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Review/Art; Dream Images of Mother and Home

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The sculpture produced by Louise Bourgeois, now 83, during the last decade is some of the best of her career; it is also some of the most audacious done by anyone during that time. The exhibition titled "Louise Bourgeois: Locus of Memory, Works 1982-1993" at the Brooklyn Museum is the first chance many New Yorkers will have to see a representative sampling of it, and the event could not be better timed.

Not only has Ms. Bourgeois recently expanded her formal range in a series of highly evocative installations, some of which were first shown at the 1993 Venice Biennale (the Brooklyn show is an expanded version of her Venice contribution). But fashion has also finally caught up with her. The concerns with the body, with sexuality, and with childhood damage and loss that shape the work of many young American artists today have been her vital, insistent fields of inquiry for almost 50 years.

That vitality is apparent throughout the Brooklyn Museum, which fairly hums with Ms. Bourgeois's distinctive energy. The 25 sculptures and 30 works on paper that make up "Locus of Memory" fill not only the museum's Morris A. and Meyer Schapiro Wing galleries of contemporary art, but also the ground-floor Blum Gallery and the cavernous Grand Lobby. Taken as a whole, they offer something close to the kind of total immersion that this artist's alternately hypnotic and outrageous vision demands.

The single sculpture and suite of drawings in the Blum Gallery, created especially for this exhibition, give some sense of the drama Ms. Bourgeois can extract from a simple form. The central image is a spider, a creature she associates with her mother, a woman of ever-changing moods. Drawn in orange and flesh-pink gouache, it here stalks across the page and there shrinks to the size of pea. As an immense sculpture of soldered metal tubing, it looms ominously over the viewer but is delicate enough to quiver and sway at a touch.

Fragility and fierceness are, in fact, the twin poles of Ms. Bourgeois's art. Just off the fourth-floor elevator one finds a block of roughly chiseled light pink stone on top of which lie two exquisitely sculptured hands, palm upward in a gesture of surrender. Around the corner, a very different sight waits. "Blind Man's Buff" (1984) is a squat marble column of breasts or phalluses that brings to mind a Brancusi squirming with an organic life of its own.

The sense of animation in this work carries over into the show's architectural installations. "No Exit" (1989), the first of them, consists of a wooden staircase of hand-hammered, weathered boards, the emblem of a bleak, solitary, absurd ascent to nowhere. It is only when one peers through a small opening behind the stairs and discovers two rubber hearts suspended side by side that the image snaps fully into focus: this is Ms. Bourgeois's view of home, the place that, however oppressive and joyless, is where the heart remains.

Home is a central metaphor for Ms. Bourgeois -- surely it is the "locus of memory" of the show's title -- and she further explores its meaning in six extraordinary, self-contained installations constructed of wire, wooden doors, steel mesh and glass, which form the centerpiece of the exhibition. Spaced down the length of the central gallery of the Schapiro Wing, these impenetrable, roomlike compartments or cells are the artist's most elaborate wedding to date of personal history and existential observation.

In some cases, references to her childhood are direct. "Cell (Choisy)" is named for the town in France where

the artist grew up. An antique sign reading "Old Tapestries" identifies her family's trade as restorers of old cloth (a profession that accounts for the images of needles that recur throughout the work in the show, as well as for the use of the spider as an image). The carved marble model of a country villa is an idealized image of her family home, though anyone trying either to reach it or escape from it would have to pass beneath the guillotine's blade poised above the locked cell door.

Elsewhere, memory assumes less tangible guises. In "Cell II," for example, Ms. Bourgeois arranges a dozen empty "Shalimar" perfume bottles and a pair of clenched marble hands on a mirrored table top. The assemblage reconstitutes in poetic form the sense of smell, that most elusive and piercingly evocative of sensory phenomena. And, as with a trace of perfume lingering in a long-closed drawer, it evokes the glamorous and anguished presence of unnamed generations of women.

"Locus of Memory" is full of such dreamlike images -- a cell full of self-reflecting mirrors, another in which blown glass spheres sit on little chairs like children at school -- while others, like a pair of attenuated 10-foot-high black rubber boots titled "Legs," indicate a wicked black humor at play. And it is exactly this artist's penchant for combining humor and hypnotic reverie that makes her work so hard to classify. It is neither surrealistic, nor confessional, nor erotic, nor nostalgic, though it includes a measure of all those ingredients.

In the past, Ms. Bourgeois herself has spoken of pain as the subject of her art, and fear: fear of the grip of the past, of the uncertainty of the future or of the loss of the present. Yet it is her gift for universalizing her interior life as a complex spectrum of sensations that makes her art affecting.

The results can be scary. It would take a hardy soul to live with the proud, mutilated, ambisexual creature of polished bronze she calls "Nature Study" (1984). But they can also be ravishingly lovely, as in the case of "Le Defi," which consists of dozens of transparent and translucent glass containers, from bud vases to circuit-breaker caps, meticulously arranged in a cratelike container, with sky-blue shelving and bare light bulbs. The effect is of a magical cellar storeroom in which the old and the new, the unsightly and the beautiful, have been freed of disorder and darkness and brought out for inspection. It is an image that may, in fact, be said to describe both the Brooklyn Museum's marvelous show and Ms. Bourgeois's career as a whole.

"Louise Bourgeois: The Locus of Memory, Works 1982-1993" remains at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park, through July 31. It travels to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington in September.