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Outing the Inside

David Salle

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Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait
an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, September 24, 2017–January 28, 2018
Catalog of the exhibition by Deborah Wye. MoMA, 248 pp., $55.00

Intimate Geometries: The Art and Life of Louise Bourgeois
by Robert Storr
Monacelli, 828 pp., $150.00

After we're done shaking our heads at what they had to endure, we project onto our long-lived women artists a mystique that's as old as history—that of the sorceress or the good witch. These women have a secret. We want them to tell us everything, *but maybe they don't want to.* If we can gain access to their magical workshop, squeezing through a narrow corridor to find the door, we might be privy to some important mysteries. The veils will be unwound, and finally we will look life in the face and weep for all that was lost to get us here.

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Louise Bourgeois: Femme*, 2006*

In her long life, Louise Bourgeois experienced both extremes of the female artist story—marginalization, even invisibility early on, and decades later a fierce and passionate following by younger artists and curators. Her status was based on an independence from fashion, and on calling attention to emotions that most people prefer to keep hidden: shame, disgust, fear of abandonment, jealousy, anger. Occasionally, joy or wonder would surface, like a break in the clouds. But Bourgeois was an artist, not a therapist. Her imagination was tied to forms, and how to make them expressive. Her gift was to represent inchoate and hard-to-grasp feelings in ways that seem direct and unfiltered.

Deborah Wye, the Museum of Modern Art's chief curator emerita of prints and illustrated books, has put together an elegant and revealing exhibition of Bourgeois's graphic work, prints, and printed books—some 265 images, made with a wide variety of techniques, all from the museum's extensive holdings, along with related drawings, early paintings, and a small selection of sculptures that show their reciprocity with the drawn forms. Wye, who organized the first Bourgeois retrospective at MoMA in 1982, as well as a survey of Bourgeois's drawings in 1994, has devoted much of her professional life to the artist and knew her well, and this show must be something of a victory lap for

her.

On first impression, the books and other works on paper seen against the museum's dove-gray or Venetian red walls are absorbing; they pull you in. But to call it a print show would be a little misleading. Bourgeois was forever altering her work, making additions and adjustments to printing proofs as they occurred to her in the moment, and the majority of the prints in the exhibition exist in several different states, or stages of development. They are often added to, painted, or drawn on—sometimes just a dot of color, other times reimagined completely. What we are really looking at are paintings on paper, which take as their starting point a printed image as a first layer.

Over the course of her marathon career, Bourgeois worked in a wide range of mediums and formats, from engravings just five inches tall to sculptural assemblages sprawling across vast museum spaces. For a long period in the 1950s, she was depressed and creatively blocked, and began long-term psychoanalysis, which seems to have helped. She emerged from her slump as a protean workaholic from whose hand issued warehouses full of materially and emotionally diverse stuff. Even within this focused exhibition we can see the range of Bourgeois's sensibility, from intimate visual diarist to stage designer manqué, intent on dominating the museum experience with her theatrical mise-en-scènes.

There's a disarming prelude as you enter the show: a wall of thirty-six smallish images, collectively titled *The Fragile* (2007), that highlights the playful side of Bourgeois's graphic art. Most are economical line drawings, one image to a sheet, some augmented with washes of color. There are two motifs: spiders and their webs, and women with greatly enlarged, pendulous breasts. The spiders have human faces, and the heads of the women, all tiny in proportion to their bodies, have a grinning countenance such as a child might draw. One drawing shows the rudimentary profile of a woman's face, with a high-bridged nose and thin lips, whom we recognize as the artist herself. This head has no eyes, perhaps because they're no longer needed.

These drawings are like sophisticated cartoons minus the captions; you can imagine some of them printed on cocktail napkins; others would make striking tattoos. In addition to visual humor, the suite shows off Bourgeois's easy mastery of contour drawing, shape, and placement. She understood the power of white space, how images and marks could be moved around the page for effect, and how sometimes making an image smaller gives it a louder voice. Interestingly, almost all of her images are drawn from a full frontal view, head-on, like specimens pressed onto glass. There are few three-quarter views of anything, perhaps because that would imply a world too local, too real, instead of the symbolic range that is her realm.

Once inside the main galleries, the exhibition begins with several illustrated books and single prints from 1946 to 1949, all of which still look fresh today. Bourgeois was from the start a high-level illustrator and book designer, and the overall tone of these engravings, which feature motifs of buildings—towers or chimneys for the most part—combined with women's bodies or parts of bodies, is one of earnest modernism; she is already adept at placing her symbolic images in an emotionally suggestive pictorial space. A 1984 variation on her famous *Femme Maison* series (which originated in 1946) features a nude woman from the waist down, the top half replaced by a multistory building with archways and high windows, with the hand of one thin arm wanly waving to the upper-left corner. Printed on a ground of bright salmon pink, it remains a pungent and incisive logo of feminist art.

The space in these illustrations, together with their small size, gives us a child's-eye view of life—some of the forms loom above eye level, and the interior spaces are tightly framed and slightly claustrophobic; we see only corners, or rooms crowded with ladders going nowhere. Either there's no place to stand or one is outside, in a too-open space. The mood is chilly and gray, unsettled and unsettling. In this early phase, the artist whom Bourgeois most closely resembles in terms of tone, touch, and point of view is that other intimate fantasist and chronicler of the doomed family, Edward Gorey. The difference, of course, is that Gorey draws the monster plain, while Bourgeois only implies it.

Dispersed through the first few rooms are examples of Bourgeois's early carved and painted wood sculptures, and they are all pretty much heartbreaking in the rightness of their forms and colors. *Pillar* (1949–1950), *Figure* (1954), and *Forêt (Night Garden)* (1953) are among her best early works, made some years before she turned to more elaborate and more narrative constructions made with a variety of industrial materials. Had she remained on this earlier path, Bourgeois might

have been the three-dimensional equivalent of a deeply inner-directed artist like the painter Forrest Bess. That, however, would have meant renouncing a certain ambition to be heard.

If she wasn't interested in being that kind of sculptor, Bourgeois continued to elaborate a more intimist sensibility in her drawings. Panic, claustrophobia, frustration, helplessness, and ennui, as well as a strange fatalistic elation, were her subjects, and she went at them with a combination of intuition and design sense.

Bourgeois was a poet of transitions, and of things entering other things. She grasped the malleability of pictorial space—how to shape the warp and woof of it into a visual logic, and how to make that plasticity relate to our bodily and emotional experience. In one untitled watercolor from 2004, swollen tubular or podlike shapes appear to rend the horizontal plane of colored washes, to suggest forms both underwater and in the air. To this graphic sophistication, Bourgeois added an insistence on the specifics—physical, psychological, and social—of female experience.

This aspect of her work is all-pervasive, and manifests itself generally in biomorphism and the attention given to escutcheons and contact points, as well as certain bodily details—nipples, orifices, and other sites of exchange, points of entry and excretion, body cavities, pass-throughs—things that signify "inside-outness" generally. In all of this, Bourgeois is way out in front of the competition. Even Picasso, that cavalier rearranger and morpher of human anatomy, can only really look at the body from the outside. For Bourgeois, the inside, with all its delicacy and power, *is* the outside. She moves easily from outside to inside and back again.

Born in Paris in 1911, Bourgeois suffered more than the usual number of grievous blows to the psyche, and her inner life stayed tightly wrapped around their memory. War, illness, sexual jealousy, mental instability were all things she witnessed in her first decade, and she never forgot—or forgave—any of them. As a teenager she learned that the attractive young Englishwoman who lived with the family as a tutor was also her father's mistress, and this betrayal in particular was something she never got over. In addition, or perhaps in response, her mother was fragile and often ill, and young Louise became her companion at various spas and treatment centers; she was released from her caretaker role by her mother's death when she was twenty-one.

After the loss of her mother, and encouraged by her charming and tyrannical father, Bourgeois started a small business selling works on paper, prints, and illustrated books out of a corner of the family's tapestry workshop on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. To acquire her stock, she scoured the auction houses and book dealers, and she seems to have absorbed, almost overnight, the dominant graphic styles of the day. She had a particular affinity for Bonnard and Toulouse-Lautrec, as well as other artists who used the illustrated book form, which was then in vogue. Something about these *livres d'artiste*, as they were known—the way they combined text and pictures, and the way the image was printed from engraving or etching plates, the whole satisfying feel in the hand of beautifully made paper embossed with rectangles of finely drawn tones of gray—formed the template for how Bourgeois would think about her own art, on and off, for the rest of her life.

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Louise Bourgeois: Self Portrait*, 2007*

At age twenty-six, she met and married the American art historian Robert Goldwater, and from then on made her home in New York. It was at the Art Students League that Bourgeois made her first engravings and woodblock prints on small sheets of paper. These early works are modest but graphically sophisticated. She quickly moved on to making her own illustrated books, which combined story with image, in many ways a natural fit for the precocious beginner, who early on recognized that her own personal history was to be her creative wellspring. She also had the ability to see in a glimpse, and later recall, an image that could carry complex feelings, as in her etching *Thompson Street* (1946), which depicts a Goreyesque gloomy figure standing in a doorway; it was inspired by seeing a young prostitute in her neighborhood.

Bourgeois's work of the late 1940s and beyond looks very much like a continuation of the Surrealist sensibility. She herself

downplayed any connection to the Surrealists; she did not see herself as their legatee, possibly because she knew all the ones who had fled Europe for New York during the war. (Although there is no record of it, as a French speaker it's possible she experienced firsthand André Breton's flagrant misogyny, and that would have been reason enough to take some distance.) In the way that sometimes the full flowering of a movement only happens after everyone has gone home, Bourgeois seems, at this remove, the true heir to Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, André Masson, and Joan Miró. It's as though she uncorked the genie in their bottle.

Some of her drawings from the late 1940s look like they could have been made by Magritte, had he been able to get beyond his precious subject matter. The Surrealists' professed belief in the power of the unconscious to guide the hand seems paltry compared to hers. There is as well a strong undercurrent in her work of the shamanistic and totemic forms of Native American and other tribal art, which also greatly interested the Surrealists. One way to think about Bourgeois's art is to imagine Surrealism, that most adolescent as well as female-objectifying of art movements, retooled by a grown-up woman.

The MoMA show gives us an artist who channeled her Surrealist inclinations into a direct, improvisational way of working. Should anyone miss the more extroverted or public side of her work, the museum's atrium is home to one of Bourgeois's crowd-pleasing spiders. This one has legs of steel (all eight of them), the upper joints of which reach twenty-one feet off the floor. *Spider* (1997) differs from some of its cousins in that the space formed inside the arachnid legs is taken up by a cylindrical enclosure of steel mesh bolted to a thin steel frame, essentially a wire cage roughly fifteen feet tall and ten feet in diameter that one enters through a narrow opening. On the inside, perfume bottles, bits of bone, pendulous shapes of cast rubber, and sections of tapestry have been tied to the wire mesh, like fruit to a sukkah.

What is a graphic sensibility? It begins with a sensitivity to the material, the paper or canvas, and the point of impact, the place where the tool hits the surface, as something that stays continually alive. Think of Cy Twombly and Jean-Michel Basquiat, teacher and student, figuratively speaking. The hand that grips a piece of charcoal as it touches down on the paper is like a phonograph needle skipping lightly across a scratchy LP. With all the skips and floats and the intermittent sinking into the record's grooves, music starts to fill the air.

What are the hallmarks of Bourgeois's graphic style? She uses mostly short or medium-length lines made by pencil, engraving tool, or brush, and the marks, all moving more or less in one direction, but not rigidly so, are bundled together in loose, overlapping rows—much like a naive artist's rendering of hair, or like medical drawings of muscle fibers bunched together in long strings. These bundles accumulate to make forms, but have no mass to speak of. They take up space but don't weigh much. The repetitive, directional lines call up a number of associations, from the art of the Pacific Northwest Native Americans to Outsider Art. Bourgeois is adept at outlining shapes with a thin, skipping line, a cousin to Andy Warhol's ink-and-blotter-paper line, which is itself derived from the broken-line illustrations of Ben Shahn.

You feel that Bourgeois wants to dig down to the basic fiber of form itself en route to creating an image; it's what drawing can do, after all. A subset of the marks that she uses, especially those made with a brush and ink, have the length and start-and-stop quality of a stitch of thread or embroidery: graphic stitches, which are bundled together and become in turn the building blocks for many of her images. These include the skein or hank of hair or yarn, as well as nerve and muscle fibers, including flayed skin and tissue, which cluster, bale up, and twist, and can become in some works undulating curtains of hairlike walls, or take the form of river currents and ocean waves. The equivalency that Bourgeois draws between hair or yarn and muscle fibers or tissue is one of her principal inventions.

Hair, women's hair, is all over Bourgeois's art. It is the perfect graphic element; like water, it can go anywhere and take virtually any shape. It can flow like a river, pass through keyholes, or twist around another form, strangling it. It can take the form of a flying carpet, or be made to cover, or smother, another surface. Or it can be parted to reveal what's underneath. Hair is something to hide behind, or a memento left behind. The eroticism of hair was also a Surrealist staple, and Bourgeois makes good use of it.

One drawing—*Hair* (1948)—lays out the vocabulary that would remain in place for more than sixty years. Using a brush and ink, Bourgeois draws a female figure as two vertical columns of sacks topped by a featureless oval head, the whole

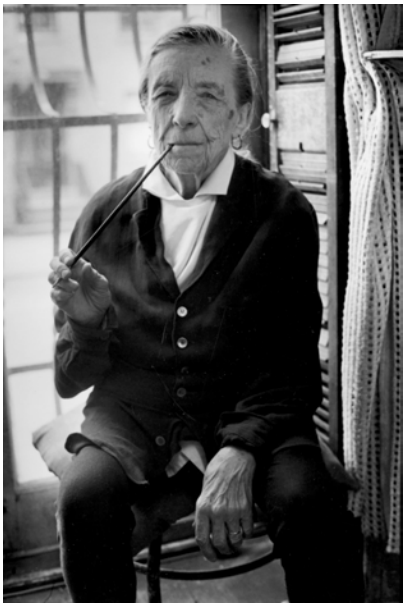
figure enveloped in a cascade of hair that flows down both sides of the body, from the top of the head almost down to the feet. The roughly almond shape of the streaming-out mass of hair that frames the pod shapes, all seamed down the middle and topped off with a little button head, give the image another, labial reading. It's like going inside Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866) and coming back out again as a doppelgänger in disguise. The detail contains the whole, like an image out of Nabokov—the world reflected in a soap bubble.

Another of Bourgeois's recurrent motifs is the protuberance, with its ready associations to bodily forms—breasts, sagging buttocks, scrota, and also tree forms, fungus of all sorts, drops of water; all the swelling, drooping, bagging forms and shapes in nature, anything dangling or hanging, any organic and even inorganic form that is subject to gravity, which is to say just about everything. Sometimes the pendula gather themselves up and reverse direction, rising up from the bottom of the garden or the ocean floor.

I can't think of anything in the canon by male artists after Leonardo that does much with the body from the inside. The way Bourgeois addressed the basic notion of the body, especially the female body, as having an inside might be her biggest legacy. One modest black-and-white print from a 1989–1990 portfolio simply titled *Anatomy* has a resonance and a poignancy far bigger than its modest size. It shows what looks like the lower section of a spinal column, with the bladelike lower ribs curving outward from the central core of bone. What makes the image arresting is the slightly up-angled point of view that gives access to a tiny opening within a recess at the bottom in the column's center, and just above, two rows of three narrow "windows," similar to those in the *Femme Maison* drawings. A directional energy leads the eye up, by implication, into and through the interior spaces of the bone, through the core of the core, so to speak, to a new realm of vulnerable body feeling. There's an intimation of the embalmer's art to it, the hook with a wad of cotton inserted deep into the body to stop fluids from leaking.

The feeling of "up inside and through the middle" of the body is present in other works such as *Torso, Self-Portrait* (1963–1964) and *Janus Fleurie* (1968), as well as some of the large etchings, *My Inner Life* (2008) and *Just Like Me* (2007). These depict the body reduced to pods and tubes coiled around a central axis. For once, "gut-wrenching" is not a figure of speech. The artist digs deep within herself, imagines her own anatomy breaking into pieces. She shows us the results of her own autopsy.

Aided by a small team of assistants and printers, Bourgeois produced in her last years two separate suites of large soft-ground etchings, both remarkable in their own way. In the first suite, the sixty-inch-tall vertical sheets allow Bourgeois to play out on a much larger scale the reciprocity between plant forms and those of the body. In one print, titled *Swelling* (2007–2008), in which three different states, one with added color, are represented, Bourgeois manages to create the impression that a stack of forms—part beanstalk, part vertebrae, part uterus or kidneys—has burst upward, clearing the concentric waves of either water or soil or primordial muck at the bottom half of the image. Inside the trunk of the rising, swollen column are smaller pod shapes, like seeds, rock babies, or jellybeans. "Swelling," a verb seldom associated with museum art, is a wonderful title, and the kinesthetic feeling of an organism thrusting upward is palpable, and also graphically tight.



Dominique Nabokov

Louise Bourgeois, New York City, June 1997

The last major prints Bourgeois completed are in a horizontal format sixty inches wide and feature a repeated motif of two loosely braided linear or tubular forms that divide the rectangle diagonally from lower left to upper right. Across fourteen separate sheets, she added additional imagery and marks in pencil, watercolor, and gouache (mostly red) that pulse and spread and course across the length of the paper. Free and loose, with great directional energy, the prints, collectively titled *à l'Infini* (2008), are possibly Bourgeois's most ebullient works.

Other late works, like the tapestry- and needlepoint-covered life-size heads from 2002, made when Bourgeois was ninety-one, achieve that sweet spot somewhere between the decorative and the disturbing, but leaning toward the latter. They

resemble masks worn by Mexican wrestlers or S&M gear, but with patterns borrowed from rugs that look, at that scale, like Rorschach tests. The first time I saw a group of them in a museum vitrine, in that instant before you recognize the familiar inside the new, I let out an audible *What the fuck?*

In Robert Storr's *Intimate Geometries: The Art and Life of Louise Bourgeois*, scholarship, biography, partisan argument, and subjective interpretation are all intertwined. The book was more than twenty years in the writing, and Storr's involvement with Bourgeois goes back even further. He was deeply attracted to her as a visionary: as difficult as she could sometimes be, she embodied his ideal of an authentic artist.

A painter himself, as well as a former senior curator in MoMA's Department of Painting and Sculpture, Storr is well grounded in the physical realities of how works of art are actually made. His descriptions of Bourgeois's drawing tropes—what they are, how they look, and what they mean—are far and away the best writing on her work that I've seen. The book is a major achievement, not just of scholarship, but also as a record of the intersection of two sensibilities, artist and writer, and of personhood as the lens through which all art must inevitably be viewed. It also supports my belief that it takes a very long time to really know anything about an artist, to internalize her ideas and sensibility.

The hundreds of drawings reproduced in Storr's book flesh out the picture of Bourgeois as a graphic genius that the MoMA show initiates. Storr quotes a line that she wrote in a 1948 diary: "My drawings are an arsenal of forms that I love." Her choice of words is revealing. Certainly "forms" is the word that points us in the right direction; whatever else she was or has come to stand for, Bourgeois was primarily engaged in finding and inventing forms, and it's that search, about which she was remarkably clear-eyed and objective, that makes her work so potent. The word "arsenal" is pure Bourgeois. There is no mistaking her intention to lay siege to something.

Bourgeois's work found common cause with the art world of the 1970s, as attention began to be paid to women artists. It was a seismic shift, and it's still going on. Although she did not identify with Feminist Art as such, Bourgeois was very active in the movement, and its triumphal tide raised the boat of her career. She was a ready-made example of an artist whose imagery and way of working were seen as specific to her gender. Female experience and identity, especially the parts centered on biological processes like sex, childbirth, and lactation, as well as so-called domestic crafts like rubbings, weaving, embroidery, and sewing: it was no longer necessary to leave them at the door in order to be taken seriously as an artist. Many other artists have also worked with female imagery; in art it's a matter of what you make out of it. Bourgeois's art came to prominence more as a result of her singularity than her team spirit.

Opportunities for women denied, an institutional bias toward male artists—it is a familiar narrative. It still goes on, but one hopes less so. Henry Geldzahler, the Metropolitan Museum's first curator of modern and contemporary art, used to tell a story on himself that illustrates the bias against women artists at midcentury. In 1969, as he was finalizing what would become an epoch-defining exhibition, "New York Painting and Sculpture 1940–1970," Geldzahler ran into Alice Neel at a party. They were friends; Neel had painted Geldzahler's portrait, and everyone knew she was a serious artist, albeit somewhat out of the stylistic mainstream. Neel matter-of-factly asked Geldzahler what of hers he wanted for his show. He replied, "Oh Alice, when did you turn pro?" That's how friends were treated; imagine the condescension if you weren't known at all.

Louise Bourgeois had to overcome many of the same prejudices. Neel was often on the dole, and made great paintings for decades before fame found her in the mid-1970s, when she had only another ten years to work. Bourgeois, eleven years younger than Neel, was married to an art historian, lived in a townhouse in the West 20s, and knew just about everyone in the art world of the 1940s and 1950s, including her early champion Alfred Barr. Fame finally found her in the early 1980s, when she was nearly seventy, with a long way yet to go. She ran out the clock at age ninety-eight, experimenting with new materials and modes of presentation almost to the end.

The MoMA exhibition gives us an opportunity to find both the young woman and the modernist inventor underneath the slyly imperious grande dame we see on the cover of Storr's book in the famous Robert Mapplethorpe photograph from 1982. Now that we have some distance, Bourgeois's art, left to speak for itself, is potent, formally bold, and mysterious. It is sometimes alarming, and often beautiful. Its beauty is the result of a controlled collision of forms that are finely tuned to

one another; its effects seem perpetually positioned between a major and a minor key. With apologies to Samuel Beckett, her work might be called pricks and kicks in about equal measure.
