

Guan Wei

Freedom, like a cloud habitat in the mountains, sea, ground and wind there, clouds on the move to where there is no resistance, nor a struggle – quiet, nothing to achieve, and nothing to lose except to enjoy the presence of inaction, to celebrate the joy of the moment.

Guan Wei, 2010



Salvation no. 1, 2015, bronze



Up in the clouds no. 1, 2012, bronze

Continuity of figures and motifs is central to Guan Wei's artistic practice. One of his most distinctive motifs is the floating cloud, which appears prominently in his paintings, including the *Day after tomorrow* and *Water view* series. In Chinese culture, clouds represent the celestial realm occupying the space between earth and heaven. They also symbolise luck and good fortune, as clouds produce rain that enriches the earth. Clouds also represent mobility and influence, with the motif appearing in many Asian cultures, a prominent example being the spiralling clouds pattern in batik *megamendung* in Indonesia, with origins tracing back to the arrival of Chinese communities in Cirebon, Java, in the 16th century. This shared symbolic meaning highlights the transculturality of the motif across place and time.

In contrast to his paintings, Guan Wei's *Cloud* sculptures are stripped of their landscape and surroundings. Here we are presented only with man and cloud and their relationship to each other. The figure is shown in a variety of actions and poses: reclining while effortlessly balancing a cloud on one foot (*Cloud no. 2*), preparing to throw a cloud using one arm (*Cloud no. 3*) and playfully flying on a cloud with arms wide open (*Up in the clouds no. 1*). It could be argued that the cloud represents freedom of thought, action and imagination in a world that is not



Cloud no. 3, 2009
bronze with powder-coated enamel

defined by race, nation or ideology. The absence of facial features and colours (apart from the black or white the bronze sculpture has been painted) further emphasises that the figure could be anyone and everyone, offering a universal sense of connection and belonging. The lightness of the cloud also contrasts with the solidity of the sculpture, freezing a moment of joy, play and movement but anchoring this existence back to earth.

Guan Wei's more recent sculpture *Salvation no. 1* continues the *Cloud* sculptures' theme of freedom and ease, with the cloud appearing as both the head and torso of the dancing figure. It is one of the *Salvation* series of playful bronze sculptures, which depict little human figures prancing on a Buddha's mask-like head. In *Salvation no. 1*, the Buddha's expression is calm with eyes closed, sitting quietly as the half-human/half-cloud figure dances on the tip of his nose, looking like it's about to take off. With these sculptures, Guan Wei extends the notion of freedom to ideas of Zen. As he has written:

Salvation is to present a happy life of Zen. A spirit which believes in people's inherent tranquility and goodness, Zen requires a person's heart to be free and to discover their true self – ultimately leading to a life of wisdom and happiness (ARC ONE Gallery 2016).

Freedom is also explored in the sculpture *Ocean 3*, which depicts one of the fish gods that have also appeared in his paintings, such as *Day after tomorrow no. 5*. The spiralling water beneath the fish figure references the lotus seat of the Buddha, echoing elements of calm or Zen. At first glance, the sculpture gives an impression of 'a fish out of water'; however, its solid, weighty form and calm demeanour, looking unburdened by its own weight and materiality, further suggest that freedom is perhaps first and foremost a state of mind.

Bianca Winataputri, 2022



Cloud no. 2, 2012, bronze



Ocean 3, 2013, bronze

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Reference:

ARC ONE Gallery 2016, *Guan Wei*, ARC One Gallery, viewed 28 January 2022, <https://arcone.com.au/news2/86eh9tn7t69cfxhdc7zpb5g88srhfl>.