

Ernesto Morales, metaphysics of clouds

by Nicola Davide Angerame

They are heavenly Clouds, great goddesses for lazy men: it is they who make us capable of thinking, speaking, reflecting, enchanting and deceiving.

Aristophanes, *Clouds*

No habrá una sola cosa que no sea una nube.

Jorge Louis Borges

Zen is a wafting cloud in the sky. No screw fastens it, no string holds it, it moves as it likes. No amount of meditation will keep Zen in one place.¹

Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki

Epigraphs in essays generally operate as polar stars to offer a direction to the reader, but if we want to do justice to the theme dealt with here, it will be necessary to adopt a multidirectional gaze, as much as possible since clouds are multiple entities, ethereal: gaseous like the wind, liquid like rain, solid like mountains perched in the sky. Michelangelo and Giambattista Tiepolo used them, in fact, as springboards in their frescoes: the *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel uses clouds as a solid and material support to sustain muscular and heavy, marble bodies. Tiepolo, on the other hand, adorned them in soft and joyful colours, almost unreal, in which he wraps the figures of a classical world translated into allegory. But Giotto is the first to consecrate the clouds as the protagonists of a fresco and in 2011 the scholar Chiara Frugoni discovered the profile of the devil's face hidden in the *Death of Saint Francis*. It is there, camouflaged for eight hundred years, in the pictorial cycle that marks the beginning of western figurative art: the fresco in the upper basilica of St. Francis of Assisi. Before this, the primacy of an illusionist master of nebular camouflage games belonged to Mantegna, who in some paintings gives shape to clouds, a bit like we all do when we see a windswept stormy sky and project our visions, evoking iridescent shapes. And if Baroque is volatile and vaporous by vocation, it will be the romantic painting to exalt the sense of omen that clouds bring with them when they become threatening and obscure. William Turner exalts the luminous and chromatic material on Venetian lagoons, and not only, while John Constable even dedicates entire paintings to them such as *Cloud Study* of 1822, making the same gesture that, a century later in 1922, Alfred Stieglitz performs with his camera, making two series of shots, the *Equivalents* and *Songs of the Sky*, which portray clouds and elect them as the central theme of a decisive production for the history of photography understood as art. Stieglitz chooses them because they speak of "*the chaos of the world and the relationship with chaos*". Thirty years later, fellow photographer Edward Steichen would trigger the mushroom cloud, the father of all death clouds, from Hiroshima to Chernobyl. And if Magritte makes a surreal use of it, in 1974, Luigi Ghirri pursued them for 365 days in his manifesto cycle entitled *Infinito*.

In this newly evoked iconography of clouds, the pictorial production of Ernesto Morales finds its own original location and shows elements of significant discontinuity with respect to a treatment of the subject that leads him to attempt the pictorial transcription of a *metaphysics of clouds*, aimed at building as much of a recurrent symbolic complex with them as an initiatory pictorial gesture, directed at the concentration, within a visual field, of a practice whose sense floods the furrow of representation to occupy the immense and boundless plain of a *further* landscape: that of the spirit, of the mind, of the psyche and of that *truth* of which everything is part.

Inside the painting, for centuries the object of contemplation by *antonomasia*, he contains the meaning of a pictorial gesture that is designed, evaluated and implemented as a broader gesture of existential and metaphysical nature, as a research process, which in giving shape to a vision aspires to touch not only the emotional chords of oneself and of others, but also aspires to take on a persuasive force in order to lead oneself and the user, understood as a travelling companion, within a world beyond matter and shape: a world that comes before these and that offers its substratum and its meaning to them. A "claim", that of Morales, which only recently, or since the mid-nineties, is scientifically supported by a new medical scientific discipline such as neuroaesthetics, a branch of neurological knowledge that studies the neural transmissions and the parts of the brain involved in the fruition of works of art and in aesthetic judgments about beauty. Equally recent is the discovery of the existence and decisive role of mirror neurons, which would be the basis of some decisive learning and *empathy*: human capacity (with divine traits) able to make us "perceive" what we see happening in another human being. Mirror neurons are also used in the deep understanding of the other, in solidarity, we can put ourselves in the shoes of our fellow beings thanks to them.

Ernesto Morales, with an instinctive act typical of the painter, and with a series of studies behind him, wants to use this "human condition" by building an *interior landscape* painting. Certainly the symbolic and metaphorical meaning of the cloud, understood as a destinal emblem of a humanity and a cosmos in full and incessant change, are at the base of this painting, but the deepest sense is that of a painting of elusive shapes through natural materials (self-produced pigments) bringing to maturity a slow distilling of things: the hand that creates the light and the volumes and the mind that is lost in its indefinite-finite (clouds have contours but they are impregnable). It is in this paradoxical game of a painting that immobilizes its own subject, which makes its way, through the empathic vision that Morales aims to increase, the profound meaning of his feeling. A feeling that has taken note of the ability of the clouds to set in motion an equally subtle, metaphysical and yet gifted thought with the particular consistency of the pictorial image, and in some way definitive, reached the zero level where the Heideggerian philosophy of Being as a horizon of meaning meets the practice of Zen capable of embracing the whole with a "gaze" that observes without judging or identifying itself.

At this point we understand how the *Atlas of Clouds* designed by Morales is a project that is worth as a touchstone and as a stimulus to continue that gesture that is double: for him it is to paint, for us it is to look, in a transmission of meaning that it is no longer that of representation. An act of painting that is capable of combining abstraction and figuration, monochrome and dripping, impression and expression. Technique and style count as a strategy for the *implementation* of a thought that is the action, within a paradigm, the cloud, which another Argentinian of European-South American culture and sensitivity such as Jorge Louis Borges has known so well to indicate by writing an ode to the cloud of which it is useful to quote some verses: *There will never be a single thing which is not / a cloud. Cathedrals are /*

*in their massive stone and biblical windows / that time will erase. (...) / What are clouds? Architecture / of the case? Perhaps God needs it / to perform the infinite work: / they are the threads of His dark plot. / Perhaps the cloud is no less vain / than the man who looks at it in the morning*². To this existential poetic approach, shared by Ferdinando Pessoa with other sentences in his *Book of Disquiet*, are the images of Morales, those paintings slowly developed on the basis of distant photographs that caught the moment and which painting puts back into motion in an *undecidable* way: while he portrays them, he offers them the strength that disturbs us, while he puts them back into motion he fixes them once and for all. Painting therefore is a strange instrument according to Morales; an instrument of meditation and absorbed contemplation that is fixed on a subject (years ago it was the nebulae and the forests, always *interior landscapes*) to reconstruct with a gaze the sense of an act finalized to make the cloud the most propitious symbol to perform a quantum leap, from material to immaterial and from shape to shapeless.

Distill the image, develop it also through the drawing, bringing back to paper an unthinkable lightness: that of incessant change. In the cloud, the Heraclitean river is even devoid of its bed. It proceeds at the mercy of the winds and without gravity to hold it, it is dispersed between heights and directions of all kinds. Highly fickle bodies to which Morales offers a visual and conceptual base, almost a pedestal on which to lay the idol. And therefore, we return to the discourse with which the Socrates of Aristophanes (*Clouds*) elevates them to divinities and elects them to platonic ideas, or something similar. The intent of the great playwright is mocking, Aristophanes is in fact a man of tradition who fights against sophists and philosophers, whom he considered as a single danger in Greece that discovers the *logos*. And when he makes Socrates say about the clouds: "*it is they who enable us to think, to speak, to reflect, to enchant and to deceive*", indicates the beginning and the end of a destiny, our western one, in which, thought has also always been deceit, sophism, and not merely thought of truth and beauty. It seems that even the clouds of Morales are "divinities" but of a different type: they inhabit the interior landscape (the boundless Argentine Pampas taught him about the clouds) and are the most evident symbol of an absolute truth that can only be seen however from an Eastern point of view, through Zen, the Buddhist meditation that helps to observe one's own thought, leaving it free to change, to incessantly transform itself like a cloud hit by the winds, but without ever identifying one's Ego with the thought that thinks or is thought, and indeed treats it like a cloud on the horizon and observing what happens to it. And what happens to it is what happens to all of us, it is the meaning of our life itself, as well as of the Whole: of the cosmos as of the most immaterial thought. Thus, we touch the real meaning of *impermanence*, from which we can each build our own desperation or rebirth. And the clouds of Morales, after certain contemplation, begin to gaze at us. To tell us this.