Louise Belcourt at Jeff Bailey Gallery
BY DAVID BRODY

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511 W 25TH Street, Second Floor
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Clouds and shrubbery, water and air have long been insinuating themselves into Louise Belcourt's lusciously brushed color fields that otherwise can seem bequeathed from Friedl Dzubas or Helen Frankenthaler. Belcourt raises the stakes of this mingling of painting space and "real" space with wry, incestuous flair in a group of new paintings currently on view at Jeff Bailey Gallery.

Belcourt lives about half the time in post-industrial Brooklyn and the other half in maritime Quebec – high-latitude big sky country. There the summer sun rakes across vast hedge-ribbed moraines to offer a drama of elongated green solids and their cast shadows. The way this bulbous geometry vibrates against blue yonder has given Belcourt tactful lessons about sneaking illusionistic volume and light into the hermetic, self-referential language of painterly abstraction. Like the early American Modernists who never lost a connection to Scene Painting – O'Keefe, Hartley, Avery, Dove – Belcourt prods abstraction by taking it back to the land.

HedgeLand Painting #11, 2009, oil on canvas, 57 x 67 inches, courtesy of Jeff Bailey Gallery

The twelve breakthrough paintings in her current show intensify Belcourt's previous terms of entwinement between solid and void by wrapping landforms around the faces of nearby rectangular extrusions like graphics onto a cereal box. *Hedgeland Painting #9* is the most literal instance: it reads as if a pair of harbor gates made from giant slabs of butter were open to an incoming tide, yet the view beyond is no more reliable than the image of a view mapped onto the light-struck slabs themselves. The inlaid horizons on each gate pass to the "actual" horizon with only minor inflections, suturing the topological rift, and causing the gates to melt back into the matrix notwithstanding their insistently shadowed thickness. The effect is pleasingly oxymoronic, like the opaque transparency of Magritte's easel painting of an easel painting of a view which it precisely blocks.

Hedgeland Painting #11 squares the circle by closing the exits. It's like a jumble of canvases and colorfully faceted children's blocks stacked against a painted wall, where the wall is as big as the sky. Image and surface vie for primacy everywhere, every rectangle of pigment is but an edge-cue away from bodying forth into a solid, and steely distance is right in your face. We do progress back, but in solid, overlapping chunks of façade. Any gap through to a logic of beyond might be just another brick in the wall; and vice versa, any façade can fake us out and go deep.

The palette of Hedgeland centers on yellow-greens and aqua-blues. Belcourt's chromatic exactitude makes this color quadrant burn with icy cool – so much so that intrusions of pure red in *Hedgeland Paintings #12*, *#13*, and *#14* singe the eye but softly. Without calling attention to the Surrealist reflexivity of it all, these three paintings in particular seem to hit a stride of calm spatial jostling. They achieve by suggestive contour, brushy overlap, and pressurized color what some of the other paintings – such as *#6*, a post-and-lintel Brice Marden patio with a framed Peter Halley bay view – must sweat for with calculated chutzpah. Of the three, *#12* is especially unfussy, the edges of its gestures and touches wholly indexical to its percussive jump cuts.

But a masterfully pleasing collage aesthetic is not necessarily Belcourt's ambition. Hard-nosed Canadian empiricism and Brooklyn grit seem to combine in Belcourt's work to undermine stylistic stasis, and thus any platform for all-out lyricism. Belcourt's brush is never less than stubbornly fluid, and in reproduction it can be easier to see that each new view of Hedgeland is like glacial melt that has refrozen at night. It's in the details of how Belcourt solidifies flow, though, that we see her flinty reticence as the exact price of a contradiction in terms.