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ENCLAVE REVIEW

Louise Bourgeois

Ed Krčma

On 31 May 2010, Louise Bourgeois, one of the most inventive and influential artists of the last century, died in New York at the age of 98. While she had waited a long time for due recognition as an artist, the formal rigour and affective potency of Bourgeois' work eventually served to establish her as a crucial model for innumerable artists seeking to explore the relationship between art and psychic life.

Born in Paris on Christmas Day 1911, Bourgeois' childhood was notoriously troubled, and many (not least the artist herself) have viewed her art as a working through of familial conflicts and dramas. Her father's repeated infidelities and tyrannical domination of the household provided the narrative support for her disturbing tableau, *The Destruction of the Father* (1974): 'What frightened me was that at the dinner table, my father would go on and on, showing off, aggrandizing himself. And the more he showed off, the smaller we felt. Suddenly there was a terrific tension, and we grabbed him – my brother, my sister, my mother – the three of us grabbed him and pulled him onto the table and pulled his legs and arms apart – dismembered him'. By contrast, Bourgeois'

mother Joséphine, who repaired and sold medieval and Renaissance tapestries for a living, was a figure of both identification and admiration; she was, Bourgeois wrote in 1995, 'deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat, and as useful as a spider. She could also defend herself, and me'.

Growing up in Surrealist Paris in the 1920s and '30s, Bourgeois eventually left France for New York in 1938 with the man she had recently married, the art historian Robert Goldwater. Her first solo exhibition took place in New York in 1945, and she continued to exhibit work throughout the late-1940s and early '50s. After 1953, however, she did not exhibit alone again for 11 years. During the 1960s Bourgeois experimented with organic forms and unstable materials such as latex and rubber. She showed this new work at the Stable Gallery in 1964, and again as part of Lucy Lippard's important 1966 exhibition, *Eccentric Abstraction*. For Lippard, the work she presented offered an alternative to 'dead-set Minimalism', revealing a kind of excessive materiality that exposed Minimalism's underbelly – all the sexuality, contingency and formlessness that the latter sought to repress, or so it then seemed. Bourgeois, together with younger artists such as Eva Hesse and Yayoi Kusama, became extremely important in developing a sculptural language that could insistently figure the body – its part objects, its drives, its convulsions – without straightforwardly illustrating or depicting it. Bourgeois' cloth and latex sculpture *Le Regard* (1966), for example, offers a model of seeing that is both subject to and driven on by unconscious forces of desire and aggression.

Active in various ways within the feminist movement during the 1970s, and exhibiting her sculptures extensively towards the end of the decade, Bourgeois' status as a major international artist was confirmed when, in 1982, she became the first woman to be given a retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Both the subversive potential of Bourgeois' work and her charismatic persona were emblemized in Robert Mapplethorpe's famous portrait of the artist carrying her phallic sculpture *Fillette* under her arm, and wearing a broad, irreverent grin on her face. The reverberations of that laughter, directed so brilliantly against various forms of power and authority, are still being felt today. Indeed, scholars such as Mignon Nixon have demonstrated the importance of Bourgeois' artistic matrilineage for contemporary practitioners, exposure to her work having been formative for artists such as Kiki Smith, Rachel Whiteread and Dorothy Cross, for example.

In 1989, and at the age of 77 it is worth remembering, Bourgeois began to produce the kind of large-scale sculptural installations for which she would become best known. Throughout the '90s she explored the potential of these charged environments – the *Cells* – which draw the viewer into psychologically intense scenarios of trauma and fantasy. In her *Red Rooms* (1994), for example, laden memories seem to have been directly inscribed into its weathered surfaces; the affective intensity of familial bonds embodied in its arresting colour; fearful and fantasized narratives

distilled into a few fetish objects and symbols; and the heavy materials of inner life deposited into various smokey vessels.

Such is the scope of Bourgeois' achievement that a whole history of art since Surrealism could be told through her work, a claim that cannot be made for many artists.

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