouds that one saw pass by in this silver pushed by the wind, when it was blowing.[3]

This meant that the clouds were able to enhance the 'reality effect' of the perspective experiment, especially with their movement, shaping Brunelleschi's original perspectival image with a mixture of reflected and painted space. The sky worked to enhance perspective in Brunelleschi's experiment, but it remains beyond its limits. Perspective may be used to fashion walls of buildings, which are solid and angular, but how can a cloud be drawn with perspective, since not only is it not linear, but according to Leonardo it also has no surface. Damisch discusses this conundrum here:

There remains the problem of the sky...Doesn't representation of the aerial element, like that of clouds, those "bodies without surfaces," as Leonardo described them, fall outside the skills necessary for linear perspective, which can only function, as a rule of construction, on the condition that everything escaping its jurisdiction be excluded from its field? How is one to represent, feature by feature, a body that has no contours? How is one to trace its "portrait"?[4]

[3] Manetti *The Life of Brunelleschi,* p.42-44.
[4] Damisch 1994, p.93-94.

Henrietta Simson, *Bodies Without Surface*, 2018, 167 x 78cm, oil on linen

Extensive Surface

Bodies Without Surface does not attempt a portrait of clouds, rather it explores how the sky escapes the confines of painted representation. It is a diptych that suggests panoramic (rather than perspectival) space, horizontal extension. There is no focal point in the work, instead a sense of drift, the subject matter not fixed by a particular viewing point. The space that these clouds move along in is indeterminate, signifying sky in its blueness, but also paint in its worked surface. As a double image the painting suggests extensive space, the gap between the canvases is devoid of pictorial illusion and so does not continue the space within the paintings, meaning it could be collapsed or expanded at will. This doubling also recalls the mirror that was required to prove Brunelleschi's experiment, as much as it points towards the endless reproducibility and proliferation of digital images. Although the work compels the viewer to move along in front of it, it operates differently to the diorama (which requires the viewer to move around it in order to activate the effect), for it introduces a sense of time into an ostensibly static image not through the technological 'flipping' of the lenticular image, but rather through its diptych structure that moves the painting away from the static and the singular and towards the sequential. Rather than fixing the viewer in front of a focal point, this work suggests movement – as if the clouds could drift from one image into the other, or out of the frame completely. The overtly stationary structure of the perspectival system removes time from the image, a problem for clouds that cannot adhere, for they are in

constant flux – bodies that mutate from one shape to another, with no surface to fix their forms.

Ungrounded

In discussing this discontinuity between perspectival space and the, "unmastered, unmasterable background element" of the sky,[5] Damisch considers the /cloud/ as an indicator of diverseness within painting. He understands it as pointing to another pictorial system that works in a kind of dialectic with linear perspective, pushing against the realism of perspective and generating new creative possibilities within art and visual representation that eventually culminate in Modernist abstraction.[6] He argues that the clouds in Baroque ceilings are an example of this, their excessive swathes dissolving the architecture that foregrounds them and through which linear perspective is understood. They act as a halfway point between the viewer and infinity – a place in the sky that the eye can fix on, imaginatively bringing the body into that space. He discusses Andrea Mantegna's (1431-1506) frescoed ceiling oculus of the *Camera Degli Sposi* in Mantua painted between 1465-74, as a Renaissance forerunner to the Baroque ceilings including Antonio da Correggio's (1489-1534) *Assumption of the Virgin* in Parma Cathedral. Mantegna's central cloud works beyond the illusionism of the trompe l'oeil architectural balustrade, and Damisch describes how the eye "loses itself" in the "faintly misty blue" of the sky.[7] The cloud mediates between ground and sky, and by implication, viewer and infinity; while in Correggio's fresco, painted 60 years later, the clouds dissolve the architectural stability of the Cathedral and establish a vertiginous vertical effect that counters any sense of the horizontality imposed by the perspectival structure. The vortex-shaped cloud lifts the viewer up towards heaven, away from the perspective grid with its horizontal and earthly concerns.

[5] Damisch *The Origin of Perspective*, p.94.
[6] Although this argument is touched upon in *The Origin of Perspective*, Damisch tackles it fully in the *Theory of /Cloud/.*
[7] Damisch *Theory of /Cloud/*, p.133.

Andrea Mantegna, *Camera Degli Sposi*, 1465-74, Ducal Palace, Mantua, 270cm diameter, fresco

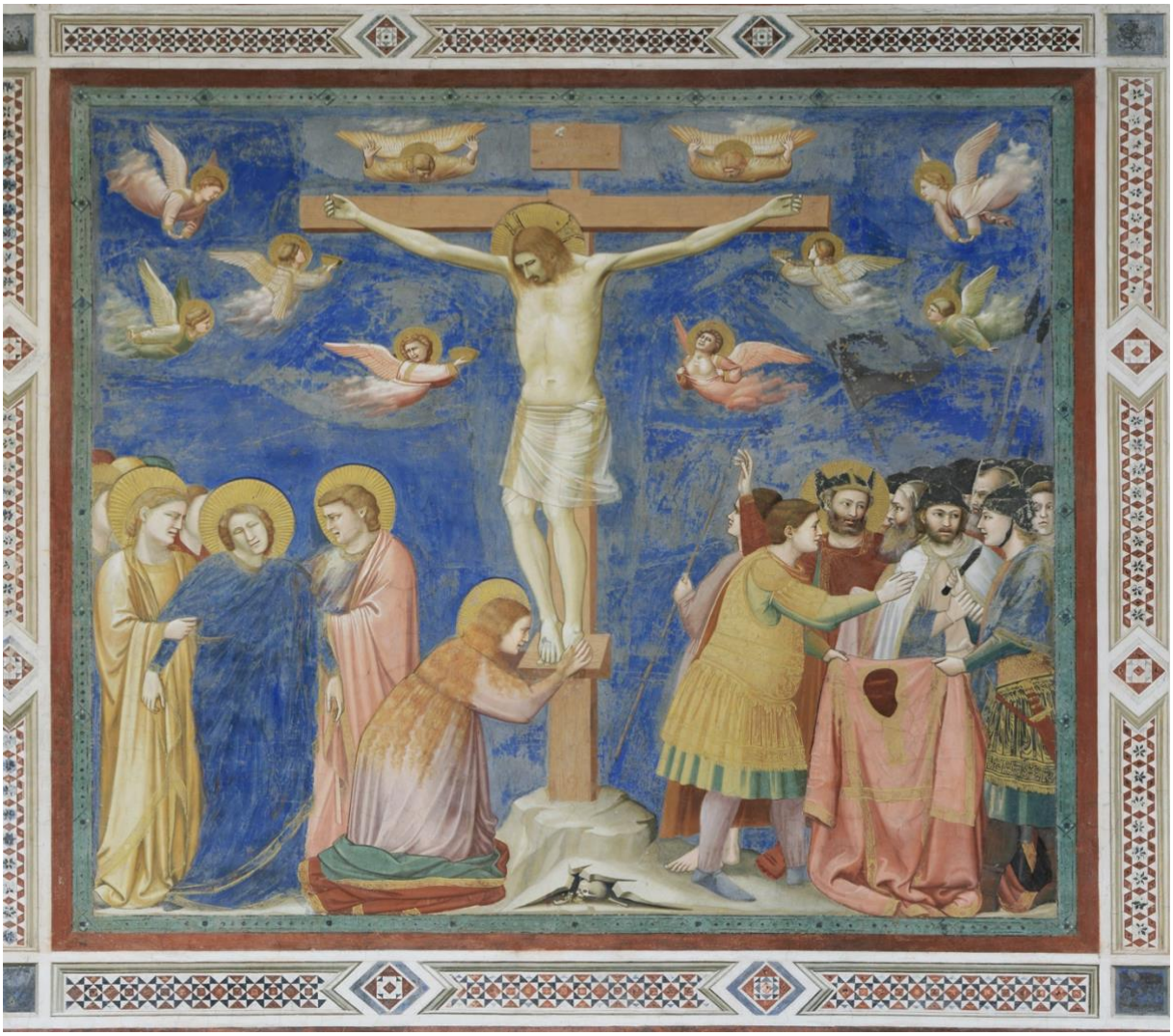
Antonio da Correggio, *Assumption of the Virgin*, 1526-1530, Parma Cathedral, 11m x 12m, fresco

All Figure, No Ground, (Scheveningen), No.1 inverts this verticality, which both ceilings employ and that directs the eye up and away from the ground, instead presenting a digitally produced, horizontal panoramic photograph of Scheveningen beach in The Netherlands. However, the beach and the surrounding land is hardly recognisable as such as the software used to create the panorama has turned it into a thin sand-coloured band that wraps around two solid black shapes. Positioned centrally is a pale blue sky that is marked and textured by a mass of cloud and contrails. The framing black areas are by comparison smooth and untouched, and act to counter the texture of sand and sky. They are blank spaces, disconcerting and silent in relation to the visually varied landscape elements. The sky becomes a principal motif, not a distant, peripheral presence. Here, the dialectic that Damisch identifies, between the grounded nature of perspectival composition and the /cloud/ and its register of sky and imaginative potentiality, has moved into the digital realm. The image is thoroughly non-photographic and non-perspectival in its form and works against the illusionism of the trompe l'oeil of the two ceiling paintings. The central landscape mass of sky and land, the 'figure' of the painting, is flanked not by any pictorial or architectural construction, but by the black emptiness automatically generated by the panoramic stitching software when no pictorial information is available. As a result, the image signposts the digital world of freely floating images that are underpinned by mathematical algorithms and not visually "grounded" in any way.

Henrietta Simson, *All Figure, No Ground, (Scheveningen), No.1,* 2016, 98 x 49cm, digital photograph on paper

Anthropocenic Cover-ups

This digital construction can produce image space in any way imaginable, and yet the introduction of heterogeneous elements into the ostensibly singular and rationally constructed space of landscape images is not without precedent. As well as understanding the /cloud/ as signifying a shift in spatial registers, I want to look at the clouds of late medieval and Renaissance painting, assessing them as interstitial masks where spatially irregular (but narratively essential) elements rupture what is the otherwise coherent picture plane. In Giotto's 14th-century fresco of *The Crucifixion* in Padua, the weeping angels that appear in the sky surrounding the Crucifixion are presented as if materializing out of the clouds that form the lower half of their robes, these concealing the bottom half of their bodies and also covering the transition where two worlds meet.



Giotto di Bondone, *The Crucifixion*, c.1306, Arena Chapel, Padua, 200 x 185cm, fresco

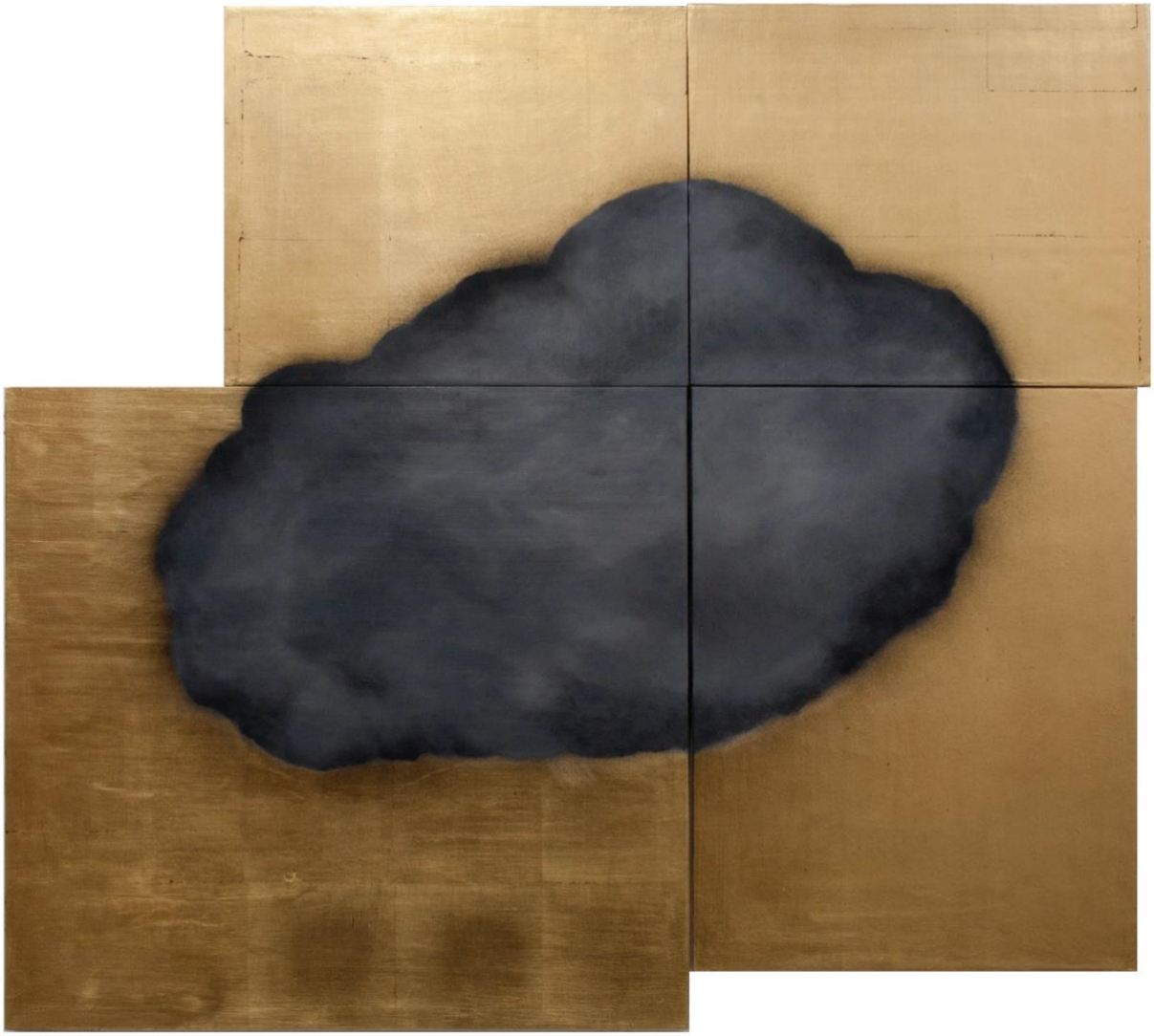
These clouds that appear throughout the Renaissance disguise what would otherwise have been a problematic spatial discontinuity for painting focused on the production of a new kind of coherent pictorial space. This historic role shows them to have been a useful and necessary presence for a culture whose drive towards representational images was somewhat counter to the portrayal of mythical and religious narrative. In Mantegna's *Minerva Expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue,* painted 200 years later, the hole that has opened up in the sky through which the Virtues arrive is framed by clouds, so that the actual boundary between one world and another is obscured, the clouds once more acting as a kind of screening device or veil. As well as providing a practical solution to compositional problems, these clouds identify shifts between registers that reveal the limits of representation. As such, they can act as critique to the 21st-century computer storage and streaming 'cloud' icon  . Rather than signaling the presence of a transcendent or heavenly space that breaks through the sky to the earthly landscape below, clouds now mask a complicated earthly materiality by means of an idealized, neat image. These are Anthropocenic clouds whereby the hyper-scale data centres that are central to our globalised digital systems are hidden behind an unassuming, clean icon – huge hardware and energy-hungry spaces obscured by a pristine landscape symbol. And extrapolating this cloud image, any image search for 'cloud data centre' reveals plenty of digitally constructed, perspectivally converging, rows of computer storage hardware framed by blue sky and white cumulus clouds. These images, made from a collage of architectural elements (that converge towards a vanishing point), and photographed sky (that enhances the effect), are a digital reverberation of Brunelleschi's perspectival panel of the Florentine Baptistry and its silvered, reflected sky.

Andrea Mantegna, *Minerva Expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue*, 1502, Louvre, 1.6 x 1.92m, tempera

Future Clouds

This survey of clouds, and their equivocal status in the construction of images since the arrival of linear perspective in the 15th- century, shows them to be divergent and ambiguous forms that play a significant role in the rich history of representational image-making. *The Cloud, Future Value* looks back at this history, as much as it looks ahead. It echoes pre-perspectival painting with its gold gessoed panels, the juncture of which suggests the perspectival window, which is 'looked through,' at the image beyond its frame. But the work also indicates this problematic digital elision of image and materiality, its ominous dark shape implying the menacing presence of the hidden data landscapes more than the innocuous icon – huge industrial centres built in wastelands or on the periphery of social space – a kind of digital wilderness. In the act of masking, clouds also reveal: the gap between illusion and reality, the constructed nature of images taken to be equivalents of space per se. They also, as Damisch explores, act as indices of pictorial regimes that dialectically develop perspectival

constraints; the sky, and its clouds, brings its suggestion of unlimited space and movement to the static perspective construction with its horizontal and orthogonal lines that map and frame the view for the earthbound viewer. And the possibilities of digital space are endlessly creative in spite of the cloud's capacity to obscure the transition from its material reality of data storage to its idealized presentation. Clouds complicate and obfuscate, but in doing so, they bear witness: not only to the limitations of ideologically constructed representation, but the possibilities beyond it, possibilities that exist beyond the horizon of perspectival landscape space.



Henrietta Simson, *The Cloud, Future Value*, 2017, 107 x 96cm, oil, spray paint, metal leaf on gesso panels

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