

“my small self in this big lake”
Intimacy and expanse in the paintings of Louise LeBourgeois

By Karen Halvorsen Schreck

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Water #451, oil on panel, 8" x 8", 2011

When I look into the recent waterscape paintings of Louise LeBourgeois—look *into*, deeply into, through the multiple layers of transparent glaze to the reflected oils beneath—my wandering mind stills to wonder. I slip into a pure moment of seeing, an experience which is not restricted to my sense of sight. Indeed, my experience seems to shift on a sensory level. No longer am I standing on the shore. I am drawn into the water now. Above me broods the presence I most often call sky. (*Oh, sky. You lift me up to your spectacular heights. And I feel your weight, too, bearing down.*) Suspended between elements within this liquid skin, I am thankful for the gift that I have received in seeing, in *swimming*, which is simply: in this moment I am able to maintain buoyancy. Immersed, I am relieved of the burden of narrative, the drag of time. I cease the kick and the churn; choppy water, after all, is not reflective. Moving neither backward nor forward, I am afloat in the subtle particulars of now. In this heartbeat, this brushstroke, the lake's waves and the sky's clouds are stilled, availed for meditation.

“Haiku are whatever happens in a particular place at a particular time,” the 17th-century poet Matsuo Basho said. “They should be brief enough to be seen in a single glance or captured in a breath.” Perhaps this is why LeBourgeois’s paintings recall for me the principles that shape a well-crafted haiku? Basho also said, “The poet gets inside the object, experiences the object’s life and feels its feelings.” LeBourgeois, a devoted swimmer who thrives in a community of devoted swimmers, plunges into Chicago’s Lake Michigan at all times and in all seasons. In her delicate brushstrokes I sense the physical memory of her practiced swimming stroke. *Water resists and receives me like this—like this paint resists and receives me.* Yes, LeBourgeois has gotten inside the object, her subject. In fact, she has subjected herself to it.

The conjunction of elements in LeBourgeois’s work—watery planet below and sky above—creates an expansive vanishing point, a prospect to wonder toward and into. The paintings do

evoke certain attributes of a specific setting (LeBourgeois has said that Lake Michigan is the simplest and most complex image that she sees on a daily basis, and thus inspires her), but the paintings are also neutral enough to hold other imagined waterscapes. *Water First Light #466* may bring to mind a forgotten scene from childhood. Or perhaps the painting hints at a vision yet to be had? *What's out there? What's below? What's above? What's beyond?* The vast expanse of each of LeBourgeois's paintings, contained in such intimate scale, might also be said to evoke those painterly maps from when the world was flat, and cartographers marked uncharted seas with the words: *There be monsters here*. Well, yes, but there be answers, too. And ultimately the searching gaze turns inward.

If I wait and watch long enough, who knows what I will encounter?

Be still and know.

Karen Halvorsen Schreck is the author of the historical novel *Broken Ground* (Simon & Schuster 2016), called a "masterfully written . . . must-read" by USA Today. Her previously published historical novel, *Sing for Me*, was described as "impressive...a well-wrought and edifying page-turner" (Publisher's Weekly, Starred Review). Karen's young adult novel, *While He Was Away*, was a finalist for the Oklahoma Book Award. She's also the author of *Dream Journal*, which was a 2006 Young Adult BookSense Pick, and the award-winning children's book *Lucy's Family Tree*. Her short stories and articles have appeared in *Consequence*, *Hypertext*, *The Rumpus*, *Belt*, and *Image*, as well as other literary journals and magazines, and have received various awards, including a Pushcart Prize and an Illinois State Arts Council Grant. Karen received her doctorate in English and Creative Writing from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She works as a freelance writer and editor, as well as at her local public library, teaches writing, and lives with her family in the western wilds of Chicagoland.