

Of Clouds and Other Mysterious Migrants
By Christina Schmid

The clouds billow and drift: Cumulus plumes, wispy tufts of Cirrus, Lenticular clouds, saucer-shaped and shimmering. Yu-Wen Wu's *Tempo Frieze* loops a series of cloudscapes. Choreographed by mist, wind, and atmospheric pressure, their movement, sped up for effect, looks oddly creaturely and invites that oldest game of the imagination: what do you see? Wherever you happen to be on the globe, topography and climate conspire to create hazes and halos, tufts and immaterial mounds that may vanish at the blink of an eye.

Not only the object of games of semblance, clouds have also been subject of scientific categorization: shape and altitude coded in a Latin taxonomy to account for appearance and patterns of behavior. When a nimbus grows ominously from a heap of bulgy cumulus, brace for a storm. When mammatus pouches droop from the sky in a storm's aftermath, the worst is over. More localized patterns emerge when intimacy hones perception. If the winter wind comes from the south, snowfall will be heavy. Anecdotal words of caution congeal into farmer's almanacs, born of familiarity with seasonal cycles, earth and sky. Clouds may drift far above but what they reveal harbors great significance for below.

Shot from a number of different locations, *Tempo Frieze* unfolds devoid of geographic ties. The only clues for the whereabouts of the meteorological phenomena Wu's camera captured come in the forms of avian flickers. Almost fast enough to elude human perception altogether, birds' slight bodies rapidly appear and disappear. Once, in one of the non-repeating fifteen-second interludes, a raptor hovers as if motionless. A pause. Then the loop begins again and time warps. Following a different timeline, Tamar Diesendruck's soundtrack disrupts the synchresis of image and sound. A specter of familiarity thus meets uncertainty: have I seen this before, or am I imagining recognition when there is none? The question alludes to a feeling familiar to migrants and exiles alike.

Tempo Frieze abstracts and continues Wu's interest in migration and orientation. In earlier work, notably *Orientations* and *Gold Mountain Prayer (Boston Census)*, data meet a subtle poetry of material. Gold dots and graphite lines map clusters of demographic movement. Lotus flowers each stand for three hundred Chinese immigrants whose ability to pursue their dreams of a good life was curtailed by discriminatory legislation. In *Accumulation of Dreams*, falling tea leaves gather into small piles before a gust of wind scatters them. Off they drift, in a graceful cloud. In *Migration*, silhouettes of birds flocked for long-distance migration along ancient routes alternate with human bodies on the move. These elegant works hint at forces whose scope far exceeds individual agency: politics, trade, evolution, and the curious resilience of dreams. External exigencies intersect affective structures riven by the pain of displacement, the loss of bearings, and the longing, always, to belong.

Random Walks and Chance Encounters engages the question of orientation more personally. Wu cultivates an intimacy with strange places by the most humble means imaginable: walking. Her walks deliberately linger in the experience of disorientation. Black dots and lines map her perambulations. A body's movement draws graphs that resemble mysterious musical notations and celestial constellations, navigational tools for those who know how to read the signs.

Like the cloud formations in *Tempo Frieze*, these human movements, individual and collective, respond to a complex set of variables, only ever temporarily visible. Migration, in this analogy, appears as a phenomenon no less natural than meteorologically caused shapes: bodies propelled not by jet streams and weather systems, but wars, famine, and global warming. In a similar vein, watching clouds is no longer separable from climate changes that loom ahead, just beyond the horizon of the immediate future. Global warming estranges the formerly familiar and destabilizes once reliable knowledge of how clouds and seasons behave. Temporality itself becomes inverted: climate change broods in the future yet sends its talons back through time.

If *The Accumulation of Dreams* engages data of past migrations, the specter of a not yet perceptible future haunts *Temporarily Visible*. As we drift toward that elusive horizon of the future, taxonomies of the known offer only imperfect maps of what is to come. Poised between analytic detachment and deeply felt experience, Wu's art imagines what data withhold. In *Tempo Frieze*, minute birds flicker across majestic cloudscapes. The ways these winged migrants navigate great distances has science mystified: they read the earth's magnetic field. How they do that is still up for debate. Yet as the hawk hovers, as if motionless, imagine an evolutionary sensibility capable of visualizing the push and pull of magnetism. Here, at the thresholds of perception and imagination, is where Wu's work lives. So tell me, what do you see when you look at this cloud?