

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Weekend Studio Visit: Louise Belcourt in Williamsburg, New York

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By John Yau



The view from Louise Belcourt's studio, New York (all photos courtesy of the artist)

At a time when, as J. J. Charlesworth wrote this week on artnet, "New York's MoMA [is] attempting a dubiously anti-historical take on art-market friendly abstract painting with its 'The Forever Now' show," it is good to remind yourself that there are plenty of other places and ways to look at art, particularly since those siding with the money are not likely to have either a revelation or a mental growth spurt in the near future, especially when it comes to promoting contemporary art.

Despite the hue and cry about zombie formalism, there is a lot of very good painting going on these days. It is just that you haven't seen much of it in MoMA or the Whitney in recent memory, and frankly you should not expect to. The apparatchiks are too busy either going to dinner with a trustee or documenting painting's demise, as evidenced by their exhibitions of Elaine Sturtevant and Wade Guyton, to actually go out and discover that appropriation is not the only game in town, and has not been for a long time. Maybe the problem isn't zombie formalism, but zombie curators. Recently, I went to the studio of Louise Belcourt, whose paintings I first saw in the late 1990s at Peter Blum. Her most recent show was at Jeff

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Louise Belcourt, "Mound 24" (2014), oil on canvas, 5 x 76 inches

Bailey Gallery in 2012. Although Belcourt has been exhibiting her work in New York for nearly two decades, I have never written about it, and thought perhaps it was time I did. This is one reason to do studio visits: you are not completely dependent on what is being exhibited, which can become a constraint, particularly for critics who write for newspapers and magazines. There was another reason for going to Belcourt's studio, which is best summed up by a point that Joanne Greenbaum, an artist I have long admired, made in a conversation she had with Belcourt for *Bomb* (February 16, 2012), while the latter's show was up at Jeff Bailey Gallery (February 17–March 17, 2012):

Your work [...] is not easily categorized. It doesn't fit into any specific group or stylistic slot. You are pushing for something that is outside a dialogue, especially a verbal one — your project is not about language. I can identify with this in your trajectory, and also with the need to be not seen as part of any group. I wonder what that hermetic impulse is. As a poet who writes about art, I confess that I find myself drawn to work that is not about language and doesn't try to be attached to an academic discourse defining art.



Louise Belcourt, "Mound 13" (2012-2013), oil on canvas, 42 x 52 inches



Louise Belcourt, who is not part of any group, splits her time between a barn in Baie-des-Sables, Quebec, on a hill overlooking the St. Lawrence River, and her studio on the South Side of Williamsburg, which has a view of the Williamsburg Bridge spanning the East River, Lower Manhattan's housing projects, and the empty Domino Sugar Refinery, now slated for multi-use development. While both views are elevated perspectives, in which the sky is noticeably present, the urban one exposes a city undergoing radical change, decay and, one would like to think, renewal, while the other view is populated by water, hills, rolling fields and hedges, a different pace of change. It is this doubleness that Belcourt brings to fruition in her work; and it is unlike anyone else's. But the twofoldness is just the beginning when looking at the paintings, which keep revealing more possibilities the more time you spend with them.

Belcourt's paintings, all of which are titled "Mounds" and numbered sequentially, are not about landscape or abstraction, but about the visual signs we assume to be integral to each. Rather than working with the signs of geometric abstraction and flatness, or with those of landscape, space, volume and perspective, she has established her own language out of these distinct dialects. Moreover, her sensitivity to light, tonal shifts and coloristic jumps, not to mention figure-ground contradictions, adds more layers of elaboration to her paintings.



Louise Belcourt, "Mound 25" (2015), oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

In her last show, she referred to her work as "paintings of sculptures of landscapes." The equal emphasis on all three terms gives some indication of the complexity of seeing and thinking that goes into these paintings. Their seeming straightforwardness and apparent simplicity are deceptive. In "Mound 13" (2012–13), there is a left and right side, each with a different sky. The artist, in the course of making, which I would equate with seeing, discovers the layers, continuities, shifts and disruptions. In "Mound 25" (2014–2015), the curving form that rises up from the left side of the bottom edge, and the large flat black shape descending from the left side of the top edge, add a visual and emotional complexity to the painting that resists translation.

Belcourt's "mounds" brought to mind early Renaissance painting and the landscape of Assisi,

Italy, while her cloudless, crystalline, northern light shared something with the Icelandic landscapes of Louisa Matthíasdóttir. Three other painters briefly crossed my mind while sitting in Belcourt's studio — James McNeill Whistler, Piet Mondrian and Emily Carr. In Belcourt's work, I saw a unique synthesis of tonalism, geometry and abstract forms. But, as happens with any strong painter, these terms soon faded into the background, where they belong, after surfacing.



Louise Belcourt, "Mound 3" (2011-2012), oil on canvas, 76 x 85 inches

There is the faintest hint of anguished tension running through Belcourt's paintings, which belies the solid planes of color filling her surfaces. At one point, I began focusing on the fissures and gaps spreading through her tightly constructed compositions. Later, I isolated her discrete paeans to light, as in the elongated, buttery yellow, geometric slivers seen on the tops of two blocks in "Mound 3" (2011–12). My attention kept shifting and re-focusing. Her paintings are full of particular instances embedded within larger views. The strain between unity and disruption is ceaseless, but, contrary to what you might expect from such pressure, it leads to all kinds of visual celebrations, odes and, yes, even lamentations. There is a depth of feeling to these paintings that, much to her credit, Belcourt has refused to trivialize.