

Louise Bourgeois: Vital Signs

An interview by Jan Garden Castro¹

Since Louise Bourgeois's major installation of the monumental towers *I DO, I UNDO* and *I REDO* and the spider sculpture *MAMAN* at the Tate Modern in 2000 (see *Scupture* Jan/Feb 2001), her exhibition schedule has, if anything, increased. Bourgeois's giant spiders have been sighted everywhere from Rockefeller Center in Manhattan to the Kemper Museum in Kansas City, the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo and the Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul.

In 2002, Louise Bourgeois began *ODE A L'OUBLI*, a series of handsewn images that would form a cloth book. According to her assistant Jerry Gorovoy, "Louise worked patiently on the *ODE A L'OUBLI* book for almost the full year. The book deals with the memories that are embedded in her clothes and the desire to forget certain things. Cutting the garments, she pinned and sewed the shapes to the fabric pages made on napkins from her trousseau. When she was finished with all of the final decisions on the fabric drawing, it was then sewn permanently to the page by a seamstress." In the Fall of 2004, a facsimile edition of *ODE A L'OUBLI* was published by Blumarts and exhibited at the Peter Blum Gallery where it quickly sold out. Says Gorovoy, "Louise was less involved in the production of the edition, but she did approve of the facsimile page by page as well as of all of the fabric that had to be dyed to match the original garment."²

Louise Bourgeois's ninety-third birthday on Christmas Day took place in the same Chelsea dwelling that she has seldom left for the past ten years. In many ways, however, Ms. Bourgeois's world literally comes to her. In addition to a full exhibition schedule, she continues to be an alert, sharp-tongued host at her weekly salons for emerging artists. She is usually polite, but will not hesitate to ask an artist, "What does it mean?" or "Who was Cézanne? Why was he important?" -- questions she asked me when I read a concrete poem inspired by a Cézanne painting of three apples.

Footage of Bourgeois's Sunday salon was included in *C'est le murmure de l'eau qui chante*, a feature film by Brigitte Cornand that was shown in the Fall of 2004 at the Whitney Museum and at the Anthology Film Archives in New York. Her drawings and sculptures were also shown at Cheim & Read in an exhibition called *The Reticent Child* which featured a multi-element fabric sculpture diorama that begins with herself as the pregnant mother and her son as the fetus inside a transparent net womb. This suite of six sculptures, which was made specifically for a project at the Freud Museum in Vienna, represents the passage of time as the child grows up and becomes secretive and silent. Bourgeois's drawing suites in the same show are compulsive and powerful, her hand and voice more haunting than ever. These works on paper also deal with the passage of time in a more abstract manner. These vital recent works attest to the fact that Bourgeois is still busy creating bodies of work filled with penetrating visions and universal resonances.

Her exhibition *Stitches in Time*, curated by Frances Morris of the Tate Modern, traveled in 2004 to the Irish MoMA in Dublin; the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh, the Centre of Contemporary Art in Málaga, Spain, and travels in February 2005 to the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami. Also in February 2005, her exhibition *Uno y Otros* opens at Centro de Arte Contemporaneo Wilfredo Lam in Havana, Cuba. Art historian Rob Storr is working on a book on the artist.

Ms. Bourgeois states in this interview that her sculpture is "pre-gender," but what does this mean? Named Louise Josephine after both her father and her mother, Ms. Bourgeois also states, "I feel I am 50-50. Emotionally, part of me is inherited from my mother, and the other aspects are from my father." Ms. Bourgeois comes closer than most to literally playing with signs of distinctive male and female behaviors - and body parts - when the mood strikes. The many-breasted *Nature Study*, whether its origins are mythic or accidental, is a true epiphany. Similarly, *The Destruction of the Father* (1974) has a classic archetypal, psychological urgency, especially if one's father is/was controlling and/or deceitful. In 1982, Robert Mapplethorpe memorably photographed Ms. Bourgeois with *La Fillette* under her arm. In one interview, she insists it is *not* a phallus (with balls) but a little girl - a little Louise.³ This paradox, both illuminating and confounding Freudian concepts, demonstrates the artist's unique point of view. She has shaped body parts into signs of obsessions in Western culture. The human body, identity, psychology, and the search for love are mysteries that have driven great artists since the days of Sophocles, Sappho, and Socrates.

This interview includes questions from students at the School of Visual Arts, New York City, where Ms. Bourgeois worked in the seventies.

Castro: Some of your latest works - sewn books and sculptures and some drawings that seem woven like cloth - seem to pay tribute to your childhood participation in repairing the tapestries of your parents. As a child, what were some favorite tapestries and art works? Why are these mythic topics still important today?

Bourgeois: As a young girl, I drew in the missing parts of the tapestry that needed restoration. My mother never wanted me to handle the needle. I never did the weaving. What I got from repairing the tapestries relates to my notion of sculpture as an exorcism. Art is restoration, the idea to repair the damages that are inflicted in life, to make something that is fragmented -- which is what fear and anxiety does to oneself -- to be whole.

From the tapestries, one gets a good education in art history. Tapestries of the 17th-Century, with their scenes of peasant life, are beautiful. As a child, it was the scale of the tapestries that had a strong affect on me.

My sculptures are not made just of cloth but of garments that have belonged to me. These clothes that I have saved constitute a diary; they have stories. I remember where I wore the garment, who gave me the garment. They hold memories.

Castro: Could you talk about some modern themes you have invented - the towers and the spiders and the cells? Did these themes come from dreams or what?

Bourgeois: My images and forms do not come from dreams. I don't dream. I start with an emotion first, an emotion that I want to re-live because it was pleasurable or an emotion that is painful that I want to get rid of.

Castro: When and why did you begin the spider theme? Did the spiders start as drawings or as models? What materials were the original maquettes? You have spoken about the mother spiders, with their sacks of eggs, as being simultaneously protective and deadly, and this is a brilliant metaphor and paradox. How did you get the great idea of balancing the huge bronze spiders on tiny pointed legs? How did the spiders get connected to tapestry?

Bourgeois: I made two drawings of Spiders in 1947. The Spiders of the 1990s are an ode to my mother who, like a spider, was a weaver. My mother was my best friend. She protected me and was clever.

There are no maquettes as I worked directly with the steel. I wanted them to envelope me and protect me. I wanted the Spiders to be strong and monumental like my mother. But my mother was also ill. The Spiders reflect both the strength of my mother as well as her fragility as they balance on tiny points.

Castro: Could you talk about the origins of the early house drawings and the sculptures of your family members?

Bourgeois: The early images of my houses and family from the 1930s and 40s reflect the fact that I was an anxious runaway from France.

Castro: I read (in *The Reticent Child*) that you resembled your father and were his favorite child, yet "the death of the father" is an important theme in your work. Could you discuss *The Destruction of the Father*? This work seems original and anti-Freudian. Is *The Destruction of the Father* connected to the *Femme Couteau* (Woman Knife) series? What inspired *Femme Couteau*?

Bourgeois: My father was a macho man. He had ideas about the kind of life that I should live. I had to get rid of his power over me to survive. There are times when you have rid yourself of feelings in order to survive. When my mother died, my world changed forever. Meeting Robert, my husband, was a blessing. As I've stated many times, I was a runaway who made it.

Femme Couteau is not connected to the work *The Destruction of the Father*. *Femme Couteau* is a defensive figure who has to protect herself while *The Destruction of the Father* is an aggressive act of devouring this pompous figure.

Castro: I read that you wrote a thesis on Kant and Blaise Pascal. How have these philosophers influenced your theories? How has Francis Bacon influenced your art? Also, how do you feel about being named Louise Josephine after both your father and mother?

Bourgeois: Geometry was important to me. It offered a certitude against the turbulence I was feeling. After Pascal suffered a near-death incident, he became less interested in mathematics

and more in religion. I'm interested in what trauma does to oneself. How we are able to cope, and what we do to survive. Do we sublimate into creative acts, or do we self destruct and become violent against the self and others?

Francis Bacon's works speak to me. I empathize with the intensity of his emotions and how other people make him feel.

I feel I am 50-50. Emotionally, part of me is inherited from my mother, and the other aspects are from my father.

Castro: You grew up when Paris was undergoing a major fashion revolution and you are presently using clothes from your youth to illustrate some themes about relationships. Is fashion a trap to disguise relationships or what?

What inspired your latest sewn sculptures of pregnant mothers with baby fetuses visible inside their bellies? Is work sewn by hand symbolic of old values that are disappearing?

Bourgeois: I am interested in style. Clothes are equally about exposing things and hiding things. The small figures in the transparent mesh sacks represent me. My work is told from the perspective of the child because that is the way I feel. I feel I need protection. Some of the sewing is done by hand and some by machine.

Castro: What meaning does five have for you?

Bourgeois: I grew up in a family of five and I also had my own family of five.

Castro: Do you use pink and blue to symbolize girls and boys? Do some colors have secret meanings? Why is Red your favorite color? (blood? Whose?) Yellow? (cuckold?)

Bourgeois: Pink is feminine. Blue can be masculine, but it also symbolizes the sky. Red is about intensity, passion and violence. Black is about mourning.

Castro: As an artist, how important is intuition? Do you always know what you're doing when you begin a work?

Bourgeois: I've always said my drawings are a journey without any destination in sight. With the sculpture, I know there is something I want to express, and I have confidence that I will eventually get there. Sometimes I finish a work and it is only then that I have an idea of what it's about.

Castro: Do you think there is always a war between the sexes, even when they appear to be loving?

Bourgeois: Most of my work deals with issues that are pre-gender. I think communication between people is difficult. To make yourself be loved is difficult.

Questions from Students at the School of Visual Arts, New York City:

Asa Kawano: I want to know your views on the role of females. When I looked at the clothing, it almost reminded me of Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*. - how society sees females. Many of your females seem "trapped"....

Bourgeois: Since I am a woman, I can only talk about things from the viewpoint of a woman. I don't know how men view women. There is an ambivalence in all of my images. There is a desire to seduce, a desire to hide, and a desire to be loved.

Michael Venuti: How come you passed from more classical sculptural material (marble and bronze) to fragile things such as cloth? What do you want to express with this? Where did you get the inspiration for *Nature Study*? Is it true that you recycled an old sculpture that another artist threw away?

Bourgeois: I'm not interested in any material per se. They're just means to an end. Each material allows you a different range of feelings and I'm interested in exploring all of them. I have held on to certain pieces of clothing for a long time, and I want to make sure they will exist when I'm gone, so I use them as raw material for sculpture.

Nature Study started out as a fragment that I rescued from a dumpster. There was something in that fragment that attracted me to take it home.

Grayson Bowen: What are the differences between your sculpted men and women?

Bourgeois: I have been making a lot of couples where the men and women exist tied together. They cling to each other. They are inseparable.

Natalia Vaile: There seems to be a surrealist aspect in your work. Did the surrealists help you in articulating your visual language? If so, how? How does it feel to be rediscovered after your career and ideas had been overlooked in the past?

Bourgeois: I'm not a surrealist, and I'm not particularly interested in their literary ways. I'm not interested in the dream world. I'm not interested in the idea of chance. I'm not interested in women as an object.

I've always stated that I am a lonely long-distance runner, and that's the way I like it.

Jinhee Yoo: Who are the three-headed figures in the cage?

Bourgeois: The three heads represent different sides of me.

Rebecca Whelen: Are there any artists who were mentors or who inspired your work?

Bourgeois: I don't look to other artists for inspiration. I do like the work of Bonnard and Bacon.

Keren Paz: Does your new work involve not only reflections on your own childhood, but also on the price a woman artist pays in terms of family and child-bearing?

Bourgeois: The new work expresses how I feel today. I'm not living in the past. The person I am today is built from my past. It's how the past comes to the surface in the present. Why do I feel this way in this situation? You have to understand your past and process it in order to live in the present.

Kelly Nicholson: You often leave your figures without appendages. What does the fragmented body mean to you?

Bourgeois: The fragmented figure exists because I am an abstract artist. I am not into realism. The missing appendages symbolize the difficulties of life and the will to survive.

(about 2500 words)

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¹ The following interview took place in New York City in December 2004 and included participation from School of Visual Arts students who wrote original questions following a slide talk on the artist's work. Thanks to John Cheim, Chris Burnside, Wendy Williams, and Jerry Gorovoy for facilitating this interview!

² Email from Jerry Gorovoy on 18 January 2005.

³ Paraphrase from interview with the artist in *Louise Bourgeois Blue Days and Pink Days* (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 1997), p. 168.