

Filip Rybkowski

A Theory of Clouds

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Filip Rybkowski's solo exhibition takes as its starting point World War I and the figure of the artist positioned within it. Rybkowski is primarily interested in the cultural and artistic consequences of the conflict from the first part of the 20th century as well as their long-term impact: the fragmentation, dismemberment and de-familiarisation of the body and the experiencing of historical and social reality, modern crises of representation and masculinity, as well as post-war attempts at a return to order, marked by the birth of fascism.

In his hallmark manner, Rybkowski evokes and re/deconstructs classical works and modernist and avant-garde exhibition situations, recreating and transforming the anxiety predicament of the modern-era subject. Engaged in a metamodernist dialogue with Marcel Duchamp, Marsden Hartley, Claude Monet, Władysław Strzemiński and Witkacy, he constructs a series of aesthetic displacements and temporal translocations. With their help, he focuses the audience's attention as much on the post-war reality of a century ago as on the 2020s – the period in which we all live, whether we like it or not.

The title of the exhibition is a paraphrase of Hubert Damisch's book *A Theory of /Cloud/*. Clouds are a key category structuring the narrative of the exhibition. Rybkowski is interested in the figure of the cloud, borrowed from Damisch, which symbolises otherness and introduces ambiguity into artistic representation, as well as in various images of actual clouds, evoked several times in the exhibition. Last but not least, the cloud – taken to mean a cluster of images – is a handy metaphor that can be used to aptly describe both the collection and the structure of the various works by the artist that the exhibition comprises.



Room 1

The works presented in the first room of *A Theory of Clouds* are mainly Filip Rybkowski's earlier works, selected for the exhibition from the artist's extensive portfolio, some of which had already been displayed at other exhibitions. This selection showcases the richness of media, techniques and artistic strategies used by the artist, as well as the range of topics and issues he addresses. Works such as *The Great Battle of White Doves for the Last Olive Branch* (2023) and the diptych *Double Trouble* (2023) are perfect illustrations of the inter- and multimedia nature of his oeuvre, with the use of media such as painting, drawing, photography, found objects and sculpture. These works are also an excellent example of the artist's use of the poetics of the fragment and the palimpsest, as well as the ubiquitous quotations and inter-visual games he plays with his audience. Rybkowski's constitutive gestures, such as re- and de-constructions, restoration, reproduction and conservation of fragments, ruins and relics are clearly in evidence in works such as *Camouflage of Divisions (Lions)* from 2024 and in the monumental *It Used to Be a Ballroom Here* (2025), the latter the focus of the first exhibition room. These works, as well as two *Posture Studies* (2023), exemplify the artist's preoccupation with the biopolitics of the body, itself part of history and subject to constant measurement, comparison and contextualisation, as well as processes of displacement, fragmentation and decomposition.

It Used to Be a Ballroom Here

2025

Composed of various mismatched fragments – originating from different orders and locations of floors and flooring, the work *It Used to Be a Ballroom Here* was originally created for the artist's solo exhibition at Trafo Trafostacja Sztuki in Szczecin under the same title. The Szczecin-born artist has often taken on board the complex history, culture and topography of the city, as well as its ambiguous and liminal status on the post-war map of Central Europe as well as Poland, within whose borders the German city of Stettin found itself after World War II in 1945. Like the city itself, the work *It Used to Be a Ballroom Here* is positioned at the intersection of two orders: the metonymic and the metaphorical. Within it, the physical remains of the real Stettin have been marked with the connotations that the city acquired since Winston Churchill's famous 1946 speech – itself a symbolic beginning of the Cold War – in which he named it as the one of the points on the map where the Iron Curtain descended on Europe.

The eponymous ballroom really did once exist. The artist refers to a forester's lodge with a restaurant, built at the end of the 19th century on the outskirts of Szczecin in the Eckerberger Wald, now the Arkoński Forest; from the turn of the century until World War II, a popular entertainment venue for the residents of the city, where lavish parties and dances were held. Forsthaus Eckerberg – as the lodge was known in pre-war Stettin – fell into ruin after the war; over time, the remains of the former 'ballroom' were demolished. Wars, conflicts, divisions, the re-writing of names and redrawing of maps, as well as nostalgia, a fascination with history combined with its denial, remnants and rubble turned into monuments and historical sites, creation, reconstruction and falsification, truth and fiction – these are all the constituent elements of both the city and the work that thematises its 20th-century history. On a parquet floor submerged in resin – as if in formaldehyde – the artist painted dance steps. These are not so much a record of dance

as a choreography full of stumbles and conflicts touching on the forced 20th-century displacements and migrations of population that affected Stettin/Szczecin. To paint them, the artist used Andy Warhol's *Dance Diagrams* from the early 1960s, which were based on an American dance manual published at the height of the Cold War entitled *The Easy Way to Good Dancing* (1956).

Horizon Blue 2025

The work is an in situ spatial arrangement. It consists of Władysław Strzemiński's *Seascape*, painted in 1934 in tempera on cardboard, and a wall designed by Rybkowski and built for the exhibition, on which the painting of the author of *Theory of Seeing* has been placed. Rybkowski's work is a space designed by the artist to present the work of another artist. Rybkowski thus evokes another paradigmatic space of this kind: the Neoplastic Room in Łódź (1948), intended by Strzemiński for the works of other avant-garde artists. The seascape for which the wall was designed is one of several works by Strzemiński from the 1930s in which the artist dealt with this theme. Andrzej Turowski called these works biomorphic landscapes, commenting on them as follows: 'In *Seascapes*, the infinite space of the blue sky and water, supported by the horizontal arrangement of the painting emphasising the undefined horizon line, was the background for transparent, white and navy-blue patches and soft lines. They resembled clouds flowing in different layers and configurations.'¹ The clouds that Turowski saw in Strzemiński's landscape were placed by Rybkowski on a wall painted with a colour resembling the blue hue of the horizon, the eponymous horizon blue. In this way,

¹ A. Turowski, *Radykalne oko. O Witkacym, Kobro, Strzemińskim, Themersonach, Żarnowerównie i innych twórcach sztuki wzbudzającej niepokój. Fragmenty awangardowego dyskursu*, vol. 2: *Żołnierze*, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie, słowo/obraz terytoria, Warszawa – Gdańsk 2023, p. 296.

the clouds painted by Strzemiński found themselves in the sky painted by Rybkowski. 'Bleu horizon' as the name of a specific colour did indeed function in the French-speaking fashion world at the end of the 19th century, but it gained popularity during World War I, when the blue of the horizon became the basic colour of French army uniforms. The reason for switching colours was pragmatic: the infantry in their pre-war blue and red uniforms were too easy a target for German artillery and snipers. With the introduction of the new uniform colour, the silhouettes of soldiers dashing out of the trenches for a frontal bayonet attack literally blended in with the blue of the horizon, the sky and the clouds. Strzemiński, a former soldier, participant in and victim of the fighting on the Eastern Front, may well have recalled this experience when painting his biomorphic landscapes, composed of clouds and – in this interpretation – the dead bodies of his peers.

Room 2

The second room of *A Theory of Clouds* displays the artist's latest works, created especially for the exhibition at MOCAP. Each of them can be interpreted as a continuation of the creative dialogue that the artist initiated with Władysław Strzemiński. Here, he continues it with other doyens of modernism and the avant-garde. We are able to spot references and allusions to Daniel Buren, Marcel Duchamp, Marsden Hartley, Claude Monet, Alfred Stieglitz and Witkacy, complete with quotations from their works. In this series of meta-modernist works, the artist employs a kind of aesthetic displacement and temporal translocation that, to echo André Aciman, one can describe as anachronoids. Taken out of their proper historical context, events, artefacts and their afterimages have been shifted in time and space, becoming a collection of events and collisions; situations that recreate and transform the anxious experiences of the modern subject, exemplified by the figure of the artist in the past and today.

Under the Same Sky (After Monet)

2025

In May 1927, Claude Monet's late work and magnum opus – *Water Lilies* – a panoramic frieze, on which the artist worked intensively during World War I, was presented to the public for the first time in the former orangery of the Tuileries Gardens. Monet, who had died in December of the previous year, did not live to see the inauguration of the new museum in Paris, but before his death he had managed to arrange the exhibition space, pushing through the idea of introducing elliptical walls. Eight large panels, almost two metres high and with a total length of almost 100 metres, set in an elliptical architectural frame, were to create the illusion of an infinite whole, a wave without a horizon or shore. This 'Sistine Chapel of Impressionism', in the words of André Masson, where plants and clouds were reflected in a boundless expanse of water, was also, in Monet's own intention, a cemetery chapel. It is worth remembering that the artist donated the first two panels to the state on 12 November 1918, the day after the armistice was signed, indicating his wish to sign them with the date of the victory. It is also significant that, during the war, the orangery building had served as accommodation for French soldiers on leave from the front. From this perspective, *Water Lilies* become flowers which Monet gave to the victors and with which he paid homage to the dead, the exhibition transformed into a monument to the First World War and a commemoration of a victory that cost millions of lives.

Filip Rybkowski's architectural and painterly installation, stretched across an elliptical section, is a travesty of Monet's proposal. The sky and clouds are reflected in the symbolic mirror of water, as in the original. However, all the compositions that make up the work have been copied by the artist from paintings depicting battle scenes. In this way, the work becomes a constellation of quotations in the form of visual appropriation. In his work, the artist used fragments of modern paintings

from the 17th century (Diego Velázquez's *The Surrender of Breda*, 1634–1635; Philips Wouwerman's *Army Camp*, circa 1660–1670; *The Battle of Alexander and Darius* by Pietro da Cortona, 1644–1650), academic and romantic canvases from the 19th century (*Liberty Leading the People* by Eugène Delacroix, 1830; *Sobieski at Vienna* by Jan Matejko, 1883; *1807, Friedland*, by Ernest Meissonier, circa 1861–1875; *Vuelvan Caras* by Arthur Michelen, 1890), as well as British painters contemporary to Monet who depicted the Great War fronts in Belgium and France. Rybkowski incorporated fragments of two canvases by John Nash into his work: *Over the Top* (1918) and *Oppy Wood, 1917, Evening* (1918), as well as the cloudy sky from *The Flooded Trench on the Yser* (1916) by C.R.W. Nevinson. The sky and clouds by Nash and Nevinson are the very same as those reflected in the pond in the garden in Giverny, not far from the front, painted by the elderly impressionist with failing eyesight.

Floor Plan 2025

Based on the same concept as the work presented in the first room of the exhibition, *It Used to Be a Ballroom Here*, this work consists of fragments of parquet and flooring. These are fragments of a historic parquet floor discarded during the renovation of one of Kraków's tenement houses from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a contemporary gym floor divided by red and white lines of a sports field, and ceramic tiles resembling floor and wall tiles that can be seen in home bathrooms, public toilets and swimming pools. Unlike the reused, found parquet flooring, the ceramic elements were designed, painted and fired by the artist himself. The glazed tiles form a multicoloured, abstract composition composed of geometric, flat patterns painted in pure colours. All the painting motifs used by Rybkowski were borrowed from Marsden Hartley's *Portrait of a German Officer*, a painting created by the artist in Berlin at the end of 1914. This work, half abstract, half composed of panoplies, medals, flags, orders and epaulettes, is a posthumous portrait

of Carl von Freyburg, a soldier and the painter's lover, killed at the very beginning of World War I, near Arras in October 1914. The dismemberment and deconstruction of the *Portrait of a German Officer*, as seen in *Floor Plan*, is also an attempt at a cultural reconstruction of the image of the American painter – a witness and participant in queer subculture in Berlin, as well as the homosexual fetish scene of the time, for which was the German cavalryman was the ideal of masculinity, while fulfilment took place in spaces evoked in the work such as toilets, swimming pools, baths and gyms.

Marcel Duchamp

Bottle Rack

1914/1964

Marcel Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* is the artist's first-ever readymade, from 1914. Together with *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915) and *Fountain* (1917), it forms a collection of the earliest found objects that Duchamp worked on during World War I in Paris and New York. In this sense, this group of readymades can be interpreted as the artist's response to the wartime crisis of representation and – parallel to the explorations of the Zurich Dadaists – a gesture of distrust towards traditional art media. In particular, the famous *Fountain*, photographed by Alfred Stieglitz in 1917 against the backdrop of Marsden Hartley's militaristic painting *The Warriors* (1913), depicting a parade of German cavalrymen, has earned an interpretation that emphasises the context of war. In this light, the *Bottle Rack* purchased by Duchamp in a household goods store has been turned into an anti-war statement – its physical form coming to the fore as an afterimage of the war-torn landscape of battlefields. The *Bottle Rack* – like the barbed wire invented in the 19th century to control cattle and first used by the military on the fronts of the Great War – consists of concentric circles studded with sharp metal spikes arranged at regular intervals. This replica of Duchamp's lost

work – made and signed by the French artist in 1964 – is juxtaposed with the works *Floor Plan* and *Marching*. In this way, not only has Rybkowski evoked Stieglitz's exhibition concept of pairing Duchamp's *Fountain* with Hartley's *Warriors*; in his own work *Marching*, the Polish artist also references Duchamp's *Bottle Rack* in the form of a bar stool that is part of the installation.

Marching 2025

Witkacy probably created his famous *Multiple Portrait* in 1917. The artist's photographic self-portrait was taken in one of the photographic studios in St Petersburg (then Petrograd) during the First World War. It shows the artist in a Russian army officer's uniform. Witkacy volunteered to the front lines of the Great War, enlisting in the Tsarist army in December 1914; he remained in the military until early 1918. The photograph depicting a multiplied Witkacy – often interpreted as an image of the modern disintegration of the 'self' and the post-war, traumatic decomposition of the male subject's identity – is not an isolated work in the context of the era. Taking trick photographs, with specially positioned mirrors, of soldiers leaving for the front was a popular cultural practice in Russia at the time. However, the popularity of this type of photography is even older. It dates back to the late 19th century, when the technique was invented and patented in the United States. 'American fun', as this method of photography was then called in Poland, was a common practice until the 1940s. It attracted the interest not only of Witkacy, but also of other artists. Among others, Umberto Boccioni (circa 1907), Wacław Szpakowski (1912) and, at the same time as Witkacy, Marcel Duchamp (1917) commissioned multiple portraits of themselves.

In his work *Marching*, Rybkowski subversively repeats Witkacy's gesture. On the basis of an American patent from the late 19th century, the contemporary artist created a device that he used in taking his own multiple portrait, which was part of the materials accompanying

the exhibition. The artist's photographic self-portrait is situated at the junction between two orders: civil and military. The elements of clothing used are not parts of a military uniform, but at most evoke its potential presence. The elements that make up the work emphasise the masquerade-like nature of the situation. The neutral table top of the photographic studio has been replaced by one from a 1950s American bar. The whole is complemented by a high bar stool, whose seat has been replaced by a military drum, and plaster panoplies, their shapes borrowed, and processed, from the paintings of Marsden Hartley.

Olive Branch Camouflage (Woodland)

2024

This stained glass work consists of two kinds of glass tiles: historical fragments, re-used by the artist, with an olive branch motif, originating from a bourgeois interior from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and tiles with an abstract pattern designed by Rybkowski based on the 'woodland' design of military camouflage. Thus, within a single composition, we find symbols of peace, joy, reconciliation, prosperity and abundance, as well as a military camouflage motif developed for the US Army based on the experiences of the Vietnam War. Although at first glance this combination seems absurd and ridiculous, the glass tiles from two seemingly distant orders complement each other, creating a harmonious whole in terms of colour and composition. The affluent, bourgeois interior from the turn of the century has been permanently linked to imperial war, beginning to function as a space of colonial oppression. The work, inspired by the participation of artists in World War I and the abstract camouflage they painted for the military, can also be read as a kind of reworking of Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass* (1915–1923).

Equalisers

2025

Composed of two objects, the work consists of levelling rods – the basic tool used by surveyors in levelling, i.e. determining the difference in height between points on the Earth's surface. The object plays on the artistic practice of Daniel Buren, which the French artist developed in the mid-1960s and has continued ever since. Its hallmark are vertical stripes of equal width, applied by the artist to canvases, objects or architectural elements. Devoid of semantic function, Buren's works – by their very presence – mark the space in which they are located, as a critical counterpoint to the museum – understood as a framework, both architectural and institutional. In *Equalisers*, Rybkowski refers to a specific work by the French artist – the diptych on canvas *Zu Unterstreichen, travail situé* from 1989, covered with white and black stripes. At the same time, through the use of surveying instruments, he returns to his leitmotif theme of measures, weights, the creation of categories, mapping and divisions of space (both physical and institutional) and the ideological conditions and consequences of these operations, recurrent throughout his work.

Room 3

The third exhibition room is filled with a site-specific installation entitled *A Theory of Clouds*. It consists of a series of three stained glass windows designed by the artist, entitled *Bird, Ball or Bullet?* (2025), two assemblages – *Votive Poses* (2025) and *Votive Poses (Rest)* (2024), as well as an untitled sculpture (2023). The space is filled with a blue ambience created by light seeping through the stained glass windows, giving it a quasi-sacred character. The stained glass windows, placed in window recesses, evoke a sense of undefined danger – broken by a bird, ball or bullet. On the one hand, with this gesture, the artist echoes the Albertian idea of the painting-as-window – through which viewers see ‘true’ reality – which has been fundamental to Western painting since the Renaissance. On the other hand, his take is ironic. The windows here are at best blind, and the only reality behind the glass pane of the image of the sky and clouds turns out to be the white wall of the museum. In this way – in line with Hubert Damisch’s observations on clouds in painting – Rybkowski’s glass sky and clouds question and undermine the order of signs in the pictorial space, revealing the limitations of representation and the conventional, constructed nature of images, as well as of the museum itself. The experience of de-familiarisation of the image, which occurs as a result of the apparent – but, after all, deliberately designed – destruction by breaking the stained glass window/sky/cloud, is expanded by three objects. The projection of the crisis of pictorial representation has thus been complemented by artefacts composed of dismembered male mannequins and casts of body and architectural fragments, embedded in the tradition of post-war Dadaist assemblages and votive chapels.

Filip Rybkowski

(born 1991)

Visual artist, graduate of the Faculty of Painting at the Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, co-founder of the Piana Gallery Foundation. In his artistic practice, he uses the critical act of (re)construction combined with reflection on the political nature of gestures of restoration, reproduction and conservation. In his intermedia art he employs a variety of media, from painting (including stained glass and mosaic), drawing, photography and objets trouvés, to sculpture and installation. The artist's hallmarks are the poetics of the fragment and the palimpsest, ubiquitous quotations and pseudo-quotations, and visual re/deconstruction of original artefacts, events and situations. His works have been presented at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, the Central Museum of Textiles in Łódź, Trafo Trafostacja Sztuki in Szczecin, Bunkier Sztuki Contemporary Art Gallery in Kraków, Kode Art Museum in Bergen, and Krakauer Haus in Nuremberg. In 2024, he received the main award in the Krupa Art Foundation Young Art Prize competition. He comes from Szczecin and lives and works in Kraków.





Filip Rybkowski
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Filip Rybkowski, *Multiple Self-Portrait*, 2025, photography,
courtesy F. Rybkowski



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