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A Panorama Considered as a Conversation (or the Other Way Around)

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By Carter Ratcliff

NOTES ON "LOW LYING CLOUDS, JULY 15, 2010" BY JIM HOLL

Floating in this blue panorama are forms that look like chunks of limestone, though some look more like clouds hit hard by sunlight. Of course, this is just a first impression. The second impression is of forms that are neither clouds nor stones but unique to this setting and, for all their differences, united by a family resemblance. Though each is as interesting as all the others, I am particularly drawn to the two forms near the center of the blue field. They seem to face one another and, as I understand them, they are saying: we two have found just the right place to be. We are near the center but not precisely at it. That would be too boring. So we have positioned ourselves just above the center-point at a distance from each other that puts us in communication and allows us to command the entire field.



Jim Holl, "Low Lying Clouds 7.15.10." Courtesy the artist.

This command is of course a subtle thing, not a matter solely of positioning but also of our consciousness of the positions we occupy in the blue field and in relation to one another. The latter—our relationship—is especially important because, as any fool can plainly see, we do not understand consciousness as an attribute enclosed by a form of some sort: an object, a body, whatever. Consciousness is not a quality trapped in an interior.

It is an event occurring outwardly, in the spaces between forms—forms like us—and it brings the one alive to the other. That is why our conversation is so lively, even though it concerns nothing more than the way we occupy the blue field. For the way we occupy it is nothing less than the premise of our being and, obliquely, the premise of all that exists and attains consciousness somehow.

The consciousness that brings the one alive to the other also brings the one alive to the many, and so all the other forms in the blue field are forever trying to hone in on our conversation. As they have every right to do, no doubt. There are two forms slightly larger than us, their positions bracketing ours, and they are saying that, as good as our positions are, theirs are better—optimal, really. And the form directly below us, the one with a sort of waist, advises our rivals to forget about us and acknowledge that the three of them form a triangle. This, they say, is the commanding pattern, and the form directly above us is saying to the three, look here, we four establish a rectangular shape that echoes the shape of the blue field—the shape but not the orientation—and this play of consonance against divergence allegorizes the play of consciousness that makes us four of the most powerful bearers of meaning in this universe.

There is no silence anywhere, not even on the peripheries, where forms turn to members

of the more or less geometric configurations and say: do not be seduced by the hope of Euclidean clarity, all is contingent in the blue field. All is adrift, and it is better by far to join a tenuous pattern than to submit to one that can provide, at best, an illusion of stability. For illusions of that kind have a way of dulling consciousness, of defeating it, eventually, and leaving the field bereft of meaning—identifiable, yes, but for all practical purposes empty. To these peripheral voices those of the central forms reply with irony, agreeing in ways that undermine agreement and disagreeing in ways that not so secretly acknowledge that every form in the blue field joins with every other in constantly shifting patterns. And of course, much more is being said, for saying is endless here, though there comes a time when transcription is no longer necessary—when it is enough simply to listen, which means, in this universe, to keep on looking.

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