



James Guppy *Cloudfront* 2006, acrylic on linen, 180 x 180 cm, courtesy the artist and Brenda May Gallery, Sydney.

Evidence of a

CATASTROPHE

■ Megan Fizzell

The Weather Reports of James Guppy

Threatening, ominous, apocalyptic; the fluid and swirling clouds stretched across the canvases of James Guppy's 2006 series *The Weather Reports* herald danger and destruction. The dark billowing plumes, often tinged with red, encompass the entire frame with the immensity of scale only achieved through the inclusion of flying debris. Beautiful and dramatic, the paintings echo the aesthetic of nineteenth

century British painter J.M.W. Turner whose turbulent landscapes evoked emotion and conflict. While these works highlight the formidable nature of weather and the devastating wreckage of war, they are not overt in their message and challenge the viewer to reflect on this world we share. Guppy is a storyteller, threading a narrative among the canvases in each collection of paintings. From his early *Blemish* series where he questioned the slavish worship of beauty by



James Guppy *Fireballs* 2006, acrylic on linen, 180 x 180 cm, courtesy the artist and Brenda May Gallery, Sydney.

corrupting portraits of beautiful people through the inclusion of goiters and scars, to the current works exploring fairy tales and myths, the focus is centred on the story. In contrast, within *The Weather Reports*, the narrative is absent, allowing the viewer to infer and project their own suppositions and experiences onto the paintings, broadening their appeal and effectiveness. The aftermath of the September 11 tragedy is subtly represented in the debris-filled clouds of *Fireballs* and *Clothed in Clouds*, which act as the starting point for the entire body of work. As a New Yorker in the 90s, this is Guppy's only personal reference within the series, with the other canvases maintaining a generality of time and place.

Regarding the work, Guppy states, "I have noticed that billowing clouds accompany most modern disasters. Whether explosions, collapsing buildings, volcanoes or storms, beautiful clouds of smoke, rain, dust or debris hang over humanity. This seems to be an essential part of the violence of destruction and a veil over what lies within." The precursor to this series featured figures floating weightlessly within a suburban landscape and Guppy sought to transfer the feeling

of levitation to the viewer in *The Weather Reports*. By omitting terra firma, the viewer is fully immersed in the overcast and smoky clouds that echo the all-encompassing nature of the phenomena.

Although the paintings originated conceptually as a reaction to 9/11, ultimately they went beyond, focusing on the tension between the sudden occurrence of a catastrophic event and the dire aftermath about to encapsulate the viewer. Whether the paintings depict the plumes from a volcano, the swirling winds of a tornado or the detritus-littered smoke from an explosion, "hidden behind, beneath or within these clouds is an approaching menace. Doom is clothed in clouds. We don't see the exploding wreckage, the torn bodies and dismembered lives, just the ominous beauty of these billowing veils shrouding Armageddon."¹ ■

Megan Fizell is a Sydney-based art historian and writer concerned with the representation of food in the visual arts. She is the voice of the food and art blog, *Feasting on Art* (www.feastingonart.com), an innovative translation of painting to plate – recipes inspired by art.

¹ Guppy, James, artist statement for *The Weather Reports*, Brenda May Gallery, Sydney, 2007.