

# CLOUDS

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PIP DICKENS

Opposite image: Cloud #7, 2023, oil on card, 23.7 cm x 28 cm

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## FOREWORD

Clouds are enduring terrestrial companions, and far beyond. Yellow-hued veils on Jupiter, consisting of layers of ammonia ice, ammonium hydrosulfide crystals, water ice and vapour. Venus is shrouded in thick, yellowish clouds of sulphuric acid, and the Oort cloud is a spherical layer of icy objects surrounding the sun, at a distance between 2,000 and 100,000 astronomical units. There are clouds composed of silicates, and interstellar clouds, accumulations of gas, plasma and dust in worlds outside our solar system. Wherever they are located, and regardless of their configurations, clouds are fundamental elements of the cosmos.

From our earthly perspective, humankind has watched these fascinating formations for millennia. They have mesmerised millions of people and inspired countless artists, provoking wonder, enquiry and sometimes veneration.

Pip Dickens' latest body of work, *Clouds* is a series of oil paintings and oil sketches centred on her personal observations, as well as Ruskin and Turner's pictorial interpretations and approach to clouds and skies. Dickens' puffs, however, offer a different twist, determined by her fondness and fascination of exploring ideas of extremes and visual confusion – a kind of 'terrible beauty'. Her phantasmagorical vapours are characterised by restrained colours, imbued with solitude and contemplation, in an attempt to capture the audience's imagination and evoke their emotions.

Furthermore, in this cycle Dickens connects to German romanticism, with its concern for the sublime, an unsettling experience not of composed harmony but rather intense and stirring, provoking strong feelings, sometimes expressing the inner tumult of the artist. *Life Inside a Cloud*, *Illuminate* and

*Nascent Cloud* are distinctive representations of physical effects, in particular the dual emotional quality of attraction and unease. Ideas of illusion and double meaning are recurring themes in Dickens' work. The notion that we may receive two contrasting visual or intellectual responses to a single stimulant is an ongoing theme in her artistic journey.

While Dickens' cloudscapes are small in format, they nonetheless tantalise viewers' perceptions, where she knowingly cloaks them under the clouds' unceasing presence.

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## Artist Statement: A Conundrum of Clouds

Clouds seem less a scientific phenomenon than a phantasmagorical wonder of nature, at once mesmerising and contradictory, light and airy puffs composed of cold moisture weighing tons. Their incredible weight hangs above us, benign and seemingly etherial. Belying their physical reality an entrancing, ever-changing appearance echoes the movement of nature itself: a coming into being and shape, constantly achieving new forms, which eventually evaporate or merge, as if they had never been at all, a full life cycle.

My studies of clouds have learned from the observations and research of John Ruskin and the studies of J.M.W. Turner which capture atmospheric moods and their effects on landscapes and human dwellings, as do the works of the Irish painter Paul Henry. Depictions of clouds have been important in the history of Western and Eastern visual traditions. More recently cloud-like forms and effects have been created in historic indoor settings by the Dutch artist Berndnaut Smilde (*Nimbus Atlas* 2015-16) and outdoor by Olafur Eliasson (*Fog Assembly* 2017).

These new oil sketches on card, canvas and paper are my method of investigating what clouds may mean to us or make us feel. The capture of formless evanescence seems an impossible task for painting, but the very difficulty propels further efforts, strangely perhaps because of the amorphous liquidity of painting's raw materials. These images are not based on photographs or other forms of mechanical capture but are rather attempts using different methods and renderings to re-conjure the mysteries of their forms and atmospheric makeup, asking how we feel about these strange, magical entities.

No resolution is proposed here to the enigma of clouds. Offered to the viewer is rather the results of an effort to spend time, as one might lying on a grassy knoll on a summer's day, giving oneself over to their unfixed yet transfixing life cycle.



## Some Uses of Clouds

Pip Dickens' recent cloud paintings refer to cloud forms but are not to do with meteorology. Freightened with evocative or mysterious references – a skull, a support for what seem like candles, a place where tear-drops emerge, marks that might suggest a rocky landscape, even a duckling– these cloud-shapes are more like apparitions than recorded perceptions. The viewer is invited to wonder whether the images, resembling ectoplasmic manifestations, are drifting towards solidity and longevity or will soon dissipate.

Dickens' paintings connect to historical and contemporary topics in painting. The most important work on clouds in visual art in recent times – *A Theory of /Cloud/* (1972/2002) by Hubert Damisch– touches on both. The notes below briefly explore some of these themes. Dickens' images inevitably recall earlier cloud representations and ideas, and their long, diverse history in art. Perhaps the most common everyday image of a cloud is the low altitude stratocumulus with its familiar cauliflower-shaped outlines, sometimes suggesting domes or rounded hills but with a darker horizontal base. Yet meteorologists, still using the classification devised by Luke Howard in 1802, describe many other varieties with dramatically different appearances. For example, cirrostratus clouds are thin, translucent skeins of ice crystals formed between 20,000 and 40,000 feet. Nimbostratus clouds on the other hand are mid-level, thick grey blankets of rain-bearing moisture capable of blocking out significant amounts of sunlight.

Is the multiplicity of recognised cloud forms sufficient to deprive them of the right to a single name? Damisch quotes from Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593) that 'without knowledge of the name it is not possible to accede to knowledge of the thing signified' (Damisch 2002, 57), hinting at the capacity of cloud forms to disturb seemingly settled orders of representation and knowledge founded on the resemblance, projected by a defining word, between the image and an idea of the thing signified.



Another feature of clouds is their incessant, endless mutability. Even as we watch they appear, thicken and blossom, coalesce, accumulate, pile-up, then are dispersed and thinned, losing form and substance, eventually to disappear. This mobile spectacle is also a striking disclosure of sunlight. The sun's rays sometimes illuminate clouds dramatically from the side or below, making them seem solidly monumental. At others their gauzy films capture and hold light in droplets of moisture 'bearing fire in their own bosoms' as John Ruskin put it, and scattering it across vast planes. They can disperse, polarize and reveal light but also absorb and smother it, casting ominous, premonitory shadows. The allure of such displays often comes from the disproportion between an ordinary earthbound scene below and a dramatic backcloth of towering aerial forms. In *The Bright Cloud* (1833-4, Tate Britain) by Samuel Palmer, for example, the rounded shapes of billowing clouds, which occupy most of the upper third of the picture plane, are echoed by the shapes of trees, hillside and sheep, bringing an enigmatic harmony to a bucolic scene.

In Europe clouds feature in Jewish, Christian and pagan stories, and so eventually show up in their visual representation. <sup>1</sup> Damisch observes how clouds came to organise spacial relations between the human world and Christian images of the divine kingdom from the sixteenth century onwards, serving as cushions, seats, balconies and platforms. In the most ambitious examples of Baroque *tromp l'oeil*, Correggio's Parma frescoes for the church of San Giovanni Evangelista and the dome of the cathedral, prosaic views of real architectural spaces are replaced by tunnels of light lavishly decorated by clouds, affording the upward gaze of the viewer a glimpse of heaven.

Clouds have also offered a means of transport between earth and heaven; angels hover or descend while the saintly are carried aloft. Medieval artists 'never painted a cloud but with the purpose of placing an angel upon it' while today, Ruskin observes, we have so disenchanting them that they signify only 'so many inches of rain or hail' (quoted *ibid*, 187) Yet for Ruskin our capacity to perceive the beauty of skies and clouds, 'the glory of the Sun and Moon for human eyes', unfolds a

life-giving truth. What so deeply disturbed him about historically new, ominous 'plague-clouds' he thought he began to see around 1875 was precisely a threat to this inestimable gift.<sup>2</sup>

Clouds have served the purpose of allegorical allusion in painting. At the upper left of one of Mantegna's three depictions of St Sebastian (1457-59, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) a white cloud is shaped to resemble a horse and rider, suggesting perhaps a figure from St John's apocalypse or even the destructive power of time itself. Turning to the visualisation of mythological and religious stories, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Jupiter created a haze in which he hoped to hide from his jealous spouse Hera the rape of Io. In his telling analysis of Correggio's erotic and disturbing *Jupiter and Io* (c. 1530, also in Vienna) Damisch reflects on the potential of cloud and formless, blotchy shapes more generally to provoke the imagination of the artist and the viewer. For Leonardo, day-dreaming, musing on amorphous, indistinct shapes and tones like stains and clouds, could help the painter to suggest 'mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, great plains, valleys and hills... battles, and lively postures of strange figures, expressions on faces, costumes and an infinite number of things' (quoted in Clark 1988, 135). A system of imaginative projection onto deliberately made stains and blots was proposed as a creative technique by Alexander Cozens in 1785. The suggestions, even 'information', available from amorphous shapes was claimed to enhance the powers of the artist to create what he or she willed, but might also, however, reveal darker preoccupations, apparent in the projection of fetishistic fantasies.

Techniques of 'seeing in' cloud-like forms can be contrasted with techniques of observation and recording. Transience and constant change make clouds a demanding subject for representational drawing and painting because neither in form nor position do they remain helpfully still. Yet this difficulty was eventually seen by different artists as an opportunity to sharpen scrutiny and improve rendition. Here then, if tamed by method, clouds may be brought to serve the ends of representational veracity, inverting their value for psychological projection.

Yet Damisch returns to the point that a cloud 'is a substance with neither form nor consistency, onto which Correggio imprints emblems of his desire, just as Leonardo before him, imprinted his onto the stains on a wall.' (Damisch 2002, 31-2) This touches not only on the seductiveness of the indeterminate, the attractiveness of what escapes graspable shape, the suggestion of endless possibility and limitless life. As Peters and Piechocki (2021) remind us, in classical Greece clouds tended to be given a female gender, and linked in their constant 'becoming' with a capacity to give birth, not only to rain, thunder and lightning but also in the medieval period to frogs and fish. In Aristophanes' play *Clouds* the female chorus appears in the costume of clouds. Socrates, the target of the satire, remarks that 'clouds can turn into anything they want', underlining their power to provoke, even direct, the spectator's imagination. In this light clouds not only personify poetry itself but also connect to an idea of the origins of creativity in the passions, the psyche's endlessly changing forms, perspectives, objects of desire, only some admissible by the subject. Well-known surrealist techniques, like *frottage* and *fumage*, producing evocative diaphanous, smoky or indistinct surfaces, were designed to allow contact with the unconscious by evading mechanisms of self-censorship.

Damisch subtitled *A Theory of /Cloud/* 'Towards a History of Painting', implying a contribution to an as-yet unfinished project. His argument is that the painting of cloud-forms (or/cloud/), the putting to use of their multiple shapes and meanings, played a decisive role in a sixteenth century revolution in European painting, introducing a new type of pictorial space, dethroning drawing and eventually freeing and exalting colour. Painter-theorists of the High Renaissance, like Brunelleschi and Alberti, devised the foundations of a systematic, horizontally-oriented linear perspective, while artists in Northern Europe worked incrementally towards a similar pictorial order. Damisch agrees with other historians that the aesthetics of the period ranked drawing far above colour. Human and divine figures were to be judged against known norms or ideals of beauty, right proportion and harmony, and had to be presented frontally and clearly for such correspondence to be visible.<sup>3</sup> The revolution in painting initiated by Correggio, later identified with the Baroque, breaks decisively with an outlook in which solid,

impermeable objects with clear, fixed outlines were judged uniquely suited to the linear powers of drawing. Painting is set upon a path in which colour is finally recognized as an independent element or 'force', until Matisse is able to say in a 1904 letter to Signac that drawing and colour were 'completely different, even absolutely contradictory'. Drawing 'relies on linear or sculptural form' while painting 'relies on coloured plasticity.' What Matisse presents as an opposition means that 'the painting, especially when it is applied in small dots, destroys the drawing.' (Amory and Dumas 2023, 161) Damisch believes that cloud as a painterly device is decisive to this process.

In sum, as well as offering a daily spectacle of polymorphic beauty clouds gather around themselves a rich accumulation of associated ideas. The briefest glance at the history of clouds in art, not to speak of the insights and erudition of Damisch, reveal remarkably strong links to painting's enduring themes and topics, like line and colour, ephemerality and duration, materiality and spirituality, the sublime and the prosaic, concealment and revelation. Aspects of which are explored by Dickens in these paintings.

Dr Ian Heywood

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1 For comments on Catholic theology and the use of images see Damisch 47-53. For Ruskin's theology of clouds see 'The Firmament', Chapter VI, *Modern Painters* Vol. 4, 106-114.

2 See Ruskin 'The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century'. Also Nicholas Robins (2021), 'Ruskin, Whistler and the Climate of Art in 1884'.

3 For a discussion of metaphysical thinking about human proportion in the Renaissance see Panofsky, 1955, 117-122.



Cloud #6, 2023, oil on card, 32.8 cm x 26.3 cm





Cloud #2, 2023, oil on card, 24 cm x 22.3 cm



Cloudy Ducky, 2023, oil on card, 28.6cm x 30 cm

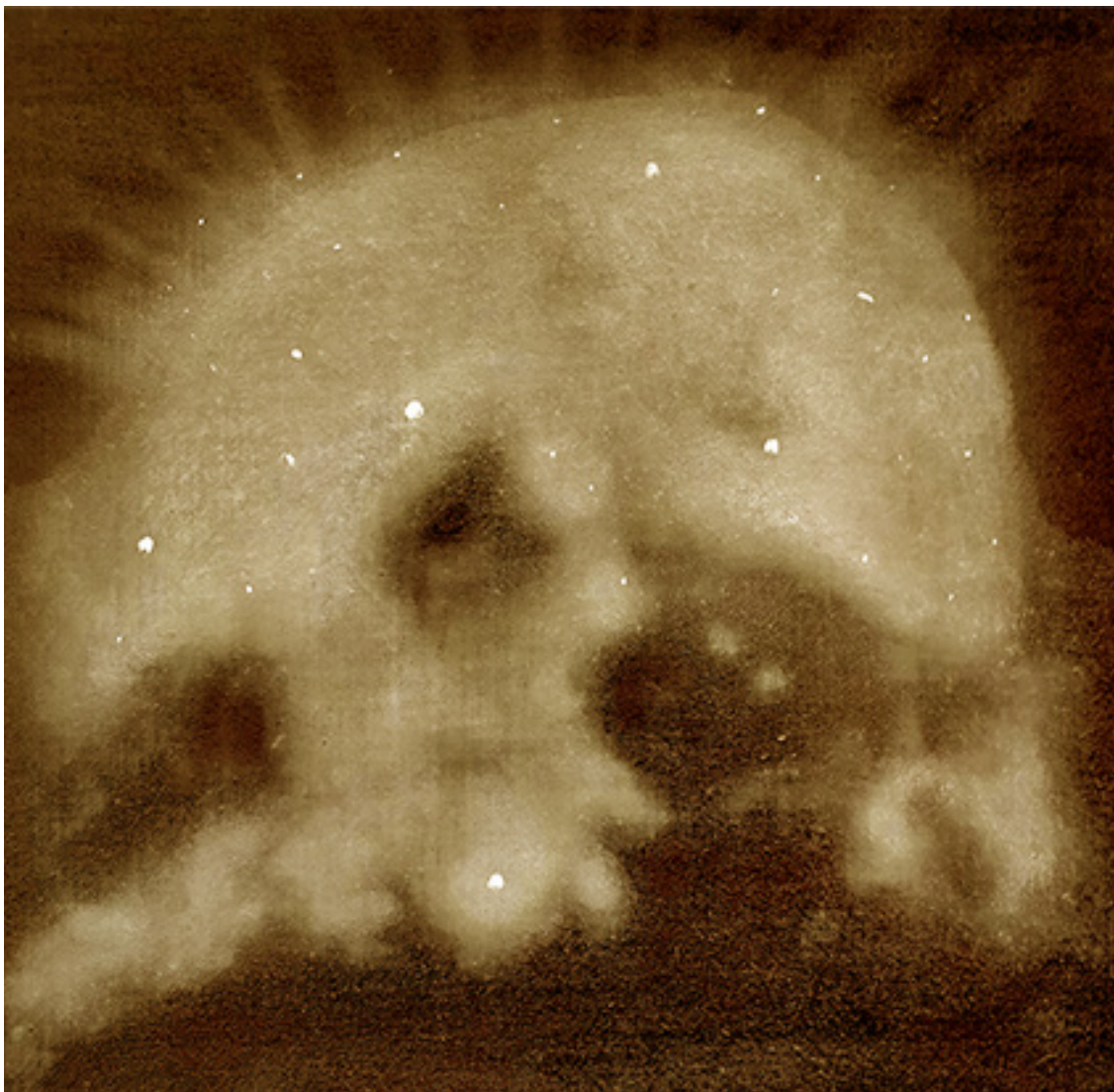




Life Inside a Cloud, 2023, oil on card, 39.2cm x 47cm

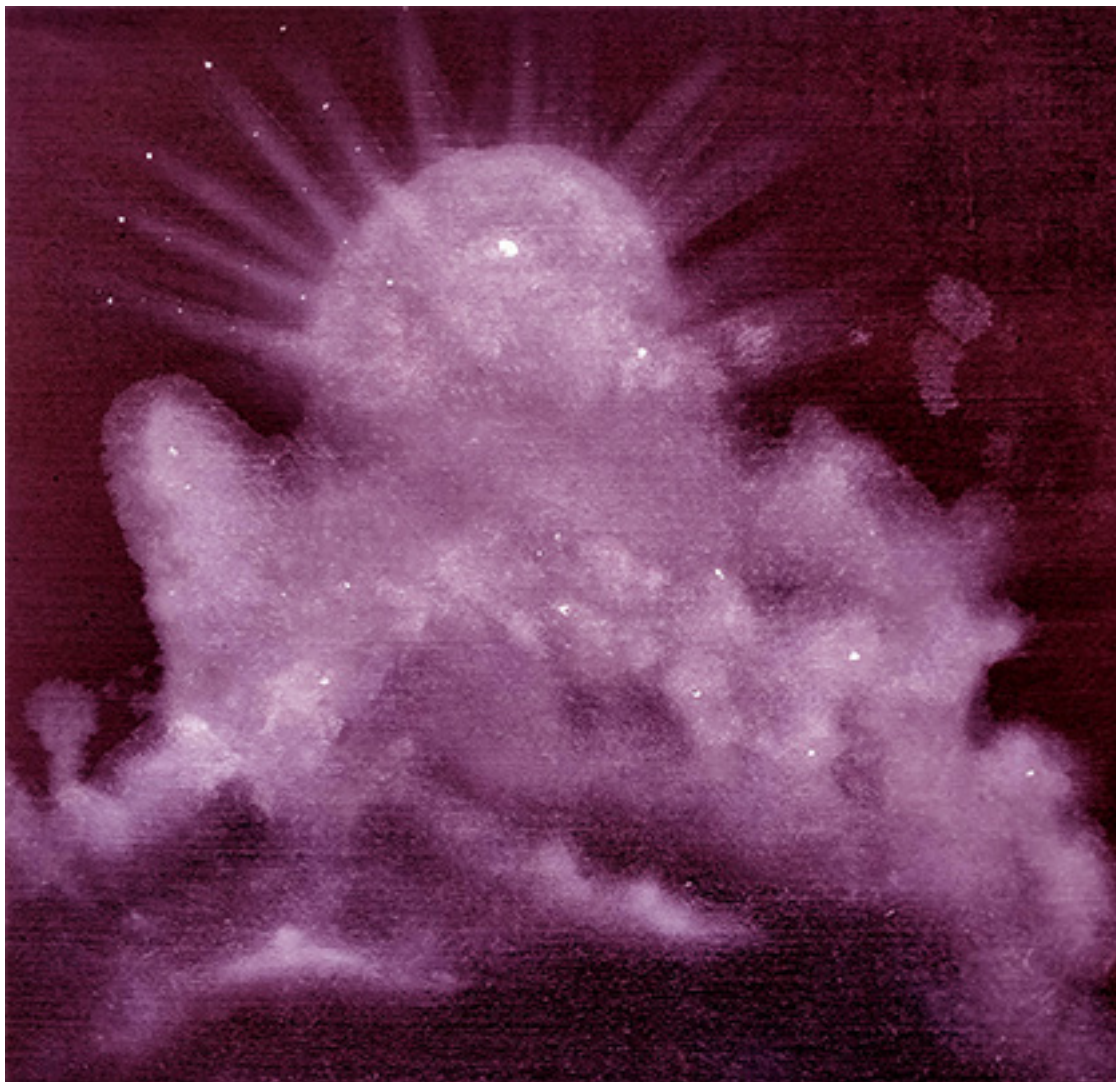


Nascent Cloud, 2023, oil on card, 39 cm x 52.8 cm

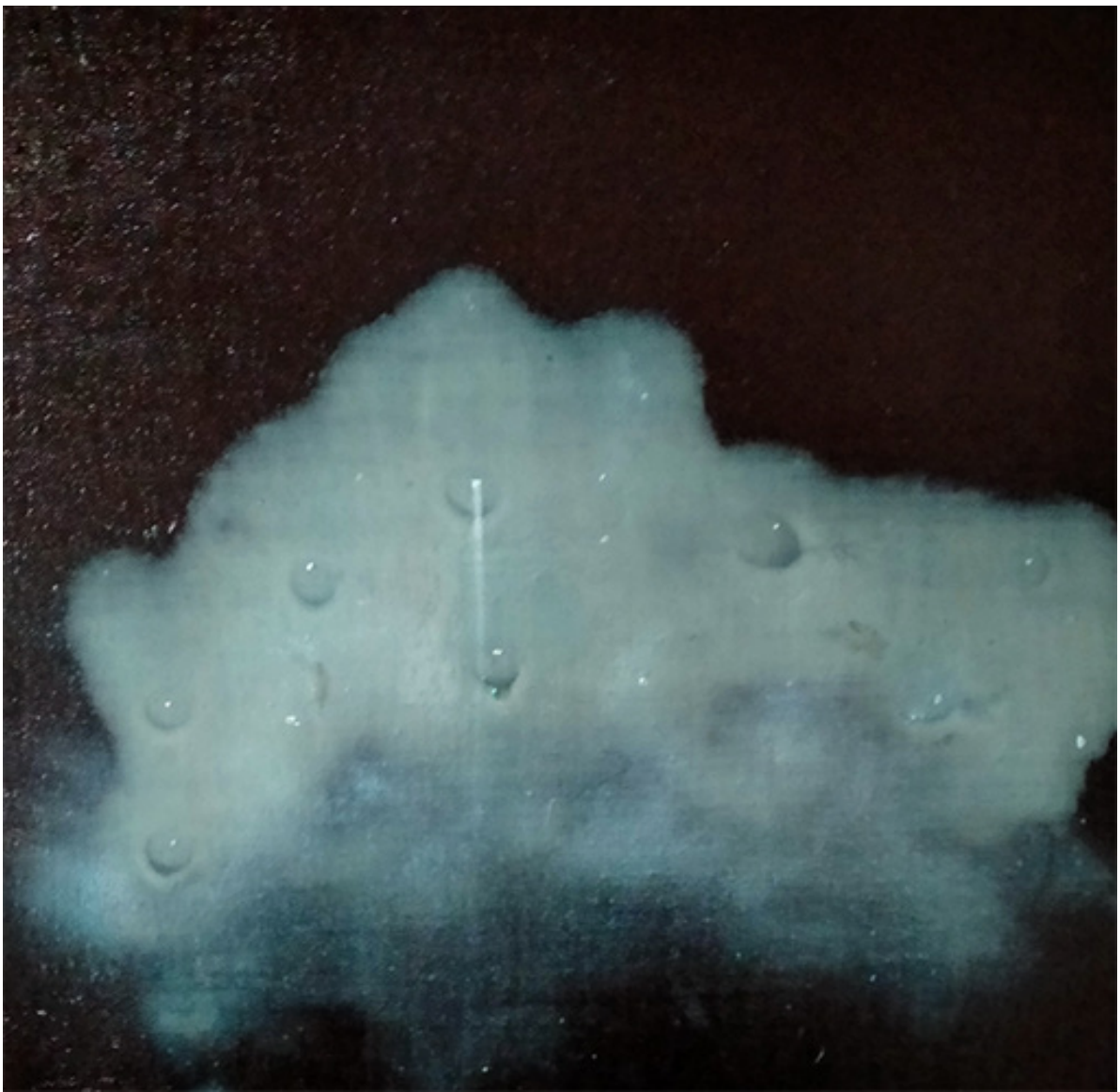


Death Cloud, 2023, oil on canvas, 30cm x 30 cm

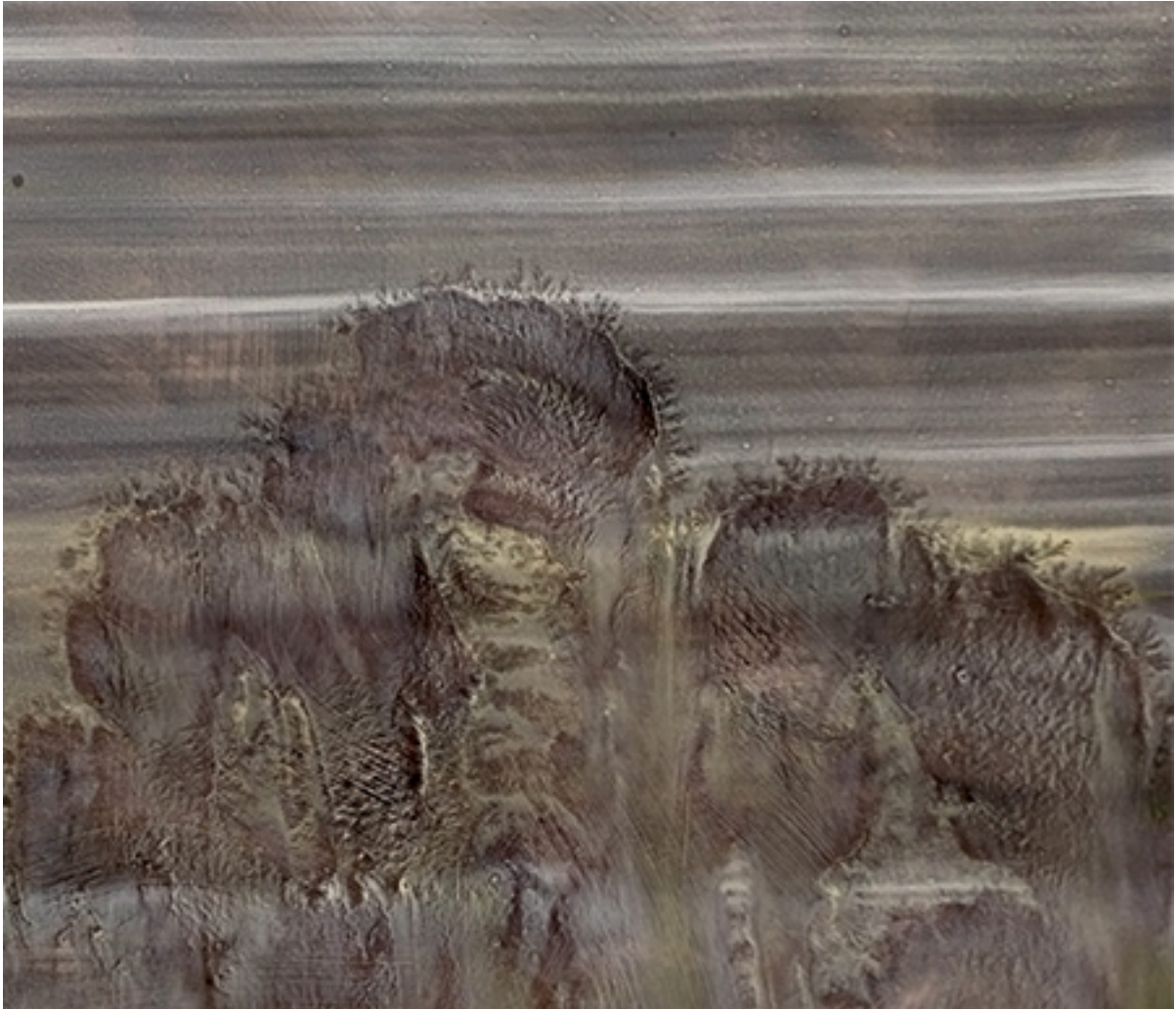




Magnificum, 2023, oil on canvas, 30 cm x 30 cm



Where Tears Form, 2023, oil on canvas, 30 cm x 30 cm



Cloud Kyoto, 2023, oil on paper, 49 cm x 60 cm





Cloud Wax, 2023, oil on paper, 43cm x 55cm



Cloudscape #1, 2023, oil on board, 30cm x 30cm





Cloudscape #2, 2023, oil on board, 30 cm x 30 cm



Elephant Man (Cloud Drawings), 2010, charcoal on paper in bespoke entomological display case

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Pip Dickens (b. 1962) is a painter. She has a Masters in Fine Art from The Slade School of Art, University College London, graduating in 2000. She is Lecturer in Fine Art (Painting) at Lancaster University and Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and Member of The National Association for Fine Art Education.

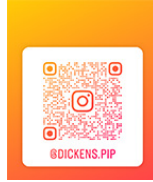
She has had many solo and group exhibitions (see [www.pip-dickens.com](http://www.pip-dickens.com)) and her work is in numerous public, commercial and private collections in the UK and overseas including charcoal drawings in the Prints & Drawings Collection at the British Museum and paintings in the Bradford Museums and Galleries collection and The Stanley & Audrey Burton Gallery at the University of Leeds. Research awards have included travel to Iceland and Japan.

Pip Dickens' CLOUD research is part of the Art and Time Research Network formulated by Dr James Quin at Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts at Lancaster University.

<https://wp.lancs.ac.uk/temporalities/>

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