

Louise LeBourgeois

By Andrew Patner

Essay for one person show *This Imagined Place* at gescheidle, Chicago

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Louise LeBourgeois cuts holes. She cuts them in walls. She cuts them in our expectations. She cuts them in our minds. Much as Georgia O’Keeffe looked out a little cut window hole in an airplane and saw that clouds were really *Clouds*, Louise uses the “normal” tools of vision and physical parameters to remind us that what we see we also imagine and what we imagine is what we remember about what we see. Louise LeBourgeois is an investigator. She digs into a landscape with almost clinical rigor. She collects science pamphlets about rocks. She looks at open spaces with a squinty eye. She stares at something—at some things—for hours. She files things away in her mind and in boxes in her studio and in what I imagine must be boxes in her mind. I know that she remembers things that most people never even notice that they have said in the first place. I would think that she remembers just about every thing that she sees.

But then, as with O’Keeffe, even with all her research, her pondering, her keen observation, she starts over. The squinty stare is still there, but its focus is now on an absolutely blank canvas. All that she knows at the outset are the dimensions of the panel, the hole that she is cutting in the world. She does not sketch. Despite the almost scientific composition of her pieces, she makes no outline or grid. She goes somewhere into her head and starts to tell us—and tell herself—what she sees in that space in front of her: a tree, a group of rocks, a lake. But unlike the Surrealists, whom Louise admires and draws sustenance from as we all should, these are not stock items from a single dreamscape. There are no recurrences or “symbols” here. Instead there is a combination of a dreamlike quality with the specificity that is dear to this artist. These are imagined places but they are very much *this* imagined place or *that* one and each one is new.

Of course it is Louise's exquisite technique that gets us from A to B, from the idea in her head, the vision in her mind's eye, to the work in front of us. But as careful and as quietly astonishing as that technique is, it would mean little if it were not also able to get us from B to C, that is from the work on the wall to the viewer observing it. And this may be where this artist's real genius lies. Louise LeBourgeois's carefully and intricately worked paintings connect *us* to her vision. There is a sort of alchemy at work here whereby she cuts a hole in the world and then in the process of making a painting she fills up not only her panel or canvas, but us as well. It's as if somebody sends you a picture postcard from somewhere far away, somewhere that you have never been. Yet you are the person who is there.

Andrew Patner (1959 - 2015) was a Chicago-based journalist, broadcaster, critic, and interviewer. He was a regular contributor of arts criticism for the Chicago Sun-Times. Patner worked for Chicago's National Public Radio affiliate WBEZ for eight years as an arts critic, program host, and producer. He also served as critic-at-large for WFMT Fine Arts Radio, where he hosted a weekly program called "Critical Thinking" from 1998 until his death in 2015.