

CHEIM & READ MODERN PAINTERS

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REVIEWS



LOUISE BOURGEOIS, *ARCH OF HYSTERIA*, 1993. BRONZE, 32 X 40 X 23 IN. COURTESY CHEIM & READ, NEW YORK, GALERIE KARSTEN GREVE, PARIS, AND HAUSER & WIRTH, LONDON.

Europe

LONDON

LOUISE BOURGEOIS

TATE MODERN AND HAUSER & WIRTH AT COLNAGHI

Seven years ago, Louise Bourgeois was the first artist invited to make an installation for Tate Modern's vast, 100-foot-high Turbine Hall. Undaunted, she built three steel towers (collectively titled *I Do, I Undo, and I Redo*) reached by spiral staircases that led to hidden chambers where sculptures were sequestered, as though to keep them safe from prying eyes. Peering into these cells felt like an act of trespass—you became a Peeping Tom ogling someone else's secrets. In the first major survey of Bourgeois's work in the UK, however, there are no games of hide-and-seek: playful stratagems have been sacrificed on the altar of high seriousness. This touring retrospective is likely to be the last in Bourgeois's lifetime, and it seems designed to confirm her place in history.

Establishing her as a colossus straddling two centuries is one thing, but faithfully reflecting a career that, over 70 years, has given rise to thousands of artworks—a seemingly endless stream of drawings, paintings, prints, embroideries, sculptures, installations, and large-scale public works—is another. Foraging continually through memories of her childhood in France, of her long-suffering mother and philandering father (whose mistress was installed in the house as his daughter's governess), Bourgeois returns again and again to such themes as love, sex, gender, motherhood, and the family. Her propensity for revisiting the same topics and for slipping into the

role of an angry child makes Bourgeois's career seem to spiral back on itself and, in so doing, warp one's sense of time.

Take, for example, *Do Not Abandon Me*, a tiny sculpture of a mother and newborn infant crudely stitched together from scraps of pink cloth. Made in 1999, when Bourgeois was 87, it addresses her fear of abandonment. "I want tears for having been born," she had written nine years earlier. "To be born is to be ejected. To be abandoned..." Identification with the infant, therefore, seems on the cards, but as a mother Bourgeois must surely empathize with the woman who, at the vulnerable moment of giving birth, fears her lover's rejection and even anticipates her child turning its back on her. Such ambiguities transform this apparently simple sculpture into something rather more complex, an exploration of reciprocity—of giving as a form of emotional blackmail—and also of the way the child inhabits the adult.

Scruffy little sculptures like this are not readily associated with greatness, though. Nor are the obsessive scribbles with which Bourgeois fills her insomniac hours and which perform a crucial role in dredging up images from her unconscious. For this show, such primal outpourings have been sidelined in favor of a handful of key works from each decade, displayed as a neat chronology that cuts a swath through her meanderings to create the impression of a clear linear development.

But her oeuvre's withstanding of such radical surgery attests that Bourgeois has produced some of the most iconic and troubling works of the past 70 years. The show opens with "Femme Maison" (House Woman, or Housewife; 1945-47), a series of paintings of a woman whose head is trapped inside a house, as though her intellect has been stifled by domesticity. *Arch of Hysteria* (1993), a headless bronze cast of a slender male, hangs from the ceiling by an umbilical thread, like a human sacrifice,

athletic yet vulnerable. Then come such installations as *Red Room (Parents)* (1994), an enclosure made from old doors, furnished like a bedroom with stark formality, to evoke the tensions and loneliness endured within an adulterous marriage.

Standing outside Tate Modern is a giant bronze, steel, and marble spider: *Maman* (1999) is a tribute to the artist's mother, who, as a tapestry restorer, was adept at spinning and weaving. Bourgeois describes her as her best friend, but the sculpture suggests more ambivalent feelings, given that spiders are notorious for devouring their mates and drinking the blood of their prey. The show ends with a cabinet of curiosities—small pieces grouped together according to recurring themes, regardless of medium or chronology. A whiff of the creative clutter with which the artist surrounds herself, it provides a much-needed antidote to the tidiness of previous rooms.

Endeavoring to enshrine Bourgeois's art in the canon, this retrospective loses sight of the process of making the work and of the wise and witty woman who produces it. Miraculously, though, the 96-year-old is still keeping us on our toes. Across town at Hauser & Wirth at Colnaghi, painted bronze casts of her clothes—made in the last few months—stood sentinel like her "Personages" of the '40s and '50s. Defying gravity, they seem like self-portraits, declaring that Louise Bourgeois is still very much alive and as prolific as ever. It is much too soon to consign her to history. —SARAH KENT