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The places that scare you

Obsessed with rooms, dolls, missing limbs and mirrors, Louise Bourgeois's work, often drawing on her troubled childhood, lures novelist Siri Hustvedt into her own past.

At 95, the artist is still producing art of terrifying emotional power

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Louise Bourgeois with one of her sculptures, Baroque (1970).
Photograph: Ted Thai/Getty Images

A tiny, slender woman with long hair tied back in a ponytail, regal posture, a shrewd expression and a forceful walk swept through the Pierre Matisse Gallery, an entourage of young men trailing behind her. She was dressed in black, and her presence acted on the room like a bolt of electricity. "Who is that?" I asked my husband. "Louise Bourgeois." "Oh, of course," I answered. A couple of years earlier, in 1982, the Museum of Modern Art had mounted a major show of her work. Curated by Deborah Wye, the exhibition brought the 71-year-old Bourgeois, who had been showing painting and sculpture in New York since the 40s, into the art-world limelight.

That was the only time I saw her in the flesh. After a couple of minutes, she vanished, followers in tow. My memory of what I felt as I looked at her is vivid - a mixture of awe, fascination, and amusement. There was a theatrical quality to her sudden entrance, as if she had staged it for our benefit.

Louise Bourgeois is now 95 and still making art. Tate Modern will show more than 200 of her works in an exhibition that opens this week. It's a major retrospective that includes many of her most famous sculptures as well as less well-known pieces made during seven decades of intense artistic labour.

The story of Louise Bourgeois's early life has become so enmeshed with her work that many critics have been seduced into biographical or psychoanalytic readings of the art, punctuated with pithy pronouncements from the artist, who is also a prolific writer: "My name is Louise Josephine Bourgeois. I was born 24 December 1911. All my work in the past 50 years, all my subjects have found their inspiration in my childhood. My childhood has never lost its magic, it has never lost its mystery, and it has never lost its drama." Or perhaps more tantalising (at least for someone with an analytic bent): "50 years old be kept in the dark - result rage result - frustration from knowing / 10 years old unsatisfied curiosity - rage outrage result rage / kept out / 1 year old - abandoned - why do they leave me/ where are they / 3 month old - famished and forgotten / 1 month old - fear of death."

The second of three (surviving) children, Bourgeois began her life on the Left Bank, where her parents had a gallery. Later, the family moved to Choisy-le-Roi and then to Antony. Her father served as a soldier during the first world war and was wounded at the front. After his return, the family opened a tapestry restoration studio, where Louise learned to draw in order to assist in the family business. She suffered terribly when her father brought his mistress, an English woman, Sadie, into the house under the pretext that she was the children's tutor - a situation that his wife, Josephine, an avowed feminist, tolerated. Sadie stayed for 10 years. Louise attended the Lycée Fénelon, and in 1932 studied mathematics for a short time at the Sorbonne. That same year, she cared for her critically ill mother, who died in her presence. Bourgeois left the Sorbonne for various art schools. At one of them she had Fernand Léger as a teacher. She knew the Surrealists, but understood that they had little use for a woman artist, and was irritated by their preaching and antics. In 1938, she met the art historian, Robert Goldwater, married him, and moved to New York, where she has lived and worked ever since.

Stories that are told and retold harden. Part of the pleasure we take in fairy tales and myths is that their forms are fixed, but family stories often turn rigid as well. Our narratives about tormented fathers or depressed mothers or suicides or lost money serve to explain ourselves. They order the chaotic and fragmentary character of memory, which is not stable, but dynamic and subject to change. Bourgeois's tale of the family interloper has been reiterated time and again both by the artist and by her critics since she first revealed it in Artforum in 1982 under the title Child Abuse, but neither it, nor any other story or poetic utterance from her writings can explain her art. The work has its own oblique vocabulary, its own internal logic or anti-logic, its own stories to tell, and these resist an external narrative, no matter how titillating. Its meanings are made in the encounter between the viewer and the art object, an experience that is

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sensual, emotional, intellectual, and dependent on both the attention and expectations of the person doing the looking.

Before I had read a word about or by Louise Bourgeois, I was fascinated by the emotional power of her work, how it stirred up old pains and fears, summoned complex and often contradictory associations, or echoed my own obsessions with rooms, dolls, missing limbs, mirrors, violence, nameless threats, the comfort of order, and the distress of ambiguity. Bourgeois can take you to strange and hidden places in yourself. This is her gift. What may be deeply personal for her finds its translation in art that is far too mysterious to be confessional. Throughout her long career, however, there have been repetitive themes and forms that appear in multifarious guises and mutations. From the paintings first shown in 1947 under the collective title *Femme Maison* to the mesmerising *Cells* of the 90s, the artist has vigorously reinvented versions of the body/house - as refuge, trap, or a bit of both - and she has done it with an eye and mind that interrogate the history of art as well as the human psyche.

The mind and its memories as a metaphorical place, *topos*, is an ancient idea. Freud, too, was fond of a spatial trope - archeology. Dig and you shall find. Repressed memories. Screen memories. Fantasies. For Aristotle, every memory has two parts: *simulacrum*, a likeness or image, and *intentio*, an emotional colour that is an associative link to a person's inner chain of experiences. Word association as a clue to unconscious processes would become an essential part of psychiatry in the 19th century, and today brain scientists know that emotion consolidates memory. What we don't feel, we forget. I have come to think of Bourgeois as an artist who roams the antechambers of a charged past, looting it for material that she reconfigures as external places and beings or being-places.

The house/women of *Femme Maison* are in and of the architecture that can't hold their huge but vulnerable bodies. The debt to Surrealism is obvious. As in Magritte's *Le Modèle Rouge* (1935), in which boots and feet are one, Bourgeois makes the container the contained. But while the impulse in surrealism was always toward objectification - turning person into thing - Bourgeois does exactly the opposite. The inanimate houses come alive.

Her early sculptures or *Personnages*, first shown in 1949, are thin, life-size, rough-hewn wooden figures that have often been cited as an early example of installation art. These abstract tower/beings or "presences" inhabit a room in relation to one another and to the visitors who come to see them. "They were about people in my mind," Bourgeois once said in an interview. Stiff, hacked, and precariously anchored, one expects them to topple. When I look at *Sleeping Figure*, I think of someone on crutches. *Portrait of Jean-Louis* is a boy-skyscraper. A work from the same period, the abstract *The Blind Leading the Blind*, with its long multiple legs, feels startlingly like an advancing crowd. But these objects also resemble three-dimensional signs or characters from an unknown language inscribed in space. Like letters, they are stand-ins for what isn't there, tactile ghosts.

Bourgeois's sculptures from the 60s, when she left wood and began to work in latex, plaster, bronze, and marble, look different, but reprise her themes. The rigid anatomies and architectures of the 50s seem to have been melted down into organic forms that summon genitalia, internal organs, stones, fossils, caves, and primitive huts, as well as the work of other sculptors, from Bernini to Brancusi. *Tower* (1962) is a phallic spiral. *The Lairs*, *Cumuls* and *Soft Landscapes* are variously disquieting and comforting, suggestive of phallic outcroppings, womb-like retreats, and baroque drapery. The suspended bronze *Januses* are phallic, pelvic, labial, mammary, and ocular. "Oh my God, it's a penis!" becomes "Well, not really, sort of, but it's also ..." Unstable borders, sliding recognitions, aggressive sexual ambiguity, and visions of the body amputated, in pieces, or sprouting extra parts - it all evokes a world in which perception is not yet structured by language, a hallucinatory pre-linguistic space of primal drives. A nod to Freud's "polymorphous perverse", perhaps? It's inevitable that critics have called upon the theories of Melanie Klein, DW Winnicott and Jacques Lacan to explicate the work of a woman who was once quoted as saying, "Psychoanalysis is my religion."

The difficulty faced by those trying to interpret Bourgeois's art is illustrated by *The Destruction of the Father* (1974), because the object and the narrative that accompanies it have become inseparable. The thing looks like a stage with its frame, draped fabric, and internal red illumination. A gigantic mouth or maw with mounds above and below holds, at its centre, cast animal bones, as well as lumps and protuberances. The story, told in first- and third-person versions by the artist, is that "we" or "the children" leap up on to the table and eat the father - an "oral drama". Part Greek tragedy, part Totem and Taboo, the exciting fantasy of eating dad may be implicit in what we see, but not explicit. Revenge for Sadie? Feminist politics through the language of Kleinian child analysis? These are just two proposed solutions that, however well meant, pinch the work and don't begin to capture its wounded, raw, ambivalent feeling.

The artist's intellectual sophistication, her mordant commentary, and the weight of the theory brought in to bear on her work can quickly obfuscate rather than reveal what is in front of us. Even when a visual reference is explicit, as in the *Arch of Hysteria*, critics are quick to jump to conclusions, which are then passed from one to the next. The body in most versions of Bourgeois's arch is male. Art writers have repeatedly glossed this as a feminist inversion of Jean-Martin Charcot's idea that hysteria is an illness exclusive to women. But the 19th-century neurologist (with whom Freud studied) firmly believed in, wrote about, lectured on, and treated "traumatic male hysteria". In the *Bibliothèque*

Charcot at the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris there is a photograph of a naked man in the arc en cercle. I am convinced that Bourgeois knows the picture - the similarity is striking. Although the connotations of hysteria then and now are undeniably sexist, and the artist may have wanted to play with that assumption, her use of the image addresses something else: a fascination with psychic/somatic states, with explosive tension as well as its opposite - flaccid exhaustion and withdrawal.

One version of the arch is part of a Cell (1992-93), in which the man has lost his head and arms, perhaps to the saw that stands nearby in the enclosure. Under him, on his bed or covered board, I read the words "Je t'aime" written by hand in red over and over again like an incantation. I love the Cells, and there are several in the show. For me, they hold the attraction of forbidden places in my childhood - an erotic tug to see what is in there. They both lure and frighten me. They beckon me in and keep me out. Sometimes I can peer through an open door. Other times I look through the cage walls. In Eyes and Mirrors (1993), I confront my own voyeurism. In Choisy (1990-1993), a guillotine hangs ominously over a marble house, and I imagine it being cut in two. My body. My house. I can't help writing stories for these enigmatic spaces, in which I feel both violence and love. They are like mute, motionless narratives, and even when one doesn't know that much of the iconography is personal - the house is a model of the Bourgeois family house in Choisy, the tapestries in Spider recall the restoration work of Josephine - its intimacy is palpable. And while the artist makes use of found objects - beds, chairs, spools, perfume bottles, keys - their placement and proximity to sculptures of body parts or abstract forms create an atmosphere of only partial legibility and turn the Cells into machines of metaphorical association and recollection for the viewer. I clutch at the fragments of my early memories through the familiar architecture of my childhood house, which allows me to locate my experience in space. Without that frame, the memories are suspended in emptiness. But memories change, too. Each time we remember an event, the present tinges the past, which is always also imaginary. The Cells give us enchanted access to that fragile topos where memory and fantasy merge.

The most recent pieces in the show are made of fabric: more Bourgeoisian bodies, many of them injured, some of them unhoused or suspended. The rooms have vanished. One of the bed partners in the headless pair of Couple IV (2001-2002) wears a prosthetic leg. The Three Horizontals (1998), mounted one above the other like diminishing versions of the same person, are amputees. Their soft anatomies appear to have been torn and mended. The aching expression on the face of Rejection (2001-2002) makes me want to reach into the box, take out the poor head, and cradle it in my arms. I know that these sewn, scarred figures are disturbing, but for me they are also among the most beautiful and compassionate works that Bourgeois has made. They are dolls of loss and mortality. I am looking at myself. I am looking at all of us. The artist brings back the Arch of Hysteria (2000), this time as a woman. She hangs in the air, her wounds stitched up but her body alive in its shallow arc.

Louise Bourgeois is old, but the vigour of her imagination is clearly ageless. She once said that her sculpture is her body. If I could choose one work for her, I would pick Seven in Bed (2001), a late piece of manic joy - sweet, erotic, and funny. But neither I, nor the artist, can choose. The body of Louise Bourgeois is multiple and potent. It borrows from and transforms the vocabularies of modern art. It is feminine and masculine, terrified and bold, soft and hard. It speaks in the language of space and form and plays with both recognition and strangeness.

In his essay for the Tate's catalogue, Robert Storr proposes an "unreading" of Bourgeois, the theoretical object. This is wise. I propose that you go to the Tate Modern and look long and hard at the work. After that, you may want to read what has been said by and about this extraordinary artist. And then, you may want to unread all of it, not excluding the words I have offered here.

Louise Bourgeois talks to author AM Homes

AM Homes: Looking back at your career, what surprises you most?

Louise Bourgeois: That I was so persistent.

AMH: What does it mean to you to be "recognised" by the art world and the public?

LB: It allows you opportunities.

AMH: When you think about this retrospective, what do you hope it accomplishes?

LB: That people will understand me.

AMH: What gives you joy?

LB: To do my work.

AMH: What concerns you most these days?

LB: To be understood.

AMH: What do you look to for inspiration?

LB: Through my interaction with other people.

AMH: How would you describe the evolution of your work?

LB: I understand myself better and better.

AMH: What are your biggest sources of inspiration?

LB: I want people to like me.

AMH: What are you a fan of? (ie books/television/film/art)

LB:
I don't watch TV. I like friends coming over to read to me. I'm very interested in a new book on Duchamp, since I knew him, by Bernard Marcade.

AMH:
You have outlived and out-produced so many artists. What were the key moments in your life - moments that prompted transformation, or shifts in the work you made? For instance, meetings or conversations you had with other artists or new materials you had access to?

LB:
I was a "runaway girl". I married an American and moved to New York. I'm not sure I would have been an artist if I had remained in France. In terms of my work, the shift in the forms is caused by new problems that I encounter with people and the fact that I like to please different people.

AMH: What makes you feel you've had a good day?

LB: I've said everything I wanted to say.

Women artists and writers on Bourgeois's legacy

AM Homes

I often tell my daughter stories to help her fall asleep - stories of imagined adventures that she and her dog might have - but the other night I started to tell her a story about her going to visit a great artist: Louise Bourgeois. My daughter, instantly sensing that this story had more substance than the others, sat up. "Is she real?" she asked. "Very real, and very old," I said, and went on to tell the story of how Louise had spent many years creating enormously inventive sculptures working with all kinds of materials, fabric and stone and metal, and how her work was all about the world she lived in and the experiences she had, and how one day my daughter would go to her studio, and together they would draw. My daughter found the story very exciting. "When can we go?" she asked. "Soon," I said, "very soon." And somehow I am thinking that I had better organise that visit as soon as possible. And that as much as my daughter is waiting to meet the master, so too is the master awaiting the child.

Cornelia Parker

I don't think she has been an influence on my work, but she has been an inspirational figure. She is somebody who became recognised later on in life and is going from strength to strength. She is uncompromising. She broke through the glass ceiling as a woman artist of her generation. Now there are numerous leading female artists. Louise had more battling to do. She is hugely important. There's a kind of bravery in her work. I saw some of her recent work at the Venice Biennale; it is the drawing that really does it for me.

Germaine Greer

Louise Bourgeois is a truly extraordinary artist. From her emergence in the 1960s, no one has known quite what to say about her. She is as obsessed by the condition of women as any feminist; she is also fascinated by the paradoxes of gender. Her obsession with women begins as men's obsession. She is the bad girl, the runaway girl, who has stolen a penis and run away with it under her arm, but it is not a glorious, towering phallus. It is a flaccid penis, incarnation of

the grotesque, bulging, drooping and sagging, like a breast. If her work reminds us of anyone, besides the indigenous artists all over the world who rework her body-painting motifs and totemic objects, it is, oddly enough, the masculine magniloquence of Rodin. Bourgeois makes the anxiety that quivers in Rodin's reassembled body casts appalling and explicit. The result is a kind of power that has never been seen in any woman's work before.

Kiki Smith

Louise Bourgeois is one of our greatest living artists in America. She has lived through many periods of art and has the resource of language in her work, which makes it highly resonant and complex. She is an extremely intelligent and astute artist, both in talking about her work and talking through the personal while maintaining a formal, abstract language. She is able to move very fluidly between representational and non-representational imagery. My biggest connection to her work is through her prints: I am an enormous admirer of the economy in her printmaking, particularly her engraving. She certainly influences my art; her precedent opened up an enormous amount of space for other artists.

Roni Horn

I would like to say only this: if name is destiny, Louise Bourgeois is an oxymoron.

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Louise Bourgeois is at Tate Modern, London (020-7887 8888), from Thursday until January 20. Louise Bourgeois: New Work is at Hauser & Worth Colnaghi, London (020-7287 2300), from Wednesday until November 17