

# Pool of Clouds [Piscine de nuages]

## Clara Schulmann

English translation, Fig Docher

In the train to London I listen to the voice of Claire Richard talking about her book *Des Mains heureuses: une archéologie du toucher* [Happy Hands: an Archaeology of Touch]. The work centers on the importance of touch in a moment when preventative gestures still keep us at a distance and motherhood as a new grammar of gestures. The most basic relation to the other plays out in touch: new responsibilities that create in return new loyalties, explains Claire Richard. I wonder what these new loyalties produce in the field of art, as they designate a zone from now on affected by and affectively charged with our common experiences—where we would speak less by and with our eyes, summoning more our other senses.

In the meantime, Eva sends me. Eva sends me images of her works at the moment when she finishes them in the workshop. I do not know her work, so I need her to tell me what she's doing. Our exchanges pass through the images and through her voice that describes them to me. I ask her questions. She responds. I hear that she's looking for the right words. She herself is starting a new practice. She completed a training last January to learn how to sandblast glass. She wanted to learn something new, something technical. So she works on glass tiles on whose surface she draws forms. The technique of sandblasting consists in digging into a surface by blasting it with sand, very hard, which is done in a booth. She sends me pictures and a video in which we see her hand brush one of her freshly-finished pieces. She holds, undoubtedly, her phone in one hand, while the other follows the contours of the drawing on the surface of the glass. The framing is very tight, and we can distinguish the finesse of the swirls while also understanding what is at stake with sandblasting: creating a very slight relief, matte, that "muffles" the contourless transparency of the glass. In her sandblasting work, Eva says it's a caress. She caresses the glass, but the more she caresses, the more she digs in, creates volume.

I tell her how, on my end, I recently had the desire to pass my fingers over a sculpture in an exhibition I saw in London, despite it being well-protected. The

prohibition was serious as I was visiting a Donatello exhibition. An impressive number of works were gathered, and that day, I sent Eva the photo that I had taken of *Madone aux Nuages* (circa 1380-1466) conserved in Boston. It's a small marble relief that represents Madonna holding the Child in her arms, close to her, and they float together in the clouds, surrounded by angels. The format makes you think that the object was dedicated to a domestic use and that the technique—which consists in sculpting the material by brushing it, letting the forms appear, that emerge from the surface by only a few millimeters—renders nearly fantastical the precision and the softness of the gestures required to obtain them. In the case of this *Madonne aux nuages*, because it is basically about a mother holding her child, caught in the milky expanse of the marble, from which emerge the faces and wings of a few angels, as well as the dress, its drapery, and the veil of the Virgin, the question of softness seems central, almost as if it were the very subject of the piece. The relief is set in a marble frame that belongs to the whole and serves as a pretext, if one may say so, for the infinitesimal depth of the object - however, the artist skillfully plays with this limit: the top of the relief is slightly deeper, so the faces of Madonna with Child are more hollowed out, but the bottom is clearly less so, which gives the impression that the right foot of the Virgin, the folds of her dress and two angels' faces are literally resting on a wave of clouds that comes from our world, from a space of which we can still be a part, while the top of the relief seems clearly to belong to another dimension. In any case, the relief's format, the preciousness of the marble, and its milky, soft aspect all evoke the sensation of holding a loved one in the hollow of one's arms.

So I understand better why I like this video of Eva brushing her sand drawing on glass: I would have liked to do it too. Our exchanges revolve around a sensory approach to sculpture. I ask her what her sandblastings look like, and, for example, what they smell like. She tells me first that it's pretty metallic, that the compressed air machine that she used makes a smell that for her is between the mineral and the metallic. And then in the end

she goes back on it and writes me to say that she consulted Julie and that for Julie her pieces smell like hot river rocks, and that Eva also went to verify by rubbing rocks by the lake, "and it really smells like sandblasting," she writes.

She rubs rocks but she also breaks glass: Eva's works are also, sometimes, "clogged." This means that with a chisel and a point she makes small splinters in the glass or breaks the edge. She says that the gesture is difficult to catch because there is always the risk of breaking the piece, and that in the beginning it always breaks: "if your angle is too deep, you split the glass." I ask her how she knows that she's doing it like you should, and this time it's not a question of touch, but of sound: she calibrates many of the strikes by ear, she explains. It's through the sound that we can tell if the intervention has been successful or not. There's a clarity to the sound that guides her.

Water enters the discussion. There's a lake somewhere, but also rivers, bubbles that form in the glass—it's all very aquatic, anyway, says Eva. And then the sandblasting, also: "often at the end of the day my hair is like I went to the beach," so the sea is not far either. And as I am still in my marble cloud tide, I continue swimming. When I send Eva my image of Dontatello, she replies that she loves drapery and then I tell her that it's a very small format, destined to be hung in a bedroom, and she says that this makes her think of an amulet. It's a lot bigger than that—an amulet needs to fit in a hand—but when I go to look for more information on these reliefs I stumble across a great text<sup>[1]</sup> dedicated to representations of Madonna with Child, to their tight framing, that suggest that, arranged in the Renaissance rooms, they also had the function of a talisman, watching over future mothers and unborn children—and were thus not only devotional images, but also accompanied important stages in the lives of women.

I wonder if the word talisman would work for Eva's glass tiles, sandblasted with forms she chose and destined to be suspended: in their turn they will float around the exhibition space. Amongst the drawings she has chosen to reproduce, there are the treelike shapes, a bit organic, of whisps; there are those that work with more geometric lines, that evoke architecture, and then those that imitate lettering or sigils, and these latter forms call up the links between glass the spaces in which we are supposed to find our way around, cohabit, work—produce. These are three ways of narrating her own apprehension of a precise space, dedicated to scientific research, in which she recently spent time in residency: the Campus

Biotech and the Centre Interfacultaire de Science Affectives, in Geneva. Once again, the question of loyalty arises, this time, toward a space—that in which Eva's forms originate, offspring that are not always conciliatory. Her glass tiles wear the mark of contradictory intentions that preside over stumbling immersions: the results of Eva's residency are "hindered" transparencies. Her sandblasting narrates, above all, how difficult it is to stick entirely to a project with resolutely neoliberal coordinates: of the Biotech Campus, she says that it resembles an impassive aquarium where mouse-fish debate.

Eva and I have never met, but with each image she sends I watch for her reflection, I appreciate her shoes; we meet each other thus through her pieces and their transparencies. But she remains in the reflection, in the blur, a bit distant. She floats in her pieces. As I live on the sixth floor, I see the sky a lot. When it's gray out, my daughter says it's a bit like a swimming pool of clouds. Whether sculpture has to do with the forbidden pleasure of sliding one's finger over marble, or in the indentations of the glass, or even diving into the clouds, offers perhaps the conditions for Claire Richard's new loyalties, meaning a new way to be engaged with what we see, in what we produce, and with what we feel. In short, reduce the distance.

[1] Geraldine A. Johnson, «Art or Artefact? Madonna and Child relief in Early Renaissance», in *The Sculpted Object 1400-1700*, éd. S. Currie and P. Motture, Ashgate Press, 1997, pp. 1-24.