Louise Bourgeois

An Unfolding Portrait

MoMA
Louise Bourgeois
An Unfolding Portrait
Prints, Books, and the Creative Process

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Contents

6 Foreword
   Glenn D. Lowry

7 Acknowledgments

9 Introduction
   “time stopped, time remembered, time recreated” —
   Louise Bourgeois: Prints and Books
   Deborah Wye

Themes and Variations
36 Architecture Embodied
62 Abstracted Emotions
90 Fabric of Memory
114 Alone and Together
146 Forces of Nature
176 Lasting Impressions

Working Relationships
195 Jerry Gorovoy, Assistant
203 Felix Harlan
   of Harlan & Weaver, Inc., Printer
208 Benjamin Shiff
   of Osiris, Publisher

214 Notes
221 Chronology
231 Checklist of Plates
240 Selected Bibliography
243 Index
246 Lenders to the Exhibition
248 Trustees of
   The Museum of Modern Art

Louise Bourgeois revisiting
   an early copper plate for
   Champflanette, the White Cat
   (1994), at her home/studio on
   Photograph by and
   © Mathias Johansson
The deeply affecting art of Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) encompasses multiple mediums. The artist is most celebrated for sculpture, particularly her iconic Spiders, provocative figures and body parts, and room-size Cells. But Bourgeois also drew continuously and, most importantly for this study, created a vast body of prints and illustrated books. Her printed œuvre comprises some 1,200 individual compositions and, with their evolving states and variants, approximately 4,800 sheets in all.1 Her printmaking took place primarily in the last two decades of her very long life, but also for a period at the beginning of her career. In the 1940s, while raising three small children, she printed on a small press at home and also at outside facilities. Later, in the 1990s and 2000s, specialized printers and publishers came directly to her to work on projects. The small printing press was resurrected in the lower level of her house and another one added. Proofing and editioning were also carried out at professional printshops.

“time stopped, time remembered, time recreated” Louise Bourgeois: Prints and Books

Bourgeois’s approach to printmaking sheds light on her creative process overall. She constantly revisited the themes and forms of her art, in all mediums, as she sought to grapple with the troubling emotions that motivated her. Since printed images can be replicated, it was easy to go back over her compositions and branch out in any direction. She tirelessly altered her proofs with pencil, ink, watercolor, and gouache additions as she envisioned subsequent steps. Many prints went through fifteen, twenty, or even thirty stages of development, with states, variants, and versions. This unfolding progression of the artistic process has usually disappeared by the final stage of a painting or sculpture, but it remains visible in printmaking because these evolving proofs survive. Reviewing them is akin to looking over Bourgeois’s shoulder as she worked—a rare opportunity for insight into an artist’s vision.

Just as she was inclined toward the dynamics of printmaking, Bourgeois also favored traditional print formats—the series, portfolio, and illustrated book. These involve the gathering of related images and their sequencing, with or without added text. Sequencing generates a form of narration, and this suited Bourgeois, who was a vivid speaker, writer, and storyteller. She was highly articulate in describing the motivations for her work and kept copious notes in appointment diaries and notebooks, on countless loose sheets,
Interpretations

There are many approaches to Bourgeois’s art, yet, as her fame grew, it was her own words that occupied center stage in interpreting it. Her riveting explanations captured the interest of many critics, curators, and scholars, this author among them. She dwelled on compelling episodes in her biography as motivators of her art, and the violence, the indignation, the disgust, the envy, the hunger of many critics, curators, and scholars, this author among them. She dwelled on compelling episodes in her biography as motivators of her art, and the violence, the indignation, the disgust, the envy, the hunger of her life that appear unmistakably in her youth. Bourgeois was also well served by the concerns she expressed and family conflicts that certainly would have seemed exaggerated in her youth. Bourgeois was also well served by the concerns she expressed and family conflicts that certainly would have seemed exaggerated in her youth. But Bourgeois had a deeply sensitive nature, whereas other artists have exploited those formal inventions are not the meaning of the work rather than a clear stylistic path. As Bourgeois fought against despair with a fierce will and directed her formidable intelligence to comprehending her art, she asked herself:

how this given vocabulary can be made to express elemental emotions … the hunger the envy the disgust the indignation the violence the revenge. … no one could fail to be shaken by the emotion conveyed.

In the final analysis, however, her descriptions may be limiting: they can make it difficult to see her art with fresh eyes. Eventually, an overdependence on Bourgeois’s captivating tales led to a justifiable critical backlash among those who believed her art's formal, historical, and theoretical dimensions were being overshadowed.

That said, Bourgeois’s words still must be taken into consideration. In addition to those she spoke, she left a voluminous body of writing, matched by almost no other artist. She conveys powerful sentiments in both and, in particular, reveals the distress she suffered and the struggles she had in coping. These emotions were clearly the force behind her art; to release and understand them was her goal. As she said, “It is not an image. … it’s not an idea. It is an emotion you want to recreate.” In a search for the forms of her art, she asked herself:

This discussion of Bourgeois’s prints and illustrated books proceeds chronologically, placing them within the arc of her life and artistic development, and within the broader art world context. The visual and thematic correspondences found in her printmaking—and in all her work across decades—will be examined in later chapters. Bourgeois’s situation was unusual in that she gained recognition late in life and her early work was discovered at the same time as her new work. This simultaneity certainly had an influence on her revisiting of earlier themes, but in fact she was always concerned with a recurring set of issues and emotions. While most artists are wrapped up in their latest efforts, for Bourgeois the past and present were intertwined. As she said, “For a lifetime I have wanted to say the same thing.” To interpret this body of work, scholars now have access to the appointment diaries and notebooks she kept over the course of her life, letters, family photographs going back to the early twentieth century, and more than fifteen hundred handwritten sheets she never parted with. “Nothing is lost,” she said, “there is something sacred about things that are your past.”

A Formative Childhood

Bourgeois, born in Paris in 1911, often talked about the early years of her life. She could have been moved to tears describing a childhood incident, even some five, six, or seven decades later. Events of the here and now stirred up old memories and feelings not sufficiently buried. Her youngest years were beset by war and family conflicts that certainly would have been described as traumatic. But Bourgeois had a deeply sensitive nature, vulnerable to emotional upset, and may have been predisposed to psychological afflication. Her brother, Pierre, just thirteen months her junior, was buried. Her youngest years were beset by war and family conflicts that certainly would have been described as traumatic. But Bourgeois had a deeply sensitive nature, vulnerable to emotional upset, and may have been predisposed to psychological afflication. Her brother, Pierre, just thirteen months her junior, was buried. Her youngest years were beset by war and family conflicts that certainly would have been described as traumatic. But Bourgeois had a deeply sensitive nature, vulnerable to emotional upset, and may have been predisposed to psychological afflication. Her brother, Pierre, just thirteen months her junior, was buried.
Themes and Variations

The motivations that led to Louise Bourgeois's art were unwavering over the seven decades of her long career: it was emotional struggle that fueled her process. In seeking to understand and cope with painful memories, anger and jealousy, depression and despair, she created sculpture, prints, drawings, and, early on, paintings. Art was her tool of survival, her "guaranty of sanity."  

In giving form to her emotions, Bourgeois returned again and again to particular motifs that served as visual metaphors; together they offer a thematic framework for her work. While varying from architectural forms to the human body and sexuality to motherhood, and even to a symbolic abstraction, each imagery and concerns appear in all her mediums, and sometimes overlap in individual works.

The following discussion of the themes and variations in Bourgeois’s art explores the artist’s creative process, with a focus on her prints and illustrated books and the evolving states and variants that trace the development of her imagery. It also includes examples of related sculpture, drawings, and paintings, demonstrating that Bourgeois saw no "rivalry" between them. "They say the same things in different ways," she maintained. Finally, corresponding works from different periods are brought together. This organization emphasizes overarching relationships within Bourgeois’s practice and a remarkable consistency in her aims over the course of her lifetime. She fully acknowledged this ongoing process when she said: "to be an artist involves some suffering. That’s why artists repeat themselves — because they have no access to a cure."  

Note to the Reader:  
In the plate captions, dimensions are cited with height preceding width (for sculptures, height precedes width, which precedes depth). For prints, dimensions generally refer to the plate size or the composition size; if a full sheet or book page is shown, those dimensions are cited instead. Most prints are on paper; those on fabric are so indicated. This volume’s Checklist (pp. 231–39) provides additional documentation: full dimensions for all sheets and pages; publishers, printers, and edition sizes; credit lines; accession numbers for works in MoMA’s collection; and the MoMA online catalogue raisonné numbers for all prints and books. All works are in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, unless otherwise noted.

Shiff also brought partially printed proofs to Bourgeois that led in still further directions. Sheets with only printed fragments turned out to be additional spurs to her imagination. À l’Infini (To Infinity, 2008; plates 185–98) is an extraordinary series that began with partially printed proofs of Love and Kisses (pl. 184). In this series, the printed elements—diagonal, twisting, veinlike fragments—are almost obscured by Bourgeois’s additions in watercolor, gouache, and pencil. But one discerns them subliminally when the series is installed; they provide a kind of rhythm from sheet to sheet. À l’Infini is a prime example of the kind of unique print project that became integral to Bourgeois’s way of working at this stage of her life. Its swirling, elemental forms constitute the intimacy of small printing plates and sheets; they offer a thematic framework for her work.

In her late nineties, Bourgeois’s health declined further. Her eyesight suffered to a degree, perhaps leading to her more frequent use of red, although the color always had symbolic resonance for her. She responded positively to the large sheets of paper Shiff provided, again probably because she could work more easily with them from a visual standpoint. The intimacy of small printing plates and sheets was now more difficult, although she remained engaged to some degree at that scale. Bourgeois also had mobility issues due to arthritis, and her insomnia was severe—sometimes she went for days with little or no sleep. According to Gorovoy, this sleeplessness drastically affected her mood and her ability to work, as she went from hyperactive to thoroughly drowsy. But her creativity remained; her printmaking is a tribute to the late phase of her work. She never stopped employing art to express her emotions and to understand herself and her world. Even in the hospital, just before she died, Bourgeois asked for paper and pencils. As Gorovoy says: "She wanted her life back. She wanted to continue what we always did together."
The sky, the building, and the house, knew each other and approved of each other."  
Louise Bourgeois

Architecture Embodied

In the pursuit of emotional balance and stability, Louise Bourgeois frequently rendered architecture as a symbolic presence in her sculpture, prints, drawings, and early paintings. “As the architectural consciousness of the shape mounts,” she said late in her life, “the psychological consciousness of the fear diminishes.” These forms were invariably personified, with structures exhibiting poignant vulnerabilities and, occasionally, assertiveness. Figural works took on architectural features, molded enclosures became refuges or, conversely, traps, and roomlike constructions were sites of personal drama.

Bourgeois’s attraction to architecture was rooted in her youthful study of mathematics, which she appreciated for its reliability—it provided her with a sense of calm and security. Thinking back on her time as a young student, she wrote: “I enroll in Mathematics at the Sorbonne with the idea of strengthening my analytical mind—there is nothing I enjoy more than a demonstration by a + b—it has the beauty of Rockefeller Center—it makes me feel safe.”

At the same time, the images in her small book He Disappeared into Complete Silence (1947; plate 13–21) depicts buildings in various guises, many calling to mind the skyscrapers she admired in her adopted home. She had romanticized these buildings even before she arrived, writing from Paris to her new husband (who returned to New York before her): “I dreamt about you, we were running one after the other in a street full of skyscrapers.” At the same time, the images in her small book suggest a range of human emotions: loneliness, stoicism, fear, aggression, despair, and defeat. One enigmatic composition includes two windowless buildings set in a barren landscape; Bourgeois’s accompanying parable mysteriously identifies a single New York City landmark and gives it a clearly human dimension: “The solitary death of the Woolworth Building” (plate 14).

Bourgeois later turned to art, and then met and married American art historian Robert Goldwater in Paris; she moved to New York in 1938. Some of her early paintings and prints show architectural interiors of places where she lived with her young family. By the second half of the 1940s, when Bourgeois found her distinctive artistic voice, she began to feature buildings prominently in her paintings, with eerie, surrealist overtones and narrative implications (plate 13). Her works titled Femme Maison (Woman House; plates 1, 6, 7) exemplify her gendered depiction of the realities of a young mother confined at home with inescapable responsibilities.

Bourgeois’s illustrated book He Disappeared into Complete Silence (1947; plates 13–21) depicts buildings in various guises, many calling to mind the skyscrapers she admired in her adopted home. She had romanticized these buildings even before she arrived, writing from Paris to her new husband (who returned to New York before her): “I dreamt about you, we were running one after the other in a street full of skyscrapers.” At the same time, the images in her small book suggest a range of human emotions: loneliness, stoicism, fear, aggression, despair, and defeat. One enigmatic composition includes two windowless buildings set in a barren landscape; Bourgeois’s accompanying parable mysteriously identifies a single New York City landmark and gives it a clearly human dimension: “The solitary death of the Woolworth Building” (plate 14).
53. Lullaby.

Each sheet: 15 1/8 × 11 3/8" (38.4 × 28.9 cm)

These compositions were formed by turning and tracing common household objects, including a sardine can, cutting shears, an oval candy dish, a knife, and a magnifying glass. Bourgeois envisioned this series as a manner of musical score. Eager to publish it immediately, she did so under her own imprint, Lison Editions. ("Lison" was a childhood nickname; others were Lise, Lisette, Louisien, and Louise.)
Abstracted Emotions

54. Paris Review. 1994. Aquatint and drypoint, with acrylic stencil additions. Sheet: 36 13/16 x 28 1/16" (93.5 x 71.3 cm)

The color version of this composition was illustrated on the cover of the literary journal The Paris Review. The print itself was donated by the artist as a benefit for the journal. Printer Felix Harlan remembers Bourgeois wanting something large and impressive for the occasion. Curiously, she related its imagery to her many interviews: "It is the . . . twisting and squeezing out the juice of the pomegranate. All those interviewers squeezed me to exhaustion."13

55. Paris Review. 1994. Aquatint and drypoint, with acrylic stencil additions. Sheet: 36 13/16 x 28 1/16" (93.5 x 71.3 cm)
82 (cont.) Ode à l'Oubli
2002. Fabric illustrated book with 32 fabric collages, a lithographed text, and lithographed cover. No. 12 with ink additions. size approx.: 10 3/4 x 12 1/4 (27.3 x 30.7 cm)
Thèmes and Variations

Ode à l'Oubli

2002. Fabric illustrated book with 32 fabric collages, 2 lithographed texts, and lithographed cover. (approx.) $10/\frac{3}{4}$ × $12\frac{1}{16}$” ($27.3 \times 30.7$ cm)
No. 5 of 14 from the installation set À l’Infini. 2008. Soft ground etching, with selective wiping, watercolor, gouache, pencil, colored pencil, and watercolor wash additions. sheet: 40 × 60" (101.6 × 152.4 cm)

No. 6 of 14 from the installation set À l’Infini. 2008. Soft ground etching, with gouache, watercolor, and pencil additions. sheet: 40 × 60" (101.6 × 152.4 cm)