

HYPERALLERGIC

Light Makes Things Real

Louise Belcourt's work has a remarkable ability to make two-dimensional paintings feel three-dimensional.

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LOCKSGALLERY



Louise Belcourt, "Lamb's Ear #5" (2016), oil on wood panel, 22 x 25 inches (all images © Louise Belcourt and courtesy Locks Gallery)

In her painting, Louise Belcourt no longer conforms to the standards of traditional geometric abstraction. There are curves in the real world, she says, and she wants them in her paintings. An avid gardener, Belcourt was persuaded by lamb's ear, a perennial with furry, curved leaves, to abandon the geometric style of her paintings prior to 2008.

Her current exhibition at Locks Gallery includes several paintings in her Lamb's Ear series. As Belcourt told me in a recent gallery visit, the curving, lamb's ear shapes help to break up space in her paintings, freeing her to experiment with sculptural arrangement and form. In "*Lamb's Ear #5*" (2016), the light purple shape snaking

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Louise Belcourt, "Mound #28 (Douglaston, Queens, NY)" (2015-2016), oil on canvas, 66 x 85 inches

through the painting creates the illusion of a space one could crawl into, while the contrast of the light blue curves against the large blocks of cream and beige in "*Lamb's Ear #4*" (2016) give the impression of looking into a densely packed quarry.

Although Belcourt, who is Canadian and paints part of the year in Quebec, creates works that resemble construction sites or rural landscapes, she doesn't base her paintings on one specific image or location. As she puts it, she wants to paint something she hasn't seen before.

In "*Mound 28 (Douglaston, Queens, NY)*" (2015-2016), the earliest painting in the show, a small red line towards the bottom of the center stack of block shapes interested and surprised me because all of the blocks in the other paintings seem tightly stacked on top of each other. Belcourt simply said that she wouldn't do something like that now because she breaks up space differently.

Belcourt's work has a remarkable ability to make two-dimensional paintings feel three-dimensional. The curves in this painting manifest as large, boulder-like objects, rather than lamb's ears, which seem to hover just in front or above the blocks — I felt as if I could walk up and unhook the green and carry it away. This skill stems, in part, from her desire for the forms in her work "to be pregnant" and "aware of gravity."



Louise Belcourt, "Cliff Flower #7" (2016), oil on canvas, 76 x 85 inches



Our conversation eventually moved towards the largest and most recent work in the exhibition, "*Cliff Flower #7*" (2016). When I asked her whether she based the flowers on some in her studio, she said she doesn't necessarily think of them as flowers. A delightfully paradoxical answer, I thought.

The sky blue backdrop of the painting lightens slightly near the upper right, where a darker blue flower shape seems suspended in mid-air. But there is also the suggestion that we are only seeing part of a larger image; the flower and the leaf shapes below could be connected to something outside the frame. This feeling occurs again in the center of the image, with the pink and green petal shapes seemingly crushed between the cream-colored blocks. Belcourt creates this impression through the interplay of the blocks' lighter façades and their shadowed edges. In the studio, she spends a lot of time finding the right combinations of color and light. "Light makes things real," she told me.



Louise Belcourt, "Cliff Flower #1" (2016), oil on wood panel, 22 x 29 inches

"*Cliff Flower #1*" (2016) was perhaps the true knockout in this exhibition. Across the top Belcourt contrasts a soft, white cloud shape with a blue ground so sharp I've only seen it in northern New England and or in the deserts of the Southwest. I found myself gazing at that blue, longingly, as the Philadelphia sky hung so low that I wanted to push it away. As with the flower shapes in "*Cliff Flower #7*," the cloud formation was cut off by the left edge of the canvas. It seemed as if it would drift away at any moment.

While Belcourt's paintings don't fit within the tradition of realism, her work acknowledges the real world. She brings in curves, along with geometrics, because they exist in the world. During our conversation, she gestured towards one of her dogs lying on the floor and said that the contrast of her dog against the white floor of her studio inspired the curved black shapes in some of her paintings. Perhaps all of the shapes in her work have a root in the world, but none of her paintings are dependent upon these roots for sustenance. Belcourt has imbued each work with a distinct sense of self-reliance.

Louise Belcourt continues at Locks Gallery (600 Washington Square South, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) through February 4.