

THURSDAY, MARCH 1, 2001



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Flying among the clouds, says Chris Loprinze, a skywriter whose current assignment is drawing clouds in the air, is like entering a dream world.

Painting Clouds on an Endless Canvas in the Clouds

By SHAILA K. DEWAN

Do not ask Chris Loprinze why he spent Saturday afternoon drawing clouds in the sky above Manhattan. It was not his idea.

Mr. Loprinze well knows that skies can muster up plenty of clouds on their own.

At 23, Mr. Loprinze is very likely the youngest member of a dwindling profession, that of the old-fashioned skywriter. Skywriting, where a pilot swoops the plane to form letters and shapes, has been largely replaced by the faster skytyping, in which five planes fly in formation and use a computer-controlled radio signal to emit puffs of smoke that form letters.

Skytyping, which makes it possible to write much longer messages than skywriting, looks something like the letters that move across those electric signs in airports and on trading floors. Or, as Mr. Loprinze put it, "It's like looking at a bad dot-matrix printer." Skywriting, on the other hand, is like drawing in space, except that the lines do not stay where the writer puts them.

And that may explain why skywriting captures the imagination of artists. The clouds were the idea of Vik Muniz, who has drawn pictures with chocolate, sugar and, as exhibit right now at the Whitney Museum of American Art, dust. Enchanted by the old game of finding shapes in clouds, and perhaps by the prospect of befuddling the citizenry, he hired Mr. Loprinze.

The project, which will include two more days of skywriting, has been stymied this week by high winds and, naturally, clouds.

"For my next project, I'm going to curate the weather," muttered Tarra Cunningham, an associate curator at Creative Time, a nonprofit group that is sponsoring the project.

Mr. Muniz compared watching skywriting to watching a caricaturist at work. "It's nice to see how people come up with an image," he said. "Seeing the drawing made is like a narrative."

Mr. Loprinze thought the assignment unusual, but he could relate to the fascination with clouds. Sometimes clouds form towers, he said, and flying among them is like entering a dream world. "It takes care of everything," he said. "Turbulence doesn't seem so bad. If you're hungry, you're not so hungry."

Besides, he would much rather skywrite than pull an advertising banner. "When you banner-tow, you feel like you're part of the media frenzy and nobody cares," he said. "When you skywrite, people notice."

To make the cloud, Mr. Loprinze taped one of Mr. Muniz's cloud drawings to the instrument panel of his boss's little yellow Grumman biplane, which goes about 130 miles an hour. It was not a cirrus, a stratus or a nimbus cloud, but a puffy Charlie Brown cloud, and Mr. Loprinze drew an arrow pointing to one of the puffs and labeled it "start."

Flying at 10,000 feet, he estimated how fast the winds would move the

clouds as he drew, because they were supposed to be at specific spots — for example, near the Empire State Building. He figured the length of lines by time. For the cloud's base, more than half a mile across, he counted 17 seconds.

Skywriters, unlike draftsmen, cannot lift pen from paper. Lines are formed by vaporizing a mixture of oil and paraffin in the plane's ex-

haust manifold, but a pilot can turn the flow of the mixture on and off.

According to Mort Arben, who skywrites occasionally but runs a skytyping company in Flushing, Queens, there are only four skywriting pilots in the country. Mr. Loprinze learned from one of them, Wayne Mansfield, 54, a third-generation aviator. Mr. Loprinze works for his company, Aviad, based in North Andover, Mass.

"Wayne is the pilot I've always wanted to be," Mr. Loprinze said after his flight last Saturday. "A barnstormer." Behind him, on the airfield in Teesboro, N.J., the yellow Grumman, a converted crop-duster

that seats one, balanced on its tail wheel, rose in the air. The tail wheel (most planes have a wheel under the nose instead) makes the biplane more difficult to land.

Mr. Loprinze had taken a summer job with Aviad and then, instead of returning to flight school last fall, he stayed. In part, that is because he persuaded Mr. Mansfield to teach him to fly the Grumman. Flying around the country with nothing but a compass appealed to him, he said, and he did not particularly want to think about planes that he would have to wear a tie to pilot.

Mr. Mansfield, whose principal business is writing banners across the sky, said Mr. Loprinze was a natural.

"Skywriting requires somebody who's got a lot of experience and can fly a plane without even thinking about it," Mr. Mansfield said. "If you have to think about flying the plane, you might draw something, but who knows what it will look like."

Mr. Mansfield said he had worked with many artists over the years, including Yoko Ono and John Lennon. "It's the largest possible canvas," he said. "There is no larger available canvas than the sky."

Once, in Chicago, Mr. Mansfield drew stars. Another time, in Boston, he drew a moon. But he had never been asked to draw a cloud.

A member of a dwindling breed pursues his art above Manhattan.