

Louise Bourgeois
Delicate Strength



At the age of 96, Louise Bourgeois remains a complex and compelling figure in contemporary art. With works ranging from 30-foot monumental bronze sculpture to delicately abstracted color-pencil drawings, Bourgeois has ensured her status as both an artistic maverick and unique force in the art world. Distinctive in both form and content, Bourgeois' work eludes definition by chronological or stylistic typologies. Bourgeois lived and worked through Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Modernism, and Minimalism; and came to true fame and notoriety in the late 1960's with the feminist art movement.

Born and raised in Paris, Bourgeois assisted her parents in a family-owned tapestry business. She utilized her early artistic abilities drawing missing sections of tapestries to be repaired. Bourgeois began her formal art career after visiting the studio of Constantin Brancusi, a "cult figure of the Parisian avant-garde" (Cooke). She then became studio assistant to Spanish Surrealist painter and sculptor Joan Miró (1893-1983), and subsequently assisted French Cubist painter Fernand Leger (1881-1955).

Raised in an erudite and disciplined household, her father was careful to instill in the young Bourgeois the importance of education and family values. These lessons were muddled, however, by his ongoing love affair with the family governess who resided with the family. This precarious emotional situation ultimately drove Bourgeois to abandon art, which she associated with her family, and leave her home—a place she referred to as a "nest of nuts"—to study math at The University of Paris-Sorbonne.

In 1938, Bourgeois married American art historian Robert Goldwater and moved to New York. It was in the United States that she returned to making art, with her first exhibition of paintings at Bertha Shaefer Gallery in 1945, followed by her first exhibition of sculpture at Peridot Gallery in 1949. Although geographically far from her family and its charged emotional dynamic, her confusion, turmoil, and conflict remained—and continue to be—central to her work and her preoccupations.

Bourgeois' art is a precarious balance of strength and aggression with delicacy and tenderness. In material and in content, Bourgeois punishes her subjects with disembodiment, decapitation, and mutilation while simultaneously mending, stitching, and healing these broken figures. They represent the tortured human spirit, the exposure of its vulnerability and the potential for its salvation. Bourgeois frequently uses knives and needles in her work—the balance of the two dangerous objects is an apt metaphor. The knife wounds, the needle mends. "When I was growing up, all the women in my house were using needles. I have always had a fascination with the needle, the magic

power of the needle. The needle is used to repair the damage. It's a claim to forgiveness.” (McKeith)

Femme Couteau (2002) is an example of the employment of fragility, dismemberment, and ambiguity in Bourgeois' work. In this artwork, the reclining female form is made of pink fabric, steel, and wood. Mummy-like, delicate, and stitched together, the body is missing arms, a leg, and a head. An enormous butcher knife protrudes from the center of her throat. Obviously a symbol for anguish, the *femme* is also hauntingly still, resolved, steady. It is as though the worst has happened—she is maimed and mutilated—yet still she exists to bear weight of the knife with the fragile strength of her patched-cloth body.

The installation *Oedipus* (2003) consists of an installation of ten small figures in different stages of disembodiment. This piece represents the Greek myth of Oedipus, who unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. Bourgeois's ten pink-toned figures reveal “the brutal nature of the tale and the pained emotion within it. Bourgeois seems to empathize with her subject instinctively.” (Day) Integral to Sigmund Freud's classic psychoanalytical theory is the notion that all humans go through an oedipal stage of psychosexual development. According to Freudian conjecture, all children at one point regard their father as adversary and competitor for the exclusive love of their mother. The use of both mythology and Freudian psychoanalysis is crucial to Bourgeois' work—in her own analysis of her childhood traumas as well in the universality of her themes.

Louise Bourgeois' complexity, psychological explorations, and unique use of materials abound in the room-size installation *Destruction of the Father* (1974). The piece is a flesh-toned installation in a soft and womb-like room. Comprised of plaster, latex, wood, fabric and red light, *Destruction of the Father* was the first piece in which she used soft materials on a large scale. Upon entering the installation, the viewer stands in the aftermath of a crime. Set in a stylized dining room (with the dual impact of a bedroom), the abstract blob-like children of an overbearing father have rebelled, murdered, and eaten him. Bourgeois describes the father:

...telling the captive audience how great he is, all the wonderful things he did, all the bad people he put down today. But this goes on day after day. There is tragedy in the air. Once too often he has said his piece. He is unbearably dominating although probably he does not realize it himself. A kind of resentment grows and one day my brother and I decided, 'the time has come!' We grabbed him, laid him on the table and with our knives dissected him. We took him apart and dismembered him, we cut off his penis. And he became food. We ate him up... he was liquidated the same way he liquidated the children.

Stemming from biographical and psychological explorations, *Destruction of the Father* is a child's revenge for her father's incessant insult and ridicule. It is also, however, a catharsis and forgiveness for the years of torment—Bourgeois frequently discusses her feelings of affection, admiration, and nostalgia for her father. This piece is also an exploration and subversion of the ancient Roman myth of Saturn, in which Saturn

is told that one day one of his mighty sons will overthrow him. To ensure that the prediction does not come to fruition, Saturn eats each of his children upon their birth. Analogous to the legend, Bourgeois describes her father's systematic destruction of each of his own children's characters—consuming their strength and confidence. *Destruction of the Father* re-invents the legend and empowers her siblings. They overpower the father and are thus reborn. Turning the tide on the domineering father, they act out the ultimate revenge.

Bourgeois not only bestows upon herself and her siblings the power to avenge her father's wrongdoings, she also removes all evidence of the myth's violence from her work. In the total absence of blood, gore, and cadavers, Bourgeois places her revised myth in a feminine, fleshy, protective environment. As ironically described in 1998 when the piece was included in the Sao Paulo Biennial, "emotionally seduced and abandoned by her father, and jealous of his love and his arbitrary power over her, she envisions in *Destruction of the Father* a sardonic best of all possible worlds in which one can have one's father and eat him too." (Sao Paulo Biennial)

One of Bourgeois' most iconic images is that of the spider, is an apt icon for an artist raised among the industry of weaving. Bourgeois' spiders range from miniscule to monumental, and with each she delves into the spider's mythology and complex symbolism. Signifying danger, femininity, skill, patience, and mystery; the spider's webs are nurturing, beautiful, and artistic weavings as well as deadly traps. A spider can be frightening and ominous, yet Bourgeois finds the arachnid "a nurturing thing, a creature whose web-spinning skills recall the artist's mother, a weaver." (O'Sullivan) Bourgeois frequently states that her spiders are in homage to her mother, "because my best friend was my mother, and she was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat, and useful as an *araignee* (spider). She could also defend herself, and me, by refusing to answer stupid, inquisitive, embarrassing, personal questions." (Sischy) Bourgeois' mother is domestic and "dainty," yet tough and able to defend herself and her daughter when challenged.

Maman (1999), Bourgeois' largest spider, towers over 30 feet tall. She protects a cage of 26 pure white marble eggs on the underside of her belly. The impact of this enormous spider is immediate—large, looming, and dangerous. Her small round body, improbably balanced on spindly legs stands over three stories tall and "conveys an almost poignant vulnerability. Like a creature escaped from a dream, or a larger-than-life embodiment of a secret childhood fear, the giant spider *Maman* casts a powerful physical and psychological shadow." (Dailey) *Maman* conjures the Greek myth of the weaver Arachne, a young woman with extraordinary skills. Smug with talent and acclaim, Arachne claimed to be better than even the weaving goddess Athena herself. Arachne challenged the goddess to a weaving competition, and the offended goddess accepted. Athena beat the mortal Arachne, and in her despair and humiliation, Arachne attempted suicide by hanging herself. Athena took pity on her and brought her back to life, but not as a human. Athena transformed Arachne into a spider, thus sentencing her and her descendants to forever hang and be great weavers—in the deadly, feminine, and nimble form of the spider.

Oedipus, Destruction of the Father, and Maman all demonstrate Bourgeois' reach from ancient to contemporary—distilling age-old tales into nearly abstracted forms that are wholly her own. In the interplay of myth and life, biography and universality, Bourgeois' work remains both timeless and extremely modern. While using autobiographical anecdotes and personal memories as a source of inspiration, Bourgeois transcends the specificity of her childhood memories into universal themes that reach the viewer in disturbing, shocking, and extremely visceral ways. Bourgeois' work is an exploration of the self and her own consciousness. “In its evocation of the psyche, her work is both universal and deeply personal.” (Dailey) She delves into personal biography and ancient myth, presenting work that is wholly unique in concept, presentation, and impact.

Bourgeois' intensely personal explorations gained broader political significance in the 1970's due to the considerations and preoccupations of the feminist era in which she was working. Her work “began to attract considerable attention during the 1970's with the rise of feminism and the widespread reaction against Modernism.” (Harrison). In 1980, Bourgeois was given the *Achievement in Visual Arts Award* by the Women's Caucus for the Arts. When the award was announced, the members eulogized, “you say in form what most of us are afraid to say in any way. Your sculpture defies styles and movements and returns to the sources of art—to the cultural expression of communal belief and emotion.” (Wye, 110)

In dealing with women's issues, especially those of the female body and its sexuality, Bourgeois fit into the feminist rhetoric. When feminist art critic and writer Lucy Lippard enumerated the standards by which to assess “women's art” in 1973, Bourgeois's art met nearly all of Lippard's stipulations:

a uniform density, or overall texture, often sensuously tactile and repetitive or detailed to the point of obsession; the preponderance of circular forms, central focus, inner space (sometimes contradicting the first aspect); a ubiquitous linear ‘bag’ or parabolic form that turns in on itself; layers, strata, or veils, and indefinable looseness of handling; windows; autobiographical content; animals; flowers; a certain kind of fragmentation; a new fondness for the pinks and pastels and ephemeral cloud colors (Lippard).

Although Bourgeois' work clearly fit the feminist aesthetic of Lippard and other artists, writers, and critics, Bourgeois remained independent of this singular interpretation. Feminist professor and art historian Linda Nochlin elucidates why an artist, though working within the feminist classification, cannot not be so easily defined: “the mere choice of a certain realm of subject matter, or the restriction to certain subjects, is not to be equated with a style, much less with some sort of quintessentially feminine style.” (Nochlin). Style, medium, and subject matter are inextricably linked for Bourgeois, and incorporating such varied materials as fabric, latex, and tapestry with sculptural mediums such as steel, marble, and bronze; Bourgeois challenges both the

traditional concepts of “women’s work” and the “masculine” medium of sculpture. “Ms. Bourgeois takes great pleasure in her materials, which in themselves can become an expression of the sense of contradiction she strives for. Often she uses materials against themselves—making stone soft and rubber hard.” (Kimmelman)

In an interview in 1998 with art critic and writer Donald Kuspit, Bourgeois said, “My feminism expresses itself in an intense interest in what women do. But I’m a complete loner. It doesn’t help me to associate with people; it really doesn’t help me. What helps me is to realize my own disabilities and expose them.” (Harrison). Bourgeois’ interest is in creating art, expressing herself, and exploring her personal mythology, and finding connection and recognition within her audience. Bourgeois examines herself, her history, and consequently the world in which she lives with unapologetic, mesmerizing, and wrenching work. Her work is a balance of extremes—yin and yang—primal opposing but complementary principles. Her work represents harshness and forgiveness; masculinity and femininity; indictment and absolution. Extremes are integral to her work, as is life’s precarious balance—a 30-foot spider on impossibly fragile legs.

In 1975, Lucy Lippard touched on Bourgeois’ resolve, hardships, and strength in stating that “despite her apparent fragility... (she) survived almost 40 years of discrimination, struggle, intermittent success and neglect in New York’s gladiatorial art arenas. The tensions which make her work unique are forged between just those poles of tenacity and vulnerability” (Lippard) The first female artist to have a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1967), Bourgeois surpassed the status of a highly significant and influential “female” artist to become considered one of the most challenging, enigmatic, and influential forces in the contemporary art world today. As Bourgeois’ contemporary, sculptor Louise Nevelson stated in 1980, “True strength is delicate. My whole life is in it.” (Smith)

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