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The hits of the spider woman

By Jackie Wullschlager

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From the moment a giant, graceful bronze spider called "Maman", its legs rising and curving like sublime modernist arcs, appeared on London's South Bank last week, it was clear that the retrospective of Louise Bourgeois was going to be a fascinating affair. But Tate Modern has made it more than that: the lucid, serious account of seven decades of Bourgeois' work, which opened on Wednesday, is the museum's most revelatory, enjoyable exhibition since *Matisse Picasso* in 2002. Combined with an essential coda, a riveting display of new work at Hauser & Wirth Colnaghi, it demonstrates Bourgeois as an important, unique voice in 20th- and now 21st-century art.

At 95, Bourgeois is the world's oldest living great artist. For much of her life, she was seen as eccentric, offbeat, pursuing a solitary path. Tate's achievement is to respect that individuality, yet to tell through her the story of the art of the past 70 years, as refracted through Bourgeois' own highly autobiographical variation on it. The result is a striking collision between two compelling histories: of formal movements and innovations since the 1930s, and of the translation of women's experiences into art, which has been a vital current of the feminist revolution.

Shown at this scale, Bourgeois' work resonates with the authority, urgency and inevitability of an art that had to be made, at that time, in that way. Daring and risky, it embraced the formal language of modernism even though its subject was the collapse of the patriarchal order that informed that vocabulary in the first place. Every work here is fraught with this tension: from the dark-toned "Femme Maison" 1940s paintings - depictions of a body that is half woman, half house, clearly indebted to surrealism but also undermining its macho aesthetic - to "Arch of Hysteria" (1993), a sleek, acrobatic polished bronze male nude, which, hanging from the ceiling by a wire attached to the torso, vaults back on itself into a circle because "men are hysterical too".

If psychoanalysis is Bourgeois' religion, as she once said, that confirms her as an artist at the heart of 20th-century intellectual experience. Born in Paris to a repressive, upper-middle-class family of tapestry restorers in 1911 - the year of the city's first cubist exhibition - she knew Brancusi, studied with Léger, rented an apartment in the same building as Breton's surrealist gallery in the 1930s, then moved to New York as abstract expressionism was hitting its stride. A child of French modernism - "I seek formal perfection, that goes without saying" - she was liberated to become a sculptor by America. "Portrait of Jean-Louis" (1947-1949) transfers the upward thrust of the "Femme Maison" paintings to an anthropomorphic wall relief where her son is depicted as a blue-windowed tower block on legs. Jean-Louis' birth in 1940 was, Bourgeois says, "the most important event in my life", thus "I wanted my son to be as beautiful as the skyscrapers here in New York".

The city's striking verticality - an upbeat contrast to the horizontal planes of Paris, symbolic of the imprisoning, over-decorated interiors that she had fled - inform the outstanding "Personages" series that she made on the roof of her Manhattan apartment in the 1940s and 1950s. "The Winged Figure", "Pillar", "Femme Volage", "Red Fragmented Figure" and others exquisitely grouped together here are soaring, etiolated, spiky, anthropomorphic, life-size sculptures in steel and painted wood that at once recall David Smith's abstract/figurative experiments, Giacometti's elongated existential loners - Bourgeois' diary notes that she began reading Sartre and Camus at this time - and the Freud of *Totem and Taboo*. Intimate, full of nervous energy, these monoliths are given personality by their shape, articulation and response to each other; all are also rigid with "the stiffness of someone who's afraid - scared stiff", Bourgeois said.

"A kind of softening . . . the softness of my children and my husband" found expression in the 1960s in organic forms - lairs, labyrinths, spirals, nests - made from malleable materials such as latex, plaster, cement, textiles, which Bourgeois twisted and mauled to imply tormented physical or emotional states. The distorted "Fée Couturière" references the "seamstress sparrows" of her parents' tapestry workshop.

The anti-formality of such pieces brought Bourgeois into the 1960s mainstream, dovetailing with a younger generation including Eva Hesse and Bruce Nauman, then with overtly feminist art. The provocatively titled "Fillette" (1968), a 2ft-long, roughly textured latex-covered giant phallus with breast-like testicles, is the most celebrated of her powerful/fragile dualisms - its sexual ambivalence is caught in Mapplethorpe's photograph of Bourgeois slyly, protectively, cradling it in her arms. But in "The

Destruction of the Father" (1974), glowing like a furnace at the centre of Tate's show, the soft latex and plaster objects transform into a cannibalist fantasy. The piece, explained Bourgeois, is "basically a table, the awful, terrifying family dinner table headed by the father who sits and gloats. And the others, the wife, the children, what can they do? They sit there, in silence. The mother, of course, tries to satisfy the tyrant, her husband . . . We were three children: my brother, my sister, and myself . . . My father would get nervous looking at us, and he would explain to all of us what a great man he was. So, in exasperation, we grabbed the man, threw him on the table, dismembered him, and proceeded to devour him."

From the attack on patriarchal oppression, Bourgeois moved on to depict monstrous/nurturing maternal power in her iconic "Spider" series, choosing an animal that is a weaver like her own mother, and then to deconstruct family life in the claustrophobic, menacing wood-panelled cells - "Red Room (Parents)", "Red Room (Child)" - which brilliantly adapt the language of 1990s installation art to her own psycho analytic purpose. Showing how late fame gave her the opportunity to work at a dazzlingly monumental scale, Tate nevertheless cleverly ends with a cabinet of curiosities containing hundreds of items - spiders, phallic dolls, drawings - from her studio, confirming the sense of a restless, fertile imagination still in thrall to its own images, rather than a completed oeuvre.

But the unmissable finale is in Mayfair, where in Colnaghi's opulent rooms lined in silken burgundy, work just out of Bourgeois' studio retraces all the themes - childhood trauma, sex, maternity - that obsess her, while looking as fresh as anything made now. A series of red gouaches - "The Hysterical Mother", "The Good Mother", "The Jealous Brother" - show her venturing back to painting with trembling gestural brilliance and simplicity, while a group of white-painted upright bronzes cast from sensuously ruffled, hanging arrangements of her own clothes, stitched or ruffled here and there into semi-surreal fantasies, at once recall the "Personages" and, again, the tapestry workshop.

The only other female artists who so rigorously broke down form in order, paradoxically, to give shape to subconscious subject matter are the modernist writers - Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath - who did not survive their own intensity. Bourgeois's tough, sustained reinventions, by contrast, leave victim status behind as few women artists have managed to do, making her late work both triumphant and acutely relevant to the future of 21st-century art.

'Louise Bourgeois', Tate Modern, London SE1, to January 20, tel: +44 (0)20-7887 8888; Pompidou Centre, Paris, March 5-June 2; then Guggenheim Museum, New York, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Hirshhorn Museum, Washington DC, through 2008-9. 'Louise Bourgeois', Hauser & Wirth Colnaghi, London W1, to November 17, tel +44 (0)20-7287 2300

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