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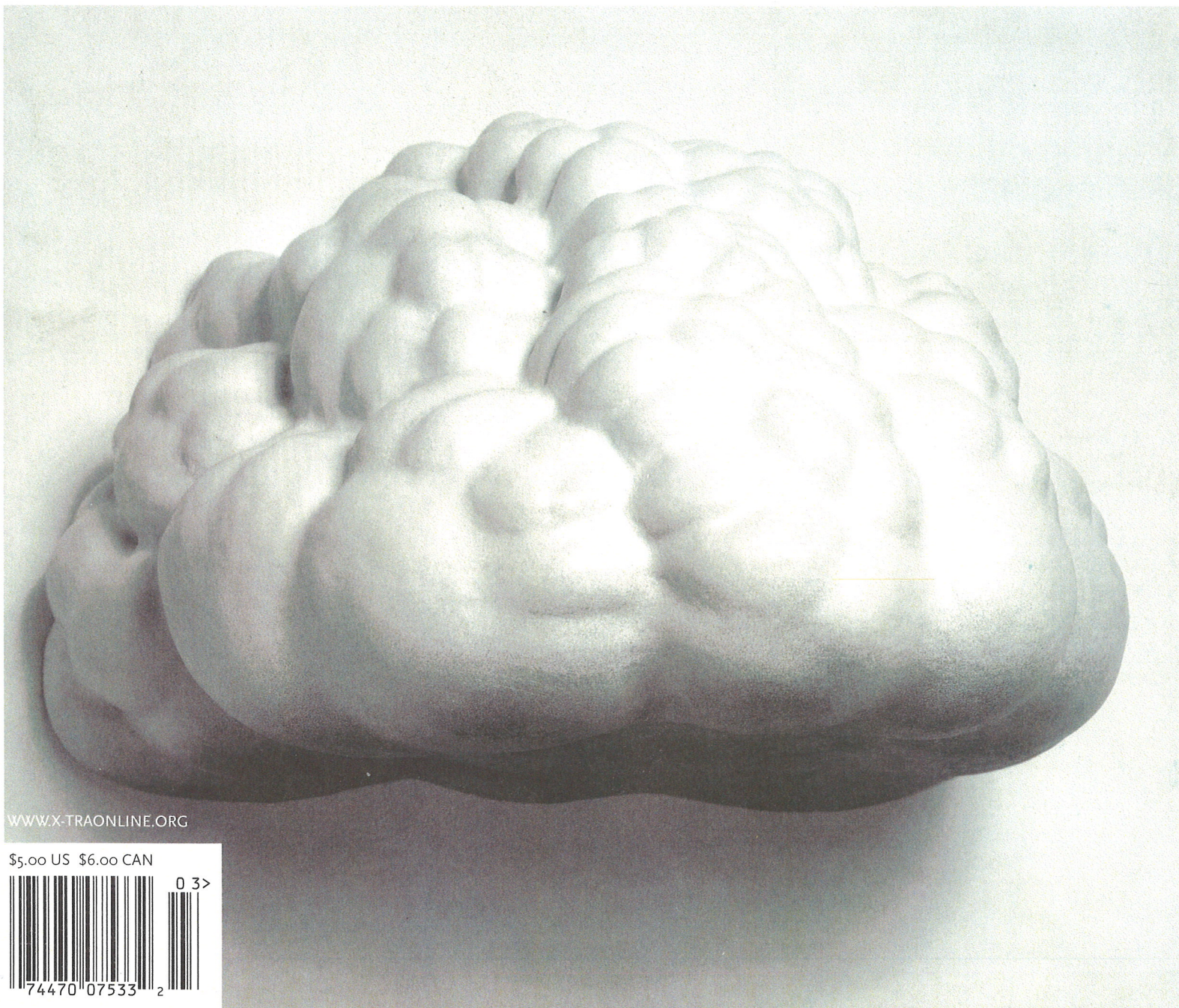
Tim Hawkinson: Taking the
Measure of the World

Erratically Ecstatic at MOCA

Visions of Airy Confines

Neha Choksi

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Visions of Airy Confines

Review by Neha Choksi

Ross Rudel's woodcarvings of cloud puffs and Gregory Kucera's photographic relief objects feel like earnest attempts to measure and condense the nature of clouds. Both projects, on exhibit concurrently, beg the question of what is a cloud, and anyone can arrive at a variety of notions of how these works are nothing like clouds. Yet, if you could only express yourself through color-stained, polished wood and needed to demonstrate "cloud" you would feel blessed to have Rudel's fluid handling of color, tone and not-right morphology. And if you had to tease out a sense of the deep atmospheric of clouds from no more than a few millimeters off a wall, you could do worse than Kucera's lenticular experiments. Both choose a path to gaining knowledge of the cloudy masses via perception, but in their choice of haptic or optic means, respectively, they arrive at quite different resolutions.¹

Coming upon Ross Rudel's room of clouds in the Angles annex space, its walls exuding small carefully polished wood sculptures bulging with round knobs all over, you might feel transformed into a giant child. Rudel, it turns out, has been rescuing fallen trees destined for firewood from LA side-yards and converting them into miniature cloud icons, part primitive-doodle and part Ur-cloud.

By displaying them serially at just over eye level, aligned within reach of the body—the eye and the hand—the clouds cease to be seen from their customary vantage. This lowering of the heavens triggers your hands' unfulfilled impulse to pick up the clouds, to run fingers over the ridges and surface undulations, to worry the knots—and this in turn coalesces into an understanding of the artist's time spent consolidating the cloud. (It almost makes one wish all the shavings were strewn on the floor to see.)

Inscribed with the immediacy of the artist's dexterous touch, the wood-clouds evoke the body that created them, thus directing attention to their own body, their woodiness and very material presence—the haptic in glorious play, as opposed to the optical "mind's eye." The title of the show claims these as clouds, but these objects, in their equanimity and equilibrium, are the antithesis of clouds: wood-patterned anti-clouds with weight, opacity, and stability. Clouds are wind-pushed fugitives, gravity-defying drops of water and light-transforming densities of air. Despite having a visual reality, clouds escape settled surface; they cannot be touched, measured or fixed.

In Rudel's vision of clouds there is absolute grave presence instead of light and void. The sustained contour mapping, gridding, and excavating implied by surface protuberances and undulations is ironically a small-scale replica of the land-engineer or grading architect's laborious method. It is as if the hydraulic mechanics of the insubstantial heavens have been transformed into the gravitational vectors of substantial earth.

For Rudel, seeing is a back-to-basics ethic of visualizing the world through effort, of gaining knowledge through one's hands. It is an individual vision that hopes to find a reflection in the viewer's sympathetic gaze. It makes no judgement about the nature of that gaze. Kucera's work preempts and fractures that gaze, contesting that perceptual knowledge. If Rudel visualizes clouds as icons whose presence is, perhaps, revered, Kucera's synthetic play of light indexes their ephemeral effect. In the past century, artists' clouds may have lost their ability to evoke the symbolic symmetry of heaven and earth in Christian iconography, but they have gained presence as abstract placeholders or bearers of our subjectivity, whether experienced in pop, sublime, abstract or scientific ways. In their modest way, thankfully, neither Rudel's nor Kucera's clouds disembodied the viewer's gaze. Our subjectivity retains its phenomenological dimension.

Neha Choksi is an artist living in Los Angeles.

