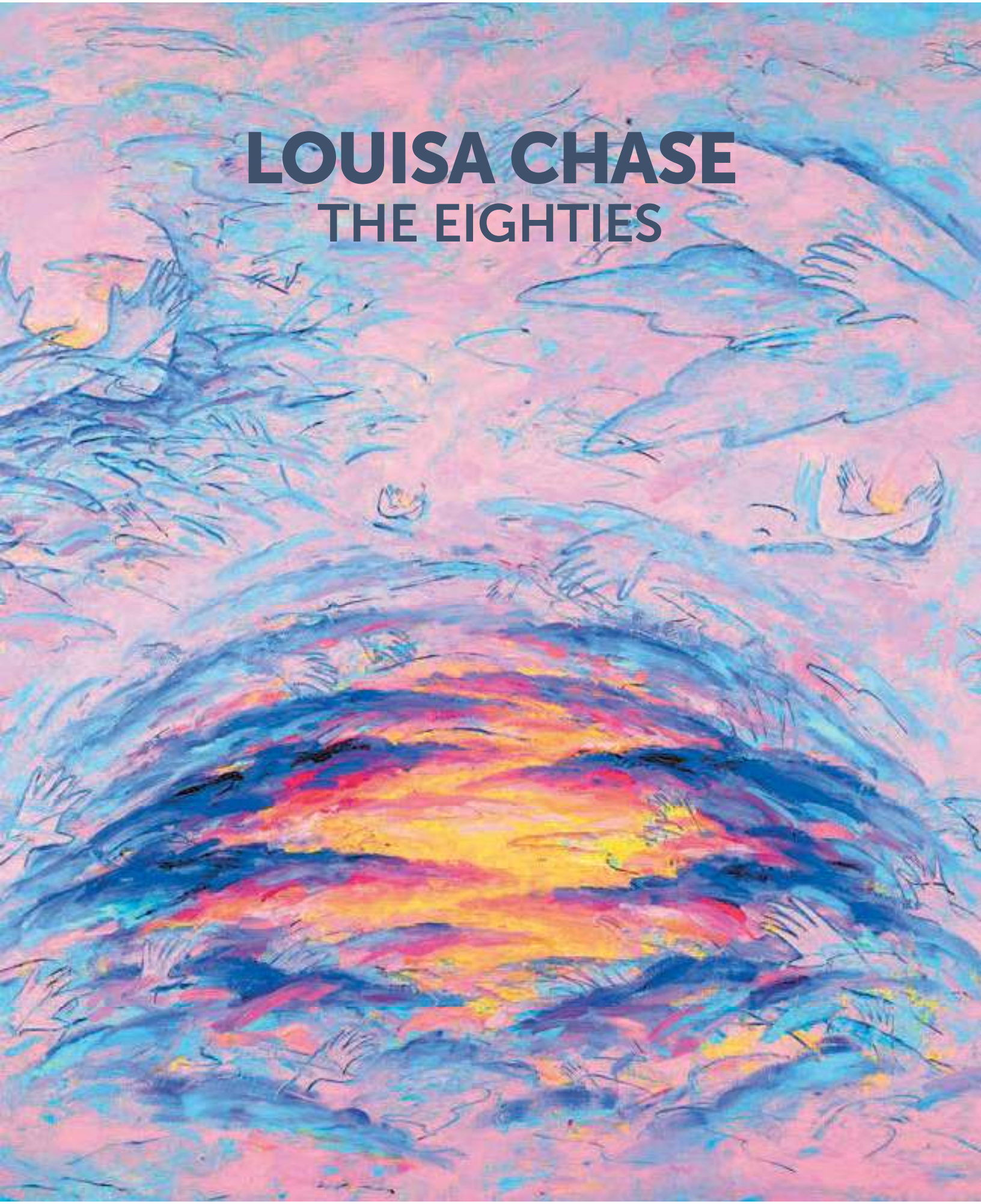

LOUISA CHASE
THE EIGHTIES

Louisa Chase, 1987 © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation. Used by permission.

BIOGRAPHY

Louisa Chase (1951-2016): "The Location is Inside"

Throughout her career, Louisa Chase sought an authentic practice of embodiment—a way of visually expressing her inner emotional life and the nature of perceptual experience.[1] In 1979, she wrote: "painting for me is a constant search to hold a feeling tangible.…One moment is shattered into many moments, one place in a thousand places. Their relationship and scale determine the nature of experience, a psychological cubism in which all the directions are at once being that experience, the complexities of one feeling."[2] She remarked in 1982: "The forces closest to landscape are the closest to the internal forces that I am trying to understand.…The location is inside."[3]

In the early 1980s, along with artists such as David Salle and Julian Schnabel and her friends Alex Katz, Elizabeth Murray, Judy Pfaff, and Susan Rothenberg, Chase was a leading figure in both the New Image and Neo-Expressionist movements. The former constituted a return to figurative form after decades when abstraction dominated the art world and the latter, a return to easel painting and expressive surfaces in reaction to the detachment and systemic modes of Minimalism and Conceptual art. Chase combined both approaches by introducing evocative and emotive schematized figurative imagery into works rendered with the subjective energies and process methodology of Abstract Expressionism.

In the mid-1980s, Chase emphasized mark-making to probe relationships of perception, being, and identity in works both in the spirit of Surrealist automatism and structural geometric traditions. In addition to painting, Chase made drawings and prints. A recipient of National Endowment for the Arts grants in 1978–1979 and 1982–1983, she taught at the Rhode Island School of Design from 1975 to 1978 and at the School of Visual Arts in New York from 1980 to 1982. In 1985, she was a visiting artist at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, along with Mary Heilmann.

Louisa Chase, 1983. Photo: Peter Bellamy.

Chase actively exhibited her work until her death from cancer in 2016 at age sixty-five. Her work is represented in major New York museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, as well as in public collections nationwide.

Louisa Chase was born in 1951 in Panama City, Panama. The Chase family moved seven years later to Mount Gretna, in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania. After graduating from the George School—a private Quaker school in Bucks County—Chase enrolled at Syracuse University. She initially planned to study Classics, but then found her way to art, where she majored in printmaking, earning her BFA in 1973. In her senior year, she attended Yale University's summer program in Norfolk, Connecticut. She was subsequently offered a grant by Yale and entered the University's graduate painting program. During her senior year, Chase studied with Philip Guston, who became a friend and

mentor. She echoed his ideas in her early works. Chase received her MFA in Fine Art from Yale in 1975.

While still in graduate school, Chase was selected by Joan Snyder for her first solo show. Held in 1975 at Artists Space in SoHo, on Wooster Street, which showcased emerging artists, her *Cars* and *Triangles* were "floor pieces," comprised of sticks and plaster balls on rounded pieces of felt. The installation reminded Irving Sandler (the administrator of Artists Space) of a model railroad. In a review in *Artforum*, Allan Moore saw Cubist ingenuity in Chase's "active and ingenious abstract composition bounded by a metaphor." He stated: "These pictorial arrays, subject to the exigencies of sculpture, lie along a peculiar continuum between tondo, that most structurally demanding of traditional pictorial formats, and the idea of a puddle."[4] In 1976, Chase moved to New York, establishing a downtown studio and joining the city's dynamic art scene. That year, she exhibited painted sculptures in a four-artist show at Edward Thorp Gallery (with John Lees, Martin Silverman, and David True). In *Artnews*, Peter Frank noted that her "tin ribbons, twisted into wild arabesques and painted in gaudy colors and patterns," with "little papier-mâché balls on platforms" planted within them, exemplified the "quirky, anti-formalist, anti 'tasteful' styles" of the work on view.[5]

Barbara Rose included Chase in *American Painting, The Eighties: A Critical Interpretation* (1979), an exhibition held at New York's Grey Art Gallery.[6] In the catalogue, Rose observed that young artists were turning away from the formalist criteria and reductionist simplifications in the art of the day. They found inspiration instead in old masters and modernists, spurred by exhibitions of the late works of Cézanne, Monet's Giverny canvases, a Jasper Johns retrospective, and paintings from the formative years of Abstract Expressionism. Rose remarked that she had begun to see "in studio after studio, bold and affirmative images executed with a new degree of complexity, density, assurance, and ambition," in which the artists had broken through "not to some radical technique or bizarre material—but to their own personal images."[7] She anticipated the revival of "maximal" painting, in which artists committed themselves to sensuous, tactile, imagistic, metaphorical, and subjective art.

In 1980 Chase traveled to Italy, where she studied the work of early Sienese and Florentine painters. That year, she showed a series of paintings of saints at the New Museum, New York, in which she dispersed pictorial forms—landscape and floral motifs and synecdoche for the human body (torsos, feet, hands, arms)—across the picture plane. She explained to a Pennsylvania newspaper reporter that the works "helped me to clarify things. St. John the Baptist was used to deal with the question of rebirth, Saint Francis symbolized a knitting back together of natures torn asunder."[8]

In the period that followed, Chase developed a distinctive abstract gestural style while incorporating a vocabulary of schematized landscape references such as mountains, cliffs, and waterfalls into her work along with disembodied body parts. In her imagery, she expressed elemental forces in nature while using pictorial metaphors for her own state of mind. She began to be included in exhibitions of emerging art and was selected for the Whitney Biennial in 1981.

That year, a solo show of her work at Robert Miller Gallery, New York, brought her to the forefront of the art world. In *Art in America*, Barry Yourgrau described Chase's thickly underpainted surfaces and stylized figurative forms as "essentially mood-charged landscapes," expressive of space and particular places. Associating the paintings with those of Elizabeth Murray, Philip Guston, Marsden Hartley, and Arthur Dove, he wrote, "one senses their integrity and earnestness, even vulnerability."[9] Chase's *Tide* (1980) was illustrated in a review in *Artforum* by Richard Flood, while in *Artnews*, Gerrit Henry observed: "each painting has the appearance of some two-dimensional relief map charting the layout of some faraway but very palpable realm of the psyche....In her work, landscape takes on a new meaning as pictures from the unconscious."[10]

Chase continued nature-based iconography in a second show at Robert Miller in 1982. In *Artforum*, Ronny Cohen posited that rather than any question of technique or color, Chase's focus was on "the power of the image to persuade as sentiment and provoke as emotion." She wrote that Chase's interpretation of "'Nature'—traditionally the most loaded category in the romantic repertory—is varied and personal. It brings to mind the heady Northern-European line of Caspar David Friedrich, Philipp Otto Runge, and Ferdinand Hodler."[11] *Artnews* observed that Chase's "large-scale situations" took hold of "particular moments and feelings. Meteorological events—a snow flurry, sea squall or thunderstorm—are the artist's vehicles for recapturing past experiences."[12] In 1984, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston organized a traveling exhibition of Chase's work.

In the mid-1980s, Chase eliminated explicit figurative form, emphasizing the gestural aspect of her work. She began to cut into thick surfaces with blades and trowels for a wealth of surface textures consisting of cryptic notations—reminiscent of the free scrawls of Cy Twombly and the automatist methods of the Surrealists. She exhibited these works at Robert Miller in 1984. In journal entries printed in the catalogue, she stated: "The physicality of the work, of the gesture, is so much closer to the uncontrollability of the feeling than a symbolic depiction."[13] She returned to ecclesiastical themes, such as *The Fall* and *St. Joan,* but expressed these subjects less with figural form than with hue and paint fluidity. In another journal entry, she wrote: "In *St. Joan* the flames, smoke, branches, figure are all in the midst of being consumed/ball of fire/completely plastic, breathing—letting air in—not solid but moving, changing—alive."[14]

Solo exhibitions of Chase's work were held at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (1984), Robert Miller (1986), and Texas Gallery in Houston (1987).

When Chase's works were on view in 1989 at Brooke Alexander Gallery in New York, a reviewer for *Artnews* commented that her

"gestural marks" suggested a search while geometry thwarted the "implications of memory and mystery."[15] When Chase had a second show at Brooke Alexander, in 1991, Ann Lauterbach addressed the development of her work, positing that the changes she made over time were not due to creating a new style for its own sake but to seeking new self-understandings. Lauterbach stated that by reinventing her pictorial language with a syntax of marks, colors, modules, and layers, Chase explored the self as relational—comprised of discrete, embodied responses to experience. Her aim, Lauterbach suggested, was to register how perception becomes being and being coalesces into identity. Lauterbach commented that in "an age of glib appropriations," Chase enlisted "a pantheon of enabling guides, including Sassetta's distilled narratives, Emily Dickinson's prismatic psyche, Philip Guston's empathic scale, Elizabeth Murray's deconstructive wit, Jackson Pollock's unmediated, layered space, Brice Marden's calligraphic voice, John Ashbery's modulating pronouns, and Joel Shapiro's infusion of a precarious humanism into the language of geometry."

Louisa Chase, c. 1983.

In the exhibition, Chase reintroduced the human figure, but only as a geometric stick figure rendered in different versions in the many strata of gouging and painting.[16] In a review of the show, Nancy Princenthal saw Chase's indebtedness to Twombly and Abstract Expressionism as well as to classical sources (as demonstrated in works titled *Icarus*, *The Dying Slave*, and *Oedipus*). To Princenthal, the works on view were consistent with Chase's earlier art in their interaction between manual form, its antecedents, and form logically deduced.[17] Also in 1991, a show of Chase's art was held at the Foundation Kajikawa in Kyoto, Japan. In a catalogue essay, Alexandra Anderson-Spivy emphasized Chase's integrity as she moved on from her earlier fame as a New Image painter to reevaluate her preconceived ideas, developing new systems of gesture and geometry.[18]

Chase continued to show her work in solo and group exhibitions through the end of her life, exhibiting in her later years at the Halsey McKay Gallery in East Hampton. Subsequently her work has continued to receive attention in solo exhibitions at the Parrish Art Museum (2018), the Palitz Art Gallery at Syracuse University's Lubin House, New York (2019), St. Petersburg College, Tarpon Springs, Florida (2020), and a retrospective at Dickinson College in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (2024).

—Lisa N. Peters, PhD

1 The Louisa Chase Papers are in the Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.

2 Quoted in Lisa N. Peters, "Louisa Chase at Robert Miller Gallery," *Arts Magazine* 57 (November 1982): 54.

3 Quoted in *Block Prints*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1982).

4 Allan Moore, "Louisa Chase, Artists Space," *Artforum* 13 (March 1975): 70–71.

5 Peter Frank, "Louisa Chase," *Artnews* 75 (November 1976): 150.

6 Barbara Rose, *American Painting, The Eighties: A Critical Interpretation* (New York: Barbara Rose, 1979).

7 Rose, *American Painting*, 5.

8 Irena Ruesnas, "Louisa Chase," *Daily News* (Lebanon, Pennsylvania), March 12, 1981, 57.

9 Barry Yourgrau, "Louisa Chase at Robert Miller," *Art in America* 69 (April 1981): 143–44.

10 Richard Flood, "Louisa Chase, Robert Miller Gallery," *Artforum* 19 (April 1981): 66; Gerrit Henry, "Louisa Chase," *Artnews* 80 (June 1981): 238.

11 Ronny H. Cohen, "Louisa Chase," *Artforum* 21 (December 1982): 74–75.

12 "Louisa Chase at Robert Miller," *Artnews* 81 (December 1982): 157.

13 Journal entry, January 17, 1984, in Louisa Chase, exh. cat. (New York: Robert Miller, 1984), [1].

14 Journal entry, February 5, 1984, in Louisa Chase, [3].

15 M.M., "Louisa Chase," *Artnews* 88 (Summer 1989): 164.

16 Alexandra Anderson-Spivy, "Finding a New Language: Louisa Chase's Recent Paintings," in Louisa Chase, exh. cat. (Kyoto, Japan: Foundation Kajikawa, 1991).

17 Nancy Princenthal, "Louisa Chase at Brooke Alexander," *Art in America* 79 (November 1991): 158.

18 Anderson-Spivy, "Finding a New Language."