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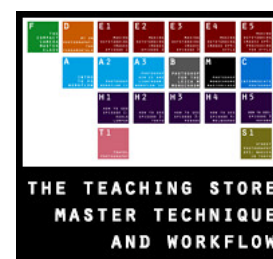
The limitations of language, redux

JULY 10, 2020 BY MING THEIN

Cloud I.

I have a bit of a problem. In fact, it's becoming an increasingly large one. Put simply, I'm running out of words to describe the things I'm seeing and the visual concepts I'm trying to explain; and I don't know if the vernacular even exists. I suspect it doesn't, but then again, I'm sure there are English speakers with greater vocabulary than me for whom it does. A large portion of you probably think this is stating the obvious; it is. But we reach a point beyond which it becomes impossible to progress further without some sort of common baseline accurately and consistently describe what it is we're intending to convey; or more specifically, to ensure that what I'm saying and imagining are the same things as what you're hearing and seeing in your own mind.

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Cloud II.

Let's take this image, and the first one in the post. Ostensibly, they're both clouds; they're even structured the same, with a dominating central cloud and some mostly empty sky around the outside. You could spend quite some effort describing both in a quantitative way – and come up with an ultimately inadequate description that nobody would be able to visualize. You could say they're both a colour portrait of a cloud, one shaped like a fluffy jujube, and the other like an inside-out explosion. I bet the second pair of descriptions wouldn't be far off the mark. But the only reason this works is because there's a lot of common secondary language here: we all know what clouds are, we have our own expectations of what a 'fluffy cloud' looks like, inside out is a concept we understand, and can translate into an expectation of lighting – but does everybody know what a jujube is?

And here we start to be on slippery ground: the more remote the allegory we use, the less likely our audience is going to understand it. And that's just describing the visual portion – we haven't even started on the structural or storytelling aspects of the image yet. Ironically, the storytelling portion is much easier: it almost doesn't have to relate to the image at all; metaphor is the order of the day. But describing the structure of an image? That's tough.

Cloud III.

Part of the problem is that the same word can mean a lot of things, even in a photographic context. Take 'Light', for instance:

1. Subjective quality of ambient luminance
2. Quantitative measures of ambient luminance: amount, direction, colour, diffusion
3. Quality or nature of contrast
4. The opposite of dark, i.e. an abundance of ambient or subject luminance
5. Visually uplifting
6. Minimalist; the opposite of busy/ detailed
7. Empty, but bright
8. High key
9. Equipment that has relatively low real mass compared to expected mass for its size or function

I think you can see the problem here already: depending on the context, the word 'light' can mean a huge number of things. And it isn't always clear which one (or ones, I suppose) of these things we're referring to. It's very possible for an image to have good light and simultaneously feel light and airy; I suppose this would qualify:
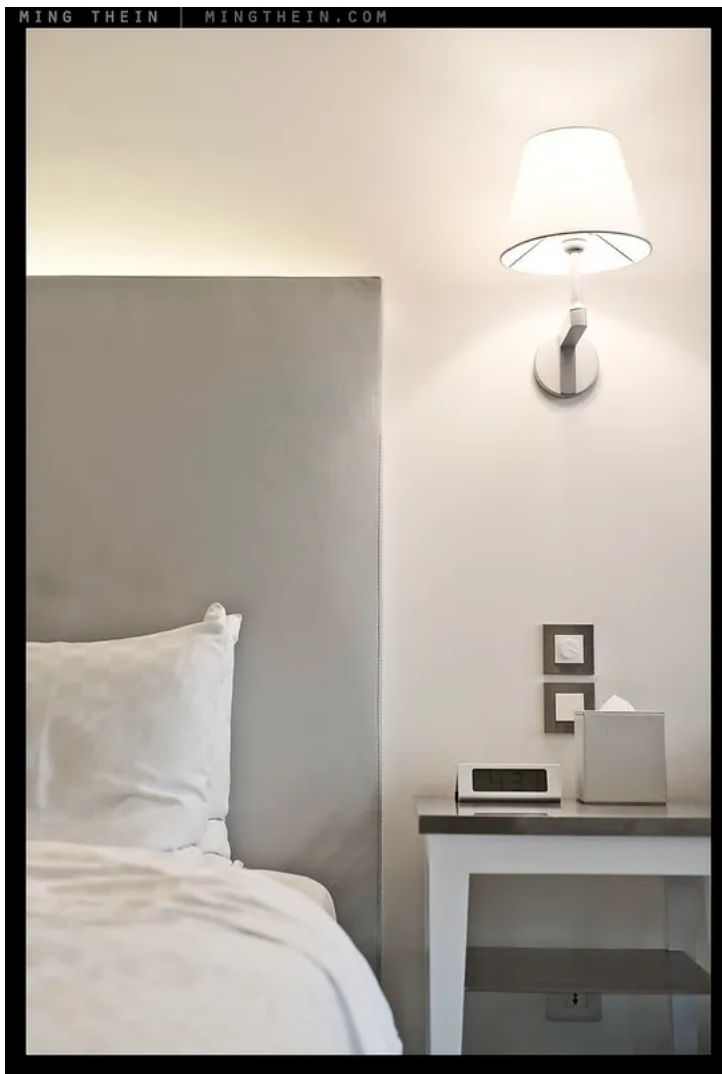
'Soft as a cloud' – an adequate description, but still not at all a cloud.

Yet ultimately, it doesn't tell you anything about the subject, the contents, or the colour, or composition. See what I mean about our language being insufficient to really discuss images in detail? I suspect musicians, painters, actors etc. all had the same problem at some point. They cannot easily discuss their work because they can't describe it; so they invented new words to work around it. Even that is largely inadequate, because you're trying to use a written/ spoken/ conceptual language to describe something that is fundamentally *physical* and actually quite precise, but at the same time not: a riff can take many different specific forms, but still count as a riff.

We photographers, on the other hand, don't really have this: how do you describe the feel of a smooth tonal transition over a large spatial area mixed with high frequency detail over a small portion of the image? What if that's predominantly high key? Or low key? Our verbiage is dominated by the technical; talk about sensor blooming or lateral chromatic aberration and everybody knows what that means. But the artistic is simply left by the wayside and ignored. And that's sad, because photography is not about measurbating your camera: it's about making images. *Understanding* your equipment is a critical part of that, but it isn't the end goal.

Clouds.

An even larger problem we face is that most of the time, the two people discussing an image are not even looking at the same thing: even if you've got the same digital file, your screen calibrations and ambient lighting conditions are almost certainly non-identical. And we know how much that can change things: look at a file on a screen with poor brightness, relatively little contrast, a limited gamut and low resolution – and then on a properly calibrated, state-of-the-art wide-gamut 4K display. And then the same thing again on a retina iPad: they're all different. Dramatically so. The only way to ensure we're actually talking about the same thing is to look at the same print, under the same light, in person. That obviously isn't practical, so we have to make caveats in the discussion and allowances for such variances; yet these variances can make an enormous difference in the overall impact and feel of an image. Even though there will always be subjective interpretative differences, at least you can minimise the overall range by starting out at the same point. What gives still images at least half of their magic is also what makes them very difficult to pin down and improve.

Cloud IV.

This brings us to The Disconnect: even if you can describe it in a way that makes sense to you, and perhaps others, does it make sense to me? What we need is some sort of universally – across photographers, at least – consistent set of terminology to describe at least common visual features of images; a set of building blocks, if you will. This way, if you can say something about the subject, the style, and the major building blocks, you should have a reasonably good idea of what the image might look like in person – perhaps not as condensed a description as saying a piece of music is a fugue and expecting it to follow a relatively fixed structure, but at least something that lets the viewer know what they're in for – and subsequently allows us to discuss and analyse the images in a more structured way.

The disconnect is something that's become increasingly apparent to me as I do more and more portfolio reviews for the [Email School](#); I used to write the portfolio reviews, but I've long switched over to a video because it's simply easier for me to point at the portions of the image I want to talk about. Then only once I establish a baseline set of vocabulary to associate with certain images do I revert to text. Video is of course not always practical, however; hence the need to find a more consistent solution. I have no idea how we go about this, but I'm willing to try, if there's enough support. Such a wordset will not appeal or apply to everybody; much the same as there's subject-specific vocabulary in every other pursuit. I don't expect it to be widely adopted, because most people will simply have no use for it. But if enough people use it, in connection with images, hopefully it will become commonplace. So, over to the audience: any and all thoughts/ suggestions/ ideas in the comments please? MT

_____

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Comments

Wayne R Crauder says:
[August 12, 2020 at 8:51 AM](#)

It may be even harder with people of different backgrounds. The clouds in one area may be different than in another area. Things like house or office building or even building are visualized by the person hearing the word based on what they have seen. I was trying to describe a day when my the sun was below the horizon. But for a short while it reflected off of the high cumulus clouds so short the automatic lights came on. And since the light reflected from the clouds at different angles, there was a constant soft light with no shadows any place (except under the very center or a vehicle). We had the same reference point, but she still cannot image a light coming from everywhere. And of course the only photos I could take were dull and boring because of the lack of subjects. And so a magic (to me) moment I have never seen again exists only in my memory with flat boring photos not displaying the magic. I think all communication faces a problem in that we know what we say. But we cannot know what our listener hears (or feels as many words carry a shading of emotion based on past experiences). Mathematical formulas perhaps. But then the proper education is required by the write and the reader.

Ming Thein says:
[August 12, 2020 at 9:00 AM](#)

Fully agreed – we can never have a universal visual language beyond the very basic (a human will always recognise another human, for instance) – but beyond that, like any conversation – context is required…

Kelvin Hammond says:
July 18, 2020 at 12:19 AM

On Instagram, I only post one photo, and one word. And in the interest of time, I usually post the first word that comes to mind, as if I was looking at Ink blots. I am usually hoping that the intent of the word is or isn't self-evident. Not in-between. That way, i intend to say something, or I want the viewer to make sense of word I chose, even if it isn't readily apparent. Both a challenge and a game.

Ming Thein says:
July 18, 2020 at 8:42 AM

That's pretty much what I do too – no point in wasting time on what is treated as essentially disposable content. Not great for engagement or audience building, but I'm not even sure that's the point…

Jurij says:
July 15, 2020 at 2:01 PM

Cloud I, oh my… and then II…
I currently live in the land of incessant sunny, blue sky… often with some light haze… for 8 months usually…
A blessing to most. A building oppressive 'sameness' to some… (me). Mid-July is that solstice of incessant blue.
November eventually, thankfully, rolls through and the hope for a changeable sky of weather and light creates excitement for every waking day.
Cloud I and then II brought a tear to my eye, and then a smile.
On your thoughts of language and content, I'll chose to read and digest.
Language is certainly imperfect, as is everything. An annoyance at times, and flexible enough to express brilliantly at others.
I do believe (as you noted) that language, like every creative process and result IS the MAGIC.

Ming Thein says:
July 15, 2020 at 2:50 PM

I still like the blue, though. It bring the kind of hard shadows that change objects into other objects that ironically we have not that much of in the tropics because the humidity leads to a lot of cloud cover…

Jamie Pillers says:
July 13, 2020 at 5:53 AM

Not sure why we need a lot of words. I like to just enjoy looking at art, creating my own response/feeling/language just for me. Maybe I'll share those thoughts with someone else and then listen to and enjoy their thoughts. No need for common set of words.

Ming Thein says:
July 13, 2020 at 8:00 AM

Surely for those thoughts to have any meaning to the other person you need some common understanding/ terminology? The 'language of photography/ visual art' would probably be analogous to the language of science: most people need but a little to describe fairly simple ideas, but technical professionals would have a whole lexicon *if* required…

Jon Barker says:
July 13, 2020 at 12:53 AM

One of the things which has enabled the wine world to develop its unique and specialised vocabulary has been the standardising influence of the MW qualification. They are able to hold the language consistent is by simply saying that people are wrong when they deviate from approved usage, and this is accepted both because of the status of the qualification (which people desire) and the acceptance of the terminology by the larger wine world. You point out yourself that lacking this structure you may struggle to maintain consistency of meaning, particularly on the internet…
The other thing that comes to mind is that it is recognised that a new language takes 2 generations to form fully functioning grammatical structures. This has been studied with the evolution of some sign languages in modern times. Initially people form a pidgin language with simplified grammar which can't manage abstract concepts. The next generation of children takes the pidgin and produces (naturally and automatically) a fully grammatical language. So, it may be that any new descriptive terminology and syntax is brought into a fully functioning state by a subsequent generation of photographers.
Neither of which means this is a pointless endeavour, of course. I think it would be a fascinating experiment to try and introduce a

range if new terminology into a field, and you may want to think about inviting an interested academic department of linguistics to observe and record how the things proceed if you go ahead.

> **Ming Thein** says:
> July 13, 2020 at 7:58 AM
>
> *" The next generation of children takes the pidgin and produces (naturally and automatically) a fully grammatical language"*
> This is interesting: I wonder how?
>
> Surely we are past a second, third and even fourth generation of photographers by now. I'm still not quite sure if we have consistency in visual 'language' beyond the same kind of simplistic repetition and copying we see on social media, much less means to adequately discuss and describe what we're seeing.
>
> *" I think it would be a fascinating experiment to try and introduce a range if new terminology into a field, and you may want to think about inviting an interested academic department of linguistics to observe and record how the things proceed if you go ahead."*
> It would, but an undertaking far beyond my capacity 🙂

Fabián Fábrega says:
July 12, 2020 at 11:44 PM

If we try to use written words to accurately explain a work of photographic art, we are rather calling up another form of art: literature. Wouldn't creating a baseline set of vocabulary be the equivalent of giving literature a limited structure in order to turn it into a useful tool for photography? If so, would the other way around feel right –standardize photography as a tool for writers to explain their literature? I would certainly enjoy a great writer explain your great pictures, but through his/her own, distinct, written words.

> **Ming Thein** says:
> July 13, 2020 at 7:56 AM
>
> An interesting point. I feel they're the opposite sides of the same coin, though: you start with an idea, but either define it in a physical way and land up with a photograph, or leave the physical form open to interpretation by the audience but solidify the idea, and land up with literature. You could produce an image based on a descriptive idea or describe a photograph, but neither are quite going to be complete representations of the other.

eduardolibby says:
July 12, 2020 at 10:54 AM

Dear Ming, I don't know how to be specific or intellectually correct when describing art. Your first two cloud images I "feel in my stomach" with their strong presence. They reach inside me. The other ones I feel differently… I refuse to put it into words. I think that for many images we can only describe accurately their subject but not their subject matter: We must be too different culturally.

> **Ming Thein** says:
> July 12, 2020 at 2:23 PM
>
> Actually, I think we can hit both ends but not the middle: a description of the physical object, and how it makes us react or feel – but not the process by which this is achieved, because it's about as black box as you can get. Maybe that IS the magic…
>
> > **eduardolibby** says:
> > July 13, 2020 at 3:44 AM
> >
> > Dead on Ming! I agree.

Danielvr says:
July 11, 2020 at 7:06 PM

What do art historians, art critics and others in the field say? Surely you won't be the first to run into the limits of language when trying to describe pieces of art.

> **Ming Thein** says:
> July 12, 2020 at 10:11 AM
>
> After reading a variety of commentary, I see basically a range of metaphors and similes – and those vary from practical to utterly nonsensical depending on who's doing the describing. There is always a sense of the author trying to make a sense of things

using their own frame of reference (or what they want us to think is their frame of reference) – *not* a description in a way that is widely understood…

> **Danielvr says:**
> July 12, 2020 at 12:31 PM
>
> 1) This reminds me of efforts to standardise wine tasting notes. The article in this link talks about that and it raises some concerns that could also apply to descriptions of visual art works: https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/wine-tasting-standardization
>
> 2) The lady in this link has created a few lists of words that can be used to describe visual art works, organized into categories like Composition, Texture, Mood and Tones. This list doesn't have (anywhere near) the depth to do justice to many art works, but on the other hand, such a list should be reasonably short. When the nuances between the meanings of words become too small, the words could create more rather than less confusion (one person's 'violet' is another person's 'purple'). https://www.liveabout.com/art-words-list-2577414
>
> > **Ming Thein says:**
> > July 12, 2020 at 2:24 PM
> >
> > 1) Yes! Or pretty much anything else – music, emotions, etc. – the best we can do are analogies and hope that our understanding of that analogy overlaps enough with other people's.
> > 2) I agree in principle simple makes more sense to try an establish a baseline, but that probably won't give you enough granularity to discuss nuance. A good start though…

> **Kristian Wannebo says:**
> July 11, 2020 at 9:11 AM
>
> (Ming, it seems my Peanuts link, or something, messed up the reply buttons on my comment and on your answer – they both lead to the Peanuts image.)
>
> So here is my reply:
> Yes, I see your point.
> I was thinking, that perhaps some of the purely descriptive art would have been more redundant and naturalistic / realistic art would have evolved differently, just a guess of course.
>
> And just think of what poetry might have been like!
>
> > **Kristian Wannebo says:**
> > July 11, 2020 at 9:28 AM
> >
> > Edit:
> > Strange, that messing-up has disappeared now.
> > Reloading didn't help, but switchng (Android) Opera to desktop mode and back did.
> >
> > > **Kristian Wannebo says:**
> > > July 11, 2020 at 9:52 AM
> > >
> > > EDIT:
> > > Wrong diagnosis.
> > > With the address
> > > https://blog.mingthein.com/2020/07/10/limitations-of-language/#comments
> > > that mess is gone,
> > > but with the address
> > > https://blog.mingthein.com/2020/07/10/limitations-of-language/
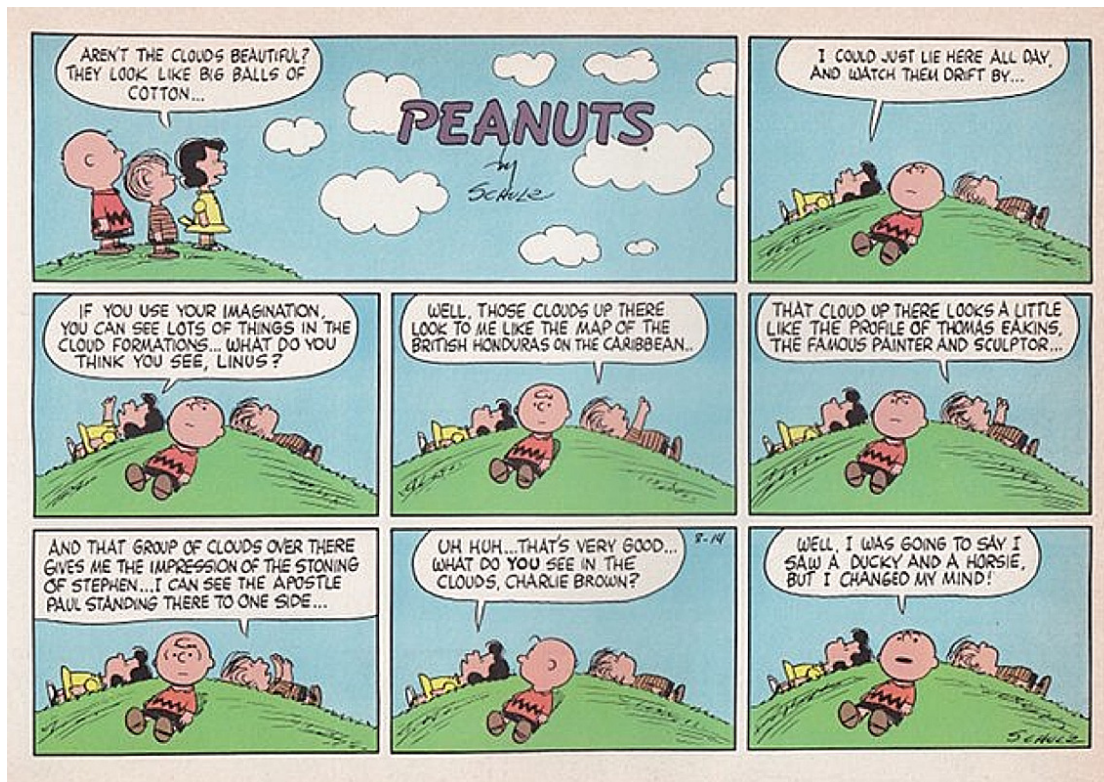> > > it's still there – with Opera on Android, but *not* with Firefox.

> **Kristian Wannebo says:**
> July 11, 2020 at 5:58 AM

– * –

> "…our language being insufficient to really discuss images in detail?"

If it hadn't been … I wonder how art would have developed?
– * –

[Once upon a time,
when language came into being,
there appeared many words no one found a use for…
… and so philosophy was invented. 😉]

Ming Thein says:
July 11, 2020 at 8:06 AM

Completely impossible to say given that art exists precisely to communicate ideas that don't really have any other means of doing so – in the most appropriate medium. I'd argue that there'd be a lot less strange interpretation if there was a means to describe exactly and completely what the audience was seeing or experiencing though…

Michael Erlewine says:
July 11, 2020 at 12:31 AM

Big topic, and you touched on but a few ideas here. Concepts and intellect are, by definition, dualistic. Yet, the various senses (seeing, hearing, etc.) are, at least according to the Buddhist teachings, non-dualistic, as they say, pure, unadulterated signal that unites subject and object and only after having been perceived or "sensed" does description and language enter the picture. My general point here is that working on a language to describe sight, IMO, is putting the cart before the horse, as they say.

Rather than finding a common language, perhaps it would make more "sense" to develop a common state of mind that could be achieved in the non-dual language of the sense of sight itself. The Tibetan Buddhists have what is called the "Tibetan Book of the Dead," which extols the sense of hearing and "Liberation through Hearing." Much less emphasis is another Tibetan technique based on the sense of sight, and liberation through seeing. This is called "Thongdrol," which translates to something like "liberation through seeing."

IMO, instead of trying to endlessly refine our common language, it makes more sense to me to work on realizing the non-dual nature of sight and "Seeing," where the act of seeing is more emphasized rather than just what is seen (i.e. the objects of what we photograph), and where the "Seeing" itself is more important than trying to describe what is seen. Rather than refining our language, instead we might better work on refining the mind, so that we have more realization in common. One of the great English poets is Gerard Manley Hopkins, who in his journals provides examples which (IMO) attempt to refine the language of description, which I am glad to include here if anyone is interested.

Ming Thein says:
July 11, 2020 at 8:01 AM

Personally, I'm all for refining the approach on all fronts: one's own ability to see/notice; one's ability to refine and present that in a way that's more 'universal' (though arguably this is difficult as we've discussed before; there is a lot of subjectivity and personal/local/secular context that will simply never overlap and thus limit the kind of ideas communicable at all) and finally, the ability to discuss and explain the aforementioned seeing to help others further their understanding, too.

Sherry Felix says:

July 10, 2020 at 9:46 PM

The first cloud is unique with its isolated flat bottom. Nice work.

Ming Thein says:

July 10, 2020 at 10:26 PM

Thanks – I guess it has something to do with atmospheric temperature conditions...

Tim says:

July 10, 2020 at 6:47 PM

In the image "Cloud 1", I see interaction (between the clouds lower surface and the ground), uniqueness (this cloud formed differently from the others), and isolation (as this cloud is separated from other elements of the image). The image is foreboding.

You apparently see a cloud.

Did you ever read a book called Zen and the art of Motorcycle Maintenance? This book deals with similar matters. It can help. Just a suggestion.

Ming Thein says:

July 10, 2020 at 7:21 PM

I see a cloud that carries a lot of implicit suggestions, emotions and feelings, but it's also Magritte's *Treachery of Images* and Freud again: sometimes a pipe (or cigar) is just that. We can overthink things and fail to appreciate them at face value 😉

Robert says:

July 10, 2020 at 4:30 PM

Hi Ming
You touch an interesting, not much treaded, aspect. I am surprised – not for the first time – how broad and at the same time how deep your thoughts are. You are right, of course, and I am not able to add anything what would deepen the theme. As a small consolation: Just imagine all the descriptions of wine!!! (Or especially for you: coffee).
Many talk about similar things, not always „surefooted", „Talking about art is like dancing about architecture" comes to my mind in such cases. Definitely not this time!
Btw, those clouds are beautiful. Sometimes, I lie down on my back and wait for them. (Sometimes one falls asleep 😉).
Greetings, Robert

Ming Thein says:

July 10, 2020 at 7:20 PM

Either the coffee tastes right, or it doesn't. Put simply: do I want another cup? 🙂

I've always believed a photographer also needs to be as much a philosopher as anything...

Robert says:

July 11, 2020 at 3:53 PM

Thank you for the link. Good to refresh.

Hugo says:

July 10, 2020 at 3:19 PM

That's why images tell more than 1000 words. You are a master of visual story telling.

Ming Thein says:

July 10, 2020 at 7:19 PM

Thank you!

treesshrubs says:
July 10, 2020 at 1:38 PM

I love clouds...and agree often there are no words to describe what we see...we all have different stories.. thanks for your thoughts and feelings via the clouds 🙂

Ming Thein says:
July 10, 2020 at 7:18 PM

🙂

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