

Louise LeBourgeois

One Body

Dolby Chadwick Gallery

Essay by Frances Malcolm

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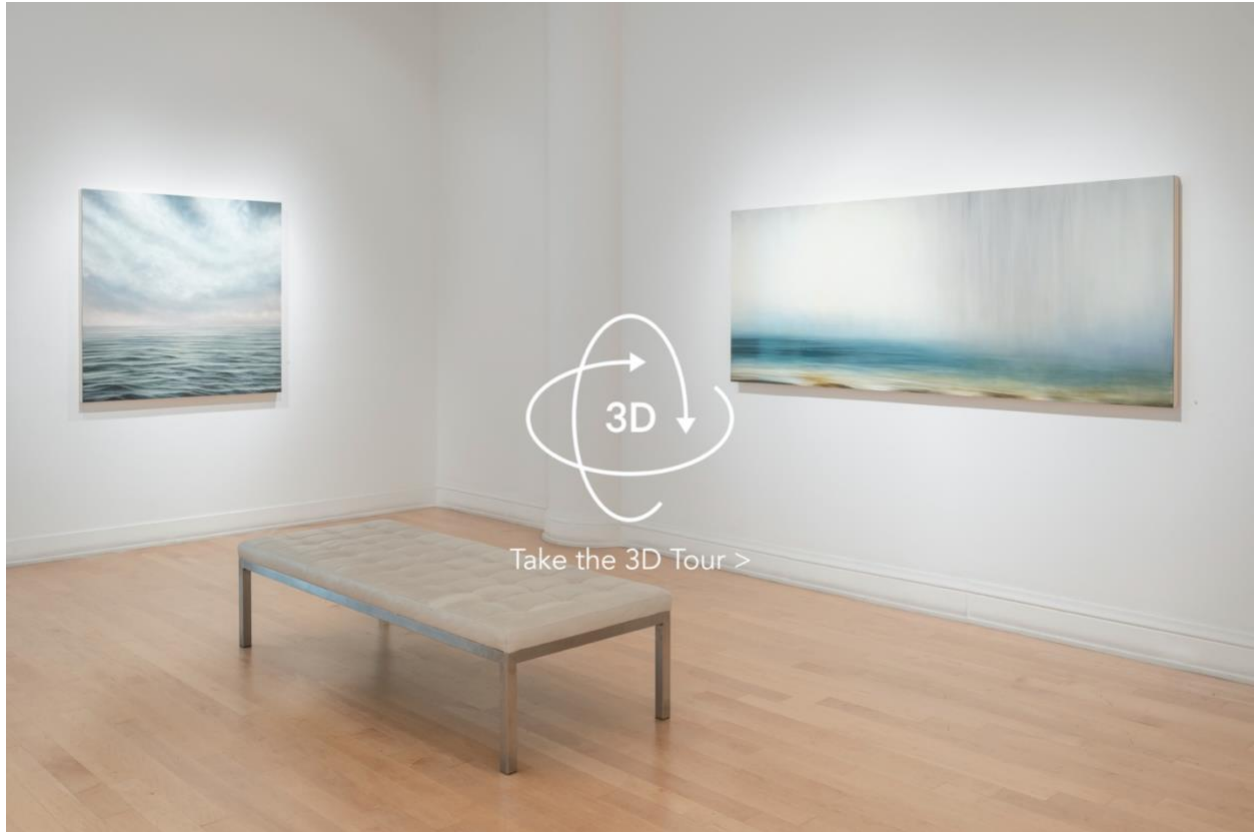
Water Touches Water #622, 2019 | Oil on panel | 48 x 48 inches

LeBourgeois's paintings are inspired by Lake Michigan, which she not only lives near but also regularly swims in. Though her style shares many of the hallmarks of photorealism, she is concerned less with achieving a true visual likeness of her subject than with capturing an emotional response. Her close cropping of the composition and exacting attention to the texture of atmosphere and water effect a vastness and abstraction that gives her room to explore a scene's kinesthetic impact. What LeBourgeois paints is not the lake itself but rather her experience of it: "There's no way I can perceive Lake Michigan without perceiving it through my human body—eyes, skin, ears, brain, and other bodily organs." The works consequently produce a sense of embodiment. We feel both buoyancy and depth—not just down, but also out toward the horizon and up toward the heavens as we inhabit her paintings.

This impact is evident in *Light at the Horizon #602* (2018), which is among several recent works painted from a swimmer's point of view. Here, the water level is depicted above the horizon line, creating a wrinkle of disorientation that recalibrates our understanding of how the elements around us cohere. It is a welcome—not unnerving—feeling, one enhanced by the painting's lyrical, meditative qualities: softly undulating waves, nebular-like clouds, the pink glow of morning light. LeBourgeois notes that it is at moments like these, when "I get a glimmer of the motion of celestial bodies rotating around each other, that I feel most alive, expanded and connected to everything else."



The sensation of being in the water—of slicing and kicking through it, of rotating to breathe—follows her back to the studio. As she builds up layers of paint and medium to a smooth, glassy finish, the body memory of swimming strokes is translated into brushstrokes. Swimming and painting are both wet, engaging a similar materiality. Both also rely on resistance: the swimmer uses the resistance of the water to move forward, the painter uses the resistance of her materials to create an internal tension that holds a work together. Although her works are often cool-toned, she frequently lays down a warm color—magenta, Pompeii red, yellow ochre—to arouse an opposition that moves the painting along; from there, she wrestles it to where it needs to be so that the finished work resonates in her gut. The at-times-demanding physicality of her process is paramount for LeBourgeois, whose deep love for paint brings each work to life.



LeBourgeois made two of the newer works, *Water Touches Water #622* (2019) and *Land of Water #625* (2020), in response to witnessing huge sheets of rain coming down over the lake. Both generate a feeling of imminent, wholesale inundation as ghostly torrents of water rush toward the foreground. All of the artist's works, though these in particular, take on a greater sense of urgency in the context of climate change. She notes that the Midwest has been besieged by unusual amounts of rain since early 2019 due to the presence of warmer air in the atmosphere during the winter months. Lake Michigan has risen 19 inches as a result, wreaking havoc on the city's infrastructure, including beaches, lakefront property, parks, bike paths, and roads.



Throughout the rest of world, the impact of climate change has been devastating, with wildfires, droughts, hurricanes, and rising sea levels threatening our health and safety, animal welfare, and fragile ecosystems. LeBourgeois's paintings are a reminder of our deep and inextricable connection to the earth—one that has been rendered invisible by those of us who have grown up in societies distinguished by modern-day conveniences and abundance. With the prospect of collapse looming, however, our once obscured links to the planet have inched to the fore. The double entendre of the show's title underscores a fundamental though often overlooked truth: in addition to referencing the work's origin in LeBourgeois's singular, corporeal experiences of water, "one body" speaks to the interconnectedness that defines our existence here on earth.

Louise LeBourgeois was born in 1964, in New Orleans. She earned a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, an MFA in Painting from Northwestern University, and an MFA in Creative Writing–Nonfiction from Columbia College Chicago. She is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including a residency at the International School of Painting, Drawing and Sculpture, Montecastello di Vibio, Italy. In addition to exhibiting extensively across the United States and abroad, she has been commissioned to create work for prominent public spaces, such as for the 17th District Police Station as part of the City of Chicago Public Art Program. She taught at Columbia College Chicago for twenty years and gives lectures and talks in academic and other settings. This is her fifth solo show at the Dolby Chadwick Gallery.

