

## Tracey O'Shaughnessy: Head in the clouds

'Thin Air' photographs an up-close, intimate look at our sky

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TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY | REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN



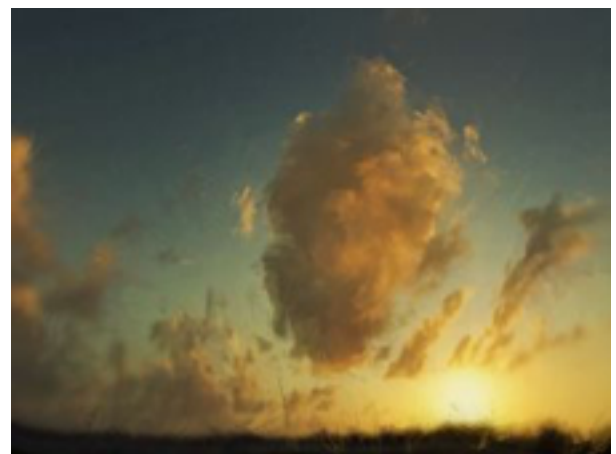
"Cloud Study 10"

We tend to reserve the gulf between what we see and what we imagine to the arts.

Poetry, dance, music, art articulates the ineffable, incarnates what we can't speak, or barely recognize that we feel.

Photography would seem a poor medium for this facility, because the precision of the lens can mitigate the inchoate nature of those emotions.

But a poetic photographer – and Catherine Erb, now exhibiting at KMR Arts in Washington Depot, is decidedly that – turns the medium into a form of poetry. "Thin Air," the exhibit of her works, are as elegiac and wistful as any poetry, so much so that they challenge the notion of what photography is and what it can accomplish.



"Cloud Study 37"



“Cloud Study 30”

Yet Erb's “Cloud Studies,” large-scale images of clouds that call to mind artists from Titian to Constable to Stieglitz, are photographs. Or at least they started out to be. To get the ethereal effect that Erb achieves requires a manipulation, deletion, addition, but most of all, a lyrical sensibility that can link the Renaissance with the Baroque and Romantic to the modern and abstract. These spectral, dreamy images are as much a throwback as they are enterprising.

The dreamy nature that Erb evokes crosses borders, barriers and styles to reveal a fundamental humanity that carries with it the capacity to embrace the transcendent.

Erb takes her photographs out of an airplane, which explains how she gets images of clouds that are at once distant and intimate, privileged and familiar. Here are the sorts of cottony cumulus clouds that ooze and solidify, fatten and dilute. These are clouds that conceal and reveal, curtaining the sky at the same time they reveal it. From a distance, they are cool, abundant and corpulent, harbingers of fair weather and smooth sailing.

Up close, they are almost anthropomorphic in their particularity, each revealing a woven, almost bur-lap texture, filigreed with strands of violet and cream, orange and periwinkle.

Once Erb has taken the photographs, she prints them on watercolor paper and adheres them to birch board. She then covers them with as many as 20 layers of encaustic, to which she occasionally adds pigment.

The effect is not so much an accurate depiction of nature as a Romantic vision of nature dreamed about. Perhaps Erb is channeling the 18th century idea of the picturesque – that nothing is more beautiful than nature, unless you fuss with it a bit and trim the edges. Or perhaps she is lending homage to the work of Titian and other Renaissance artists, whose clouds signaled divine immanence. Riffing on Stieglitz's *Equivalents* series, in which the photographer linked his own thoughts with the abstract equivalents of his emotions, Erb has said her works make the connection between “searching for glimpses of a thing's divine essence and being still and present enough to capture those moments.”

Each of these works has its own inner drama and expressive heft. Some slap with a coruscating cornflower blue intensified by a radiant linen white.

Others, like “Cloud Study 17,” soothe with a tranquil, pacific ocher that exudes a meditative air. Still others, like “Cloud Study 37,” explode with an interior vigor intensified by the juxtaposition of contrasting colors. The engrossing “Cloud Study 10” seems to invite viewers in to a jet stream of a dazzling copse of encroaching clouds.

And all of these works – many as big as 30 by 80 inches – are covered with a honeylike glaze of encaustic, which alternately lends a sheen and darkens the colors within.

These are gorgeous images, ones you want to touch, or at least glide into. They recall youthful moments of youth, lying on cool grass, staring up aimlessly at the sky, certain it was writing its own story.

In Erb's hands, it appears to do just that.

What: Thin Air

Where: KMR Arts, 2 Titus Rd 1, Washington Depot

When: Through Jan. 27

How: 860-868-7533 or [www.kmrarts.com](http://www.kmrarts.com)