

Louise LeBourgeois

Light Through Water

Dolby Chadwick Gallery

Essay by Frances Malcolm

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Water #453, 2012 | Oil on Panel | 8 x 8 inches

Light Through Water, an exhibition of recent oil paintings by Louise LeBourgeois, spotlights Lake Michigan — a longtime source of personal and artistic inspiration for LeBourgeois — at different times of day and under different weather conditions. To achieve naturalistic descriptions of her subject, LeBourgeois tightly renders the lake's surface using a series of delicate brushes. Painted on panel, the smooth and glossy surface quality of her paintings enhances the precision and exactitude of her strokes. Waves are adeptly depicted in various states of activity, from an almost glass-like stillness to rippling animation and churning tumult. As atmospheric conditions play a central role in affecting the character of the lake, her paintings are as much about sky as they are about water. In *Water #472*, for example, the atmosphere is a billowing lace of clouds faintly mottled by the blue sky beyond. A low layer of fog — tinged pink by the setting sun — has ostensibly formed as a result of contact between the cooling evening air and the warmer surface water. As the fog gains density near the lake's surface, it unites the sky and water by softly obscuring the horizon.

Compared to her earlier work, these paintings offer unequivocal evidence of LeBourgeois's gradual relinquishment of a strong narrative framework in recent years. While her art is not abstract in the sense that her visual language remains true to nature, the dramatic cropping she employs toys with spatial and compositional expectations by boxing out all but water and sky. LeBourgeois's decision to prioritize a direct, emotional experience resonates with her goal of capturing not just how water looks, but also how it feels. As an avid swimmer, LeBourgeois has come to appreciate the degree to which the experience of swimming — especially in a seemingly illimitable body of water where conditions can change dramatically — affects the body and mind. A powerful parallel exists between the visceral impact of experiencing her paintings and plunging into water: "Open water swimming is research for my paintings. It's where I test my physical courage. I don't understand why it feels necessary that I do this, but diving into my fear reminds me that I'm alive."

Located only a short walk away from her home in Chicago, Lake Michigan has played an integral role throughout most of LeBourgeois's life. It provided respite for her displaced adolescent-self who

was accustomed to the wild woodlands of South Carolina, not the claustrophobic, concrete jungle of a city like Chicago. It posed a challenge to LeBourgeois when, as grad student at Northwestern, capturing water's many elusive properties was seen as a personal test of her artistic abilities. And as a swimmer, its waters are cast as both a source of renewal as well as a means through which to push her physical and physic limits. The lake has also illuminated the many peculiarities and ironies of human experience. Figuring prominently in LeBourgeois's paintings, the horizon can be seen as metonymic of earthly toiling: masquerading as a physical, tangible destination, it quickly dissolves into an unattainable goal. At the same time, this "fictive space" serves as an edifying reminder that the farthest distance we can see does not delimit our scope of existence but rather signifies that there is more yet to come.

Louise LeBourgeois was born in New Orleans, LA, in 1969. She earned her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1990 followed by her MFA from Northwestern University. In addition to exhibiting nationally and internationally, LeBourgeois's art can be found in numerous public and private collections including the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and the McKesson Corporation in San Francisco. A faculty member at Columbia College Chicago, LeBourgeois has received an Artadia Grant, was awarded residencies at the BAU Institute in Otranto, Italy and at the Ragdale Foundation, and earned a commission from the 17th District Police Station in Chicago.