

Louise LeBourgeois

Rising Light

Dolby Chadwick Gallery

Essay by Frances Malcolm

May 4 — 27, 2017



Storm Morning #565, 2017 | Oil on panel | 48 x 48 inches

Dolby Chadwick Gallery is pleased to announce an exhibition of new paintings by Louise LeBourgeois, opening Thursday, May 4. LeBourgeois has dedicated a large part of her career to

studying the effects of light and Chicago's capricious weather on Lake Michigan. Her current body of work continues to excavate this subject matter, though from an angle that privileges more nuanced forms of perception.

LeBourgeois's compositions often comprise three essential features: water, sky, and horizon. Occasionally, a sandy shoreline appears in the foreground. In other works, the sky dominates completely, such as in *The Light Obscured Still Shines #555* (2016), in which the moon glows behind a delicate veil of clouds; upon second glance, however, it's possible that the artist has in fact captured the reflection of the moonlit sky in the calm waters below. Such slippages are at the heart of LeBourgeois' practice. Weather and light are perceivable, but not necessarily tangible, and the changing atmospheric conditions they produce can dissolve the solidity and stability of the landscape, divesting it of its nameable features. Reflecting upon these interactions, she notes that her "ideal would be a painting in which everything is invisible—in which you're almost peering into nothingness."

The minimal compositions are imparted with a sense of depth and complexity as a result of their construction. By building her paintings up from numerous layers of paint and glaze, which she carefully sands to create a smooth surface, she achieves nuances of light and dark. As she explains, "you don't necessarily see the complexity as perceive it." For example, while the viewer might not explicitly see the yellow ochre or Pompeii red that forms the base of a blueish-gray painting, it is nevertheless there, interacting with the subsequent layers of paint as well as the way in which light hits the painting and the panel, and then gets reflected back. *Rising Light #561* (2016) exemplifies LeBourgeois' adept handling of color and luminosity. An extraordinarily still and compositionally simple image, it is also charged with energy: light emanates from the panel with such strength that it appears to glow.

Despite the naturalistic features of her work (the artist learned to paint waves partly by studying Vija Celmins's photorealistic waterscapes), LeBourgeois is not concerned with making paintings that replicate photographs but rather that reflect the physical feeling of being immersed in water. An avid swimmer, she is closely attuned to the interplay between body and environment that is particular to Lake Michigan, where she swims most mornings during the summer. A metaphysical quality also undergirds LeBourgeois' interest in water: "swimming in the lake, there is nothing solid to hold onto, there's nothing solid restricting me. The only restrictions are the limitations of my own ability." It is these questions of feeling, perception, and being that drive her to use art to capture a particular energy as opposed to a particular scene. She explains this impulse by way of her recent visit to a retrospective of Agnes Martin's work at the Guggenheim Museum: "At their most powerful, her works seem to emanate some sort of presence or energy. The actual paint or pencil marks she puts on the surface are visible, of course, but so utterly spare. It seems these marks, these brushstrokes, exist not so much to be seen, but to conjure up that particular energy vibrating from the work . . . I came away from the show puzzling over the relationship between what's visible in a work of art and the energetic presence it has."

Louise LeBourgeois was born in New Orleans in 1964. She earned a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, an MFA in Painting from Northwestern University, and an MFA in Nonfiction Writing from Columbia College Chicago. In addition to exhibiting nationally and internationally, LeBourgeois has received numerous awards and grants, including a residency at the International School of Painting, Drawing and Sculpture, Montecastello di Vibio, Italy, among others. Her work has been commissioned to appear in prominent public spaces, such as for the 17th District Police Station as part of the City of Chicago Public Art Program. This is her fourth solo show at the Dolby Chadwick Gallery.