

CHEIM & READ

The Washington Post

'Louise Bourgeois': Transforming Pain Into Art

By Michael O' Sullivan

Friday, February 27, 2009



Louise Bourgeois -- the French-born, New York-based artist whose sculpture is the subject of a thoughtful and thorough retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden -- turned 97 this past Christmas. She doesn't like to travel, but she still gets to the studio.

At an age when many are seeking, or have long since achieved, psychological closure, sealing up the wounds of the past, the artist can't seem to stop picking at some pretty old scabs. Her father, for instance, slept with a household employee over a period of 10 years beginning when the artist was 11, leading to a sense of double betrayal: first by her father; and second by the young woman, who was only six years older than Bourgeois and considered a friend.

This was 1922 to 1932. In 1974, Bourgeois made a sculptural installation piece called "The Destruction of the Father," in which she visualized butchering her father's body (he died in 1951) into chunks of meat. Bathed in theatrical red lighting, that latex-and-plaster diorama is included in the show. It's grisly but also makes you think some kid went a little crazy with the Play-Doh.

So how exactly does Bourgeois expect her scars to heal when she won't leave them alone? The answer is: She doesn't. She'd much rather make art from them.

"Louise Bourgeois" covers a career of more than 60 years, from the mid-1940s to 2008. It takes up all of the museum's second floor and part of the outdoor plaza, where a 27-foot-wide bronze spider from one of the artist's most iconic series of works (you'll find another one in the National Gallery of Art's Sculpture Garden) guards the front door.

There's a world of pain on display here. Browse through the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, which is written like a glossary of symptoms and source material, and you'll find such alphabetized entries as "Abandonment," "Aggression," "Agoraphobia," "Anger" and "Anxiety." And that's just the A's. There are also entries on "Calm," "Dreams," "Music" and "Reparation."

Nothing about Bourgeois's art, it seems, is straightforward or easy.

In that abecedarian spirit, we hereby offer our own ABCs: a primer that will serve as an introduction to a few of the big ideas you'll encounter in Bourgeois' art.

A IS FOR AMBIVALENCE

Bourgeois loves ambiguity.

As curator Valerie Fletcher puts it, the artist is unusually comfortable with things that are "labile." That is to say, things whose meaning or interpretation are in a constant state of flux.

Take that jungle-gym-size "Crouching Spider" by the museum entrance. For most of us, an arachnid of that size comes across as a little, well, creepy. Not to Bourgeois. She associates the creature's web-spinning ability with her own mother's work as a weaver in the family tapestry restoration business, insisting that the image of a giant spider isn't something nightmarish at all but a nurturing maternal figure.

So far so good. She has also spoken of how spiders remind her -- stay with me now -- of prostitutes. Just like spiders, see, women of the night are furtive and delicate, according to Bourgeois.

So what do prostitutes have to do with motherhood? In the catalogue, Bourgeois tells of an incident that took place in the 1950s in New York, where she had moved with her husband. She and her father, who was visiting from France, were out on the town late one night when the two encountered a group of streetwalkers. Bourgeois would later recall -- after her father very publicly evaluated the women's sexual desirability -- that she felt a sense of identification with the women.

But only the ones who, like her mother, had been rejected by her famously philandering father as unworthy of his interest.

B IS FOR BAROQUE

In 2006, the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore installed several Bourgeois sculptures next to art from the permanent collection, including European paintings from the Baroque period. One big surprise of that show was just how well the contemporary pieces held up against the old stuff.

But that isn't what curator Fletcher means when she says that Bourgeois manifests a distinctly baroque, or richly convoluted, sensibility. She's talking about a degree of psychological complexity, even contradiction, that belies the work's outward simplicity.

One good example of that, Fletcher says, is "Femme Couteau" ("Knife Woman" in French). Nothing baroque about it, at first glance. It's basically a rag doll, one of a number of similarly crude cloth figures in the show, except this one depicts a naked, headless woman with no arms and only one leg. Also, coming out of her chest, there's a handle with a knife attached. A piece about self-mutilation, you might think.

Think again.

The dismembered torso is no victim, as Bourgeois would have it. Her helplessness? It's all in her head -- or, rather, all in your head. Take another look at that knife. It's not turned against the woman, but part of her, transforming her into a kind of human Swiss Army knife. "I am knife woman, hear me roar," Bourgeois seems to say.

C IS FOR CELL

Five works in the show come from a series of roomlike installations Bourgeois made in the 1990s, when she was in her 80s. Called cells, they reveal the artist at the peak of her imaginative powers. Four are set in cages and contain allusions to some of the artist's favorite themes. A giant spider looms over one. Another features a dollhouse-size model, in carved marble, of one of the homes Bourgeois lived in as a child and teenager in France. Look up. A guillotine hangs over it.

One of the most elegant and evocative is "Cell (Twelve Oval Mirrors)." That piece, which features 12 primitive chairs arranged around a ring of 12 swiveling mirrors, is meant to be entered. At the center of the cell are two more chairs facing each other. Sit wherever you like, you'll see not only whoever is in the other chairs but also your own reflection, staring back at you. There is no escape.

So?

For Bourgeois, the choice of the word "cell" is deliberate, calling to mind a prison. The artist has suggested that all houses are both sanctuaries and jails, and the image of a house is a recurrent one in her work.

Here, though, there's no sense of sanctuary or security. Instead, the mirrors are like the bars of a penitentiary. Sitting in it -- or on the outside of it -- you get a little sense of what it must be like to be Louise Bourgeois, sentenced to examine herself for the rest of her life, and to turn it into art.

Louise Bourgeois Through May 17 at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Independence Avenue and Seventh Street SW (Metro: L'Enfant Plaza) Contact: 202-633-1000. <http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu>. Hours: Daily 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Price: Free Programs: Today at 12:30 p.m., local artist Cara Ober will give a free gallery talk. Additional 12:30 gallery talks are scheduled for April 10, 24 and May 15. On March 18 at 1 p.m., the museum will screen the documentary "Louise Bourgeois: The Spider, the Mistress and the Tangerine." On April 16 at 7 p.m., curator Valerie Fletcher will discuss the artist's work in the lecture "The Past as Present." All programs are free.