

Looking In, Seeing Big: Louise LeBourgeois and Steven Carrelli

Catalogue essay by Steve Tomasula

Robert T. Wright Community Gallery of Art, College of Lake County

March 2 – 30, 2001

Flower in a crannied wall, if I could understand you then I would understand all in all.

-Alfred Tennyson

By first living as a giant among the Lilliputians, and then as a miniature among the giants of Brobdingnag, Gulliver made clear how scale determines what is seen, and therefore, what is considered. And ultimately what is considered worth knowing. And so it is with the views offered up by Louise LeBourgeois and Steven Carrelli. In paintings like LeBourgeois's *Aerial View* (#179), and *Lake* (#204), viewers are invited to consider palm-sized worlds, while in Carrelli's *Rise* and *Self-Portrait*, familiar objects – a leaf, a seed – are writ with microscopic clarity, inviting viewers to look closely at objects that are easily taken for granted. That is, these paintings and drawing are foremost about using the visual to know the world. But more fundamentally, through their selection of subject matter and manner of rendering, they suggest that what s worth knowing is already within the viewer, the paintings serving not so much as windows on an external reality as reflectors that turn the mind inward.

The meditative quality of this art is most clearly seen when juxtaposed to the barrage of images people are normally exposed to. Unlike the seascape as tourist souvenir, the still life as restaurant decoration or ad for tableware, these paintings and drawings require viewers to slow down, to take the care to look in ways that the speed of contemporary life doesn't encourage. They require viewers to adopt the attitude that the images appear to have been created out of, that is, as meditative acts.

Is the stone in LeBourgeois's drawing *Furrow*, for example, part of a ruin? A natural formation? Work by human hands is implied, but the possibility that this stone is as likely to be an outcropping as it is a bridge over a now-dry rivulet reaffirms people as a part of nature, not its overlord. The creation of this modest graphite drawing, like the furrow it depicts, speaks of human humility, not of nation-building, acting as it does as both an example and depiction of finding the sublime in the plain, the simple, the everyday.

Likewise, Steven Carrelli's series *Four Wheat Stalks* takes wheat, that most basic of foodstuffs, and presents each stalk as if it were an individual, worthy of attention in its own right. The gesture is especially significant when it's remembered that wheat is normally thought of in the collective, a field bending whichever way the wind blows. Here, however, the meticulous attention to detail, the shadow cast upon a gray backdrop gives an individual stalk its physical due, making each panel function more as allegoric portraiture than depiction. Indeed, the minimalism of both artists' work foregrounds their metaphoric implications.

Consider, for example, LeBourgeois's *Lake (#204)*. In it, LeBourgeois brings the spiritual nature of the landscape tradition into the present by shedding setting, perspective, and the other constituent parts of the typical landscape painting until she arrives at an elemental language. Half-close your eyes and *Lake* almost appears as an abstract painting, its nuanced fields of color in the school of Mark Rothko, perhaps, who also invested heavily in the ability of delicate transitions in color to create an ontologically-charged atmosphere. Indeed the lack of identifiable landmarks reveals LeBourgeois's lakes and landscapes as fictions, created the way a poet might layer language and memory to evoke emotional responses that no mere reportage could ever approach. Though she takes hundreds of photos of land, sky and water while traveling, she never works from a single image or memory while painting. The specifics of any one setting would only interfere with her intent: to evoke in viewers their own memories, their moments of recognition, by capturing in paint a sense of her own.

Her land and seascapes are, in other words, more about interior states of mind than lakes and fields: thus, just as humans were only able to fly once they gave up trying to imitate birds flapping their wings, so LeBourgeois has made the depiction of any one lake secondary in order to find an arrangement of colors and shapes that will trigger within viewers emotional responses that they might have had standing before their lakes. Absent are the operatic sunsets of a Fredrick Church or Albert Bierstadt painting. LeBourgeois's paintings also lack the didacticism of landscapes meant to forge a national identity or serve some other political purpose. Instead, the very narrow range of color employed in *Lake* makes the painting whisper. Its color fields, or call them water and sky, merge into one another so subtly, that it's impossible to say where one begins and the other ends. And unlike those heroically-sized canvases, the intimate scale of LeBourgeois's paintings requires a viewer to step up to them and engage them on a personal level. When one does, it's easy to have the sense of looking at places that are at once familiar if not quite remembered, and through them the quietude necessary to thought.

The same can be said of *Aerial View* (#179). By stepping back, increasing the scale of the scene by several magnitudes, the same landscape that might contain the closer views depicted in LeBourgeois's *Trees*, *Lake*, and *Furrow*, appear from the air as a diffuse memory. Looking at it, one is reminded how earlier Americans who only saw the earth from the air by climbing a mountain were moved to awe and expressions of the sublime. Landscapes painted during this period were often Arcadian, or full of violent beauty. In *Aerial View*, however, the vantage is clearly that of an airplane seat, not a mountain top. In fact, there are no mountains. No thunderous waterfalls, or majestic canyons. Instead of rays of light religiously parting the clouds, the light here is diffuse and glimmers dully off of water. But this is okay, the painting tells us, for epiphany can be evoked by the common as well as the theatrical. Here, even the patchwork of developed farmland one often sees from the air is conspicuous in its absence, the spirit of the painting perhaps best captured by the crook in the road that appears, inspired as it was by a similar crook in a Willa Cather novel. In that novel, a grave that had been laid in what was once a vast and empty plain turns out to be located, years

later, at the very spot where the only two roads planned for the isolated area are to cross. Yet the grave is respected by the locals who drive around this intersection, thereby wearing a crook in the surveyor's geometric symmetry.

The contemplative act evoked by the common is prominent in Carrelli's art as well. Like his wheat-stalk series, *Self-Portrait* takes a vocabulary of simple objects, in this painting a single sheet of paper, a maple seed, and thumbprint, and makes of them a language of association. Is the thumbprint, a token of the individual, like the maple seed, an emblem of potentiality? Or is the maple seed, like the thumbprint, a token of the individual? The clarity with which these elements are rendered suggests that it is. For unlike LeBourgeois's diffuse and evocative landscapes, Carrelli presents his spare elements with the precision of rigorous visual analysis. The space is iconic in its simplicity, his compositions as frontal as bas-relief sculpture, its objects rendered with such presence that they appear to rest on the canvas: a synthesis of Renaissance and contemporary techniques and ideas of composition Carrelli developed as a Fulbright Scholar studying abroad in Florence, Italy. Adapting egg-tempera methods of early Renaissance painters, a method that requires the mixing of crushed pigment and egg-yolk, Carrelli is able to render objects with the hard precision of those masters; the quick drying time of this method also allows him to, after a number of Modern abstract painters, leave a trace of each brush stroke visible in his work. In the manner of Moderns such as Barnett Newman, then, the painting becomes a record of its own composition – even if, unlike an abstract painting, the eye of a viewer easily blends the strokes, allowing them to resolve into the objects depicted. In this way the paintings bring together tradition and modern thought, a synthesis of visual delight, as well as the ideas his compositions embody.

In *Judge*, for example, a single plumb line is made palpable through Carrelli's modern-master technique. Like many of the objects that appear in his work, the plumb bob embodies substantial metaphoric weight in an object that can be easily held in the palm of one hand. As in a number of his paintings, the visual delight elicited by his rich depiction, the focus he commands through a narrow and symmetrical picture plane, invites the viewer to linger long enough to see the complexity

in this deceptively simple painting: hanging from its rope, this plumb bob is a dispassionate judge. The metal point will always come to rest at the same place; there are no more mitigating circumstances in the narrow space of the painting than there are in the results of gravity; the judge will be forever mute, the basis for judgment as mysterious as gravity even if its standards and results are as clearly seen, and Carrelli's dispassionate presentation makes the painting a statement of stoic proportions.

Yet when this same plumb line appears in *Veronica*, it is softened by the cloth that veils it. As depicted in a number of renaissance paintings, Veronica was the Jerusalem woman who gave her veil to Christ as He carried His cross to His crucifixion. After using it to wipe the blood and sweat from His face, the legend says, Christ handed it back to Veronica, an image of His face miraculously imprinted on its cloth. And Carrelli intimates this drama in his *Veronica*, even if he complicates it by his composition, the objects of this still life also standing in for humans and human concerns. Specifically, the veil is held out as in offering, yet to do so its corners are bound, the cloth drooping in the familiar posture of Christ on His cross. In place of an image of Christ's face, the cloth bears the silhouette of the plumb line that hangs behind it. In this manner, the rigidity of the plumb line is mitigated by Veronica's judgment of Christ, by the compassion manifest in her gift of the veil. Like the human-divine give-and-take of the Veronica story, humanity and divinity are conflated in this image, the compassion that moved Veronica to step outside of herself answered by the human blood and sweat of the God left behind as a divine image. Devoid of the halos, upturned eyes and other religious imagery that has become clichéd to contemporary eyes, Carrelli manages to create in *Veronica* religious portraiture that can be approached without irony at the turn of our century, even as it simultaneously allows itself to open up to less literal interpretations of the humanity, grace, compassion, and judgment expressed by those legendary acts.

Indeed, extending their respective landscape and still-life traditions, both Carrelli and LeBourgeois reinvigorate the substance of those traditions. They allow a return with fresh eyes to the landscape, the still life, for the reasons people have always done so: through their respective macro and micro

visions, they cause us to reconsider the familiar through their ability to make it strange. To hand the everyday back to us from a different perspective and thereby place it and ourselves in ontological context, a context that includes an appreciation for a potentiality that was within us all along.

Copyright Steve Tomasula, 2001

Steve Tomasula is the author of *The Book of Portraiture* (FC2), *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* (Station Hill/University of Chicago Press) and *IN & OZ* (Ministry of Whimsy Press). His short fiction has appeared widely in such publications as *The Iowa Review*, *Fiction International*, and *McSweeney's*. Recent criticism and essays are included in *Musing the Mosaic* (SUNY Press); *Data Made Flesh* (Routledge); *Leonardo* (MIT Press); the *New Art Examiner*, and other magazines both in the United States and in Europe. He co-edited the Word & Image issue of the *electronic book review*. He holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and he teaches at the University of Notre Dame.