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THE LOCUS OF MEMORY: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF LOUISE BOURGEOIS

For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.

—LOUISE BOURGEOIS¹

However intricate the elaborate construct of the art world may be at any given moment, its existence and renewal depend on a select number of sources. These sources, sometimes obscured by extraneous concerns, often take a long time to be identified. Yet, once recognized, their creative energy penetrates our consciousness and permanently marks our perception of the times. For those artists who have turned to spatial enclosures and/or to the image of the body—in all its permutations and fragmented forms—as a vehicle for expressing ideas about universal questions and as a means not only of connecting with the outside world, but also of reaching deep into their own psyches, the enigmatic oeuvre of Louise Bourgeois is a profound force.

The 1980s and early 1990s have been a period of unprecedented accomplishment in Bourgeois's career, leading to her most challenging and monumental work as yet. The examples selected for this exhibition bring together for the first time the full range of media, techniques, and thematic content of the past decade, including individual pieces and installations alike. In them we see Bourgeois's explorations of both natural and architectonic form and her development of a body of work unique among artists today.

Louise Bourgeois has emerged as an artist of intense individuality with her integrity and vitality intact. Her recent work represents a culmination of forms and ideas she has pursued for over half a century. The universal themes that have long obsessed Bourgeois—anxiety, alienation, love, identity, sex, and death—dovetail with and illuminate the contemporary issues of gender, sexuality, and the right to freedom and individuality. No longer a peripheral figure in the art world, but an exemplary model for artists who came of age in the 1980s, Bourgeois is now considered one of the foremost living artists, whose legacy is central to our understanding of twentieth-century art.

Trained in Europe as well as in the United States, and witness to this century's vital art movements, Bourgeois is a truly international artist whose career spans both continents and cultures. Since her arrival in New York in 1938, Louise Bourgeois has become an integral part of the intellectual and artistic life of the city. Befriending a number of expatriate Sur-

realist artists during the Second World War, she participated in the rise of Abstract Expressionism, shared the legacy of the New York School, and through her early working methods anticipated the practices of Process Art and the discipline of Minimalism. She readily comprehended all, but accepted none. Fiercely independent, she charted her own territory instead, traveling a solitary path and sustaining the isolation that so frequently attends such a road.

Motivated to express deeply autobiographical content, Bourgeois followed her own rhythm. Although her work explores abstraction, allusion to organic form permeates most of her pieces, naturally strengthened by the suggestion of fragments of human anatomy. Since there is no single mode to which she subscribed for any length of time, Bourgeois subverted established notions of the development of a style. In the process, she superbly mastered numerous techniques such as carving, assembling, modeling, and casting—using and discarding them at will—and media as varied as wood, plaster, latex, bronze, marble, and an array of found objects (“*objets trouvés*,” as she calls them). Noble or mundane, all of these methods and materials were subjected to her wishes and used to express her innermost feelings.

Although the work was exhibited intermittently and known to artists and scholars, it remained in effect the art world’s best-kept secret. This limited recognition had a positive effect, as Bourgeois has explained:

This . . . has been the story of my career. For many years, fortunately, my works were not sold for profit or for any other reason. And I was very productive because nobody tried to copy my alphabet. They knew about it, because I had some shows over the years. But it was not sold. And in America, selling is equated with success. My image remained my own, and I am very grateful for that. I worked in peace for forty years. The production of my work had nothing to do with the selling of it.²

Rejecting the rules and regulations of the art world since her essentially antiauthoritarian nature was unable to accept any established doctrine, Bourgeois instead chose to experiment, to make up her own rules, and to select her own narrative imagery. In doing so, she addressed questions of gender and sexuality and foreshadowed the premises of early feminism in accepting and exploring what was then considered marginal or ephemeral. The ever-present, subversive impulse that permeated her art from the beginning of the 1940s became increasingly recognized by proponents of change in the late 1970s. She became an example for those with the courage to draw inspiration from their innermost feelings and to turn away from the spent Modernist tradition toward the darkly subjective and elaborately eclectic realm of Postmodernism.

As Bourgeois’s work was exhibited with increasing frequency throughout the 1970s, it effectively influenced both the work of other artists and public taste. The turning point in this process was the retrospective exhibition of Bourgeois’s work at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1982. Surveying four decades, from the early forties to the early eighties, this exhibition was a milestone in the broad recognition of the artist’s work. At the time of The Museum of Modern Art’s critical reappraisal, Bourgeois was seventy-one years old. For many artists, an exhibition of such summarizing intent could have been the climax of a life’s work. For Bourgeois,



however, it heralded a new era during which her productivity surged.

In order to appreciate fully the work of this past decade, which is so rich with autobiographical and emotional reference, it is helpful to consider the artist's background. Louise Bourgeois was born on December 25, 1911, on the Left Bank of Paris, where her parents ran a gallery dealing primarily in historical tapestries. She spent her early years there and her later childhood in the nearby suburbs of Choisy-le-Roi and later Antony, where the family opened a tapestry restoration studio in 1919, right after the war (figs. 2, 3). It was in this workshop that Bourgeois first learned to draw, in order to help with the restoration work. The family was polarized between a wise and practical mother, who provided stability and affection although she was frequently ill, having suffered from the Spanish flu in 1919, and a charming but philandering father, whose flamboyance the young Louise at once admired and detested. While she studied mathematics for a short time at the Sorbonne beginning in 1932, she soon decided to pursue an artistic career and attended several art academies and studios in Paris for the following six years. In 1938 Bourgeois married Robert Goldwater, an American art historian, and moved to New York City.

While Bourgeois studied painting throughout the 1930s, it was largely her study of mathematics and geometry at the Sorbonne that pointed her to sculpture. She was fascinated by the rules of solid geometry and by the intricate relationships created by the positioning of elements in space. Bourgeois was attracted to mathematics and geometry largely because she found in these disciplines the stability and continuity that had been missing in her life at home. She explains, "In mathematics the rules are eternal, and the points of reference do not change from day to day."³ However, as her knowledge of the subject deepened, she became increasingly aware that

Fig. 4. Louise Bourgeois in her New York studio, 1940s

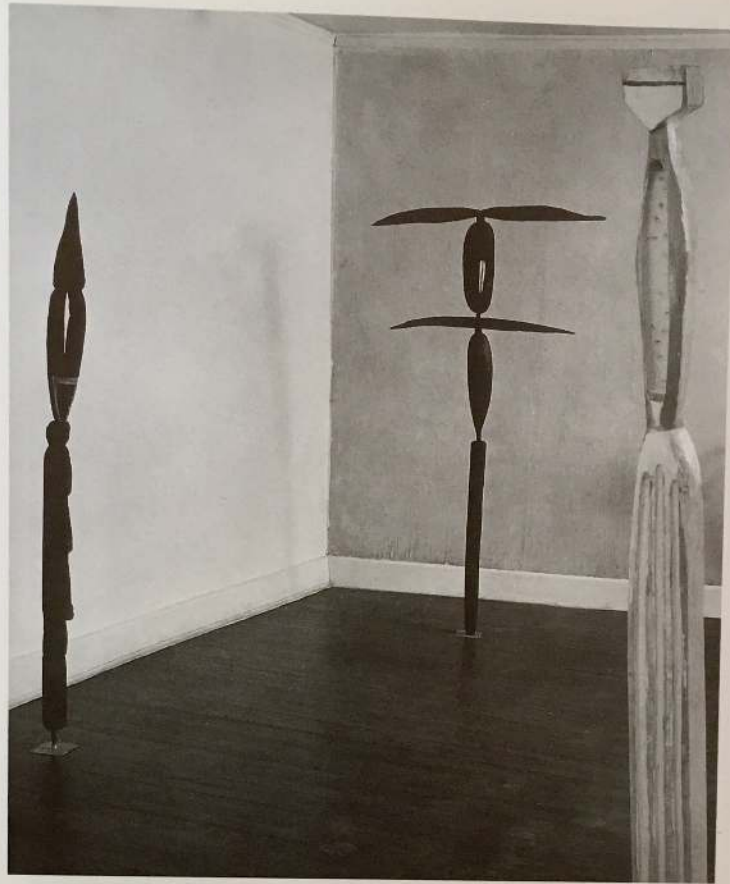
mathematics was not necessarily fixed and that Euclidean geometry was but one theoretical construct. "The day I understood that there were other geometries besides Euclidean, I experienced a sharp disappointment," Bourgeois has said. "It was for me the death of a symbol. Mathematics was no longer a safe symbol. . . . So I was in search of a new symbol, a new equation. The new equation was art."⁴

In her artwork, Bourgeois increasingly turned away from the rigid, rational rules of Euclidean geometry toward the more fluid, intuitive formulations of topology, the branch of mathematics concerned with the relationships of figures in space. While she began to investigate such formal correspondences in her paintings of the early 1940s (fig. 4), she soon turned to sculpture, which, as a medium that is labor-intensive and by nature confrontational, challenging the viewer through its physical proximity, was better suited to express the complexities of human interplay and the autobiographical drama that was to unfold in her work.

By the late 1940s, Bourgeois had abandoned painting and focused on sculpture, drawing, and printmaking. Her earliest sculptures were carved, assembled, and stacked; they were made of wooden segments, sometimes with a painted and sometimes with a natural surface. The resulting tall figures symbolically represented members of the artist's family and circle of friends. "Even though the shapes are abstract," Bourgeois explains, "they represent people. They are delicate as relationships are delicate. They look on each other and they lean on each other."⁵ In these early pieces, the artist summoned forth significant individuals in her life in France to help her fill the void she felt after leaving her homeland during the particularly difficult time on the eve of the Second World War. These missed and remembered personages, which were first displayed in 1949 in New York's Peridot Gallery, exuded an air of isolation and evoked the torment of life (fig. 5). Bourgeois has said, "My sculpture allows me to re-experience the fear, to give it a physicality so I am able to hack away at it. Fear becomes a manageable reality. Sculpture allows me to re-experience the past, to see the past in its objective, realistic proportion."⁶

From this early stage in the artist's career, she discovered that her sculpture had the power and the presence to represent the experiences of her life and, in doing so, to create new experiences, which she could share with those who viewed her work. The 1949 exhibition may be considered Bourgeois's very first installation piece, in which she exhibited the sculptures in a manner that suggested interaction, in emotional as well as spatial terms. In these early sculptures, Bourgeois created a special brand of animism that continues in her work to this day. The figures or objects represent personages close to her not in appearance, but in spirit; they constitute, in fact, a surrogate family. Bourgeois's approach to her art at this time displayed an unprecedented fusion of the rational and the intuitive. She concentrated on the spiritual function of her sculpture, using form, materials, techniques, and scale to give tangible expression to the traumatizing experiences of her own life in a heroic attempt to exorcise them.

Bourgeois's work is largely derived from her personal history and experience as a woman—daughter, wife, and mother. The artist herself frequently speaks about her adolescence amid a family with one member too many, and one should not underestimate the far-reaching effects on her life caused by the presence of the English tutor, Sadie, who was her father's



mistress and lived with the family for ten years. Bourgeois has explained, “My father betrayed me by not being what he was supposed to be. First of all, by abandoning us to go to war, and then by finding another woman and introducing her into our house.”⁷ Having three parental figures involved in complex and confusing relationships forced all three children to negotiate unusual alliances in a painfully uncertain world of pretending adults. The very notion of authority was forever undermined, leaving a young Bourgeois with the resolve to create her own universe, one in which there were constants she could define and control.

As the architect of her own imaginary world, Bourgeois was able to represent her emotions and memories in terms relevant to her experiences. Throughout her career, Bourgeois has been drawn to imagery of the body and the home to express themes of life, death, sex, isolation and alienation, and care and tenderness. In her prints, drawings, and paintings of the early and mid-1940s, Bourgeois frequently depicts women in fantastic domestic situations. One recurring image is of a female figure carrying a house on her shoulders: the universe the woman created to protect herself and her family has betrayed her and confined her as a prisoner of her own invention. In these early works, many of which are entitled *Femme Maison* (figs. 6, 7, 19), the figure and the building are fused, and it is difficult to determine whether the woman is metamorphosing into the house or the house into the woman. The poignant clarity of such statements about a woman’s status—one that was accepted not only by the larger society, but also by an art world with truly reactionary sexual politics—was far ahead of its time. This feminist vision signaled the emotional intensity and narrative content that

Fig. 5. Installation view,
Peridot Gallery, New York,
1949

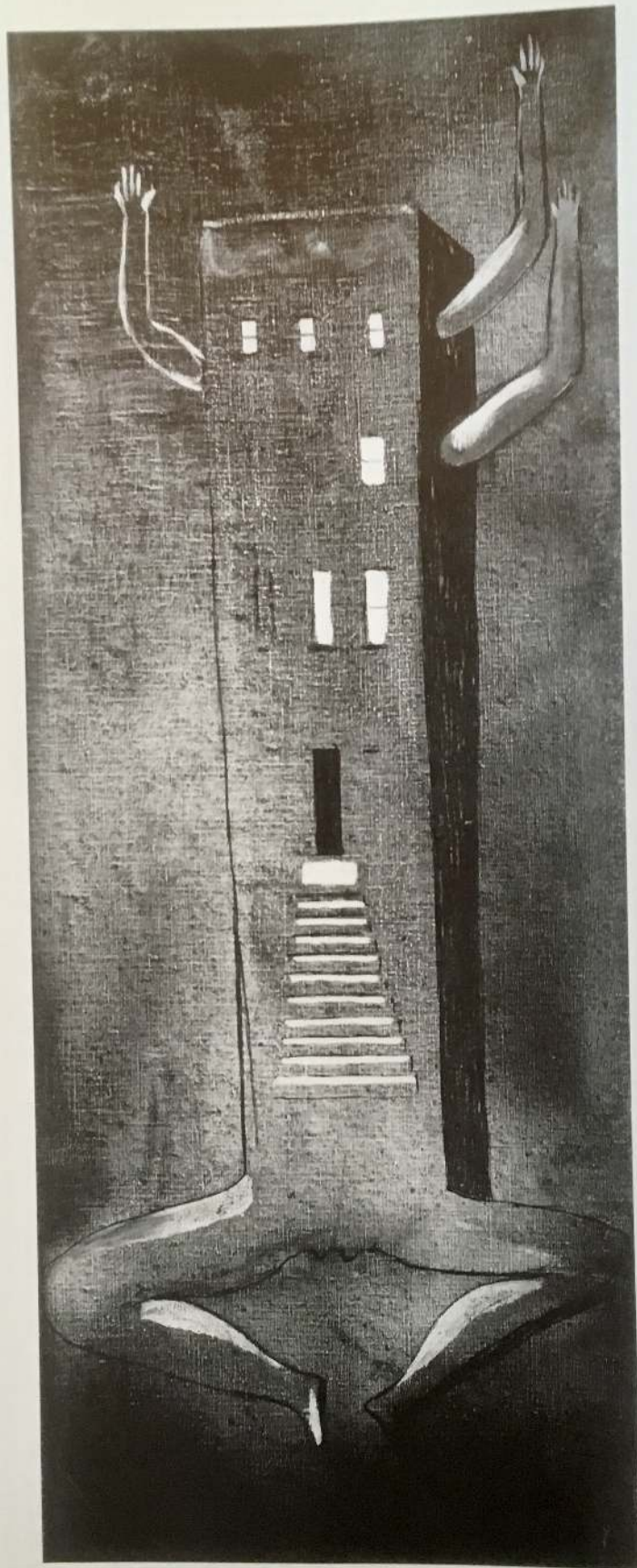


Fig. 6. *Femme Maison*.
ca. 1946–47. Oil and ink
on linen, 36 × 14 in.
(91.4 × 35.6 cm). Private
collection, California

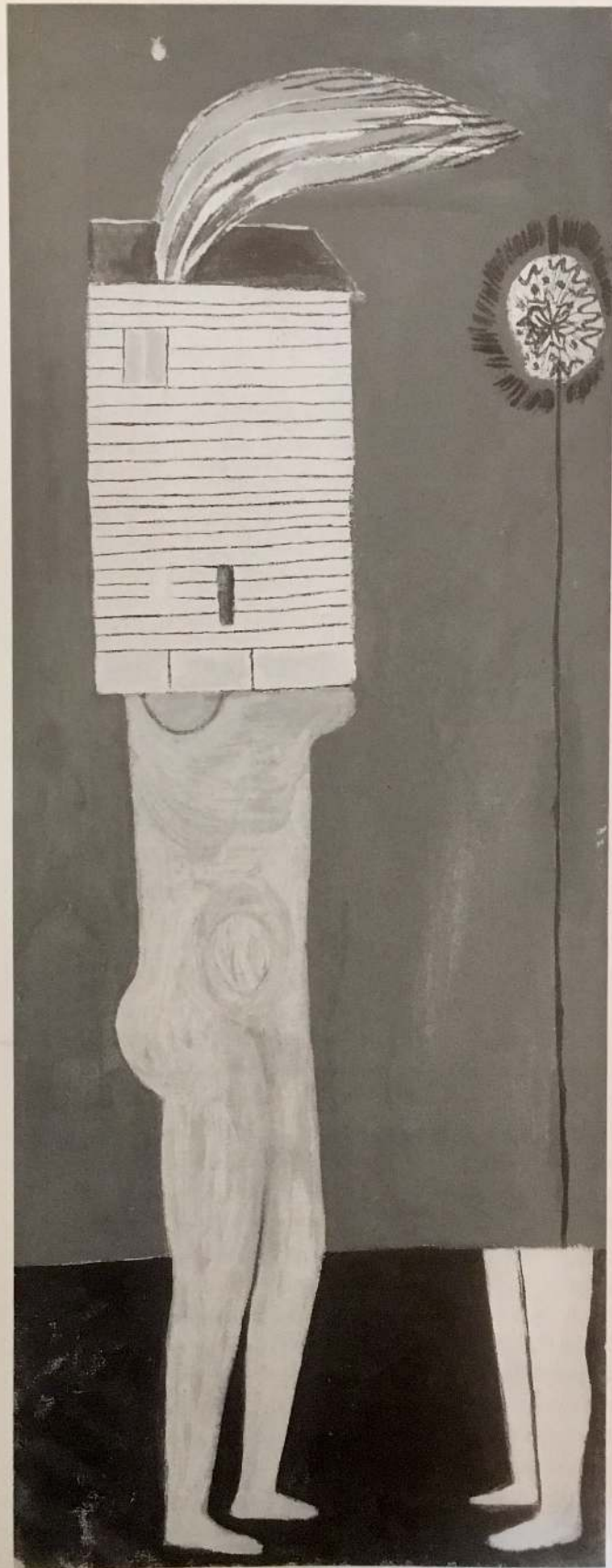
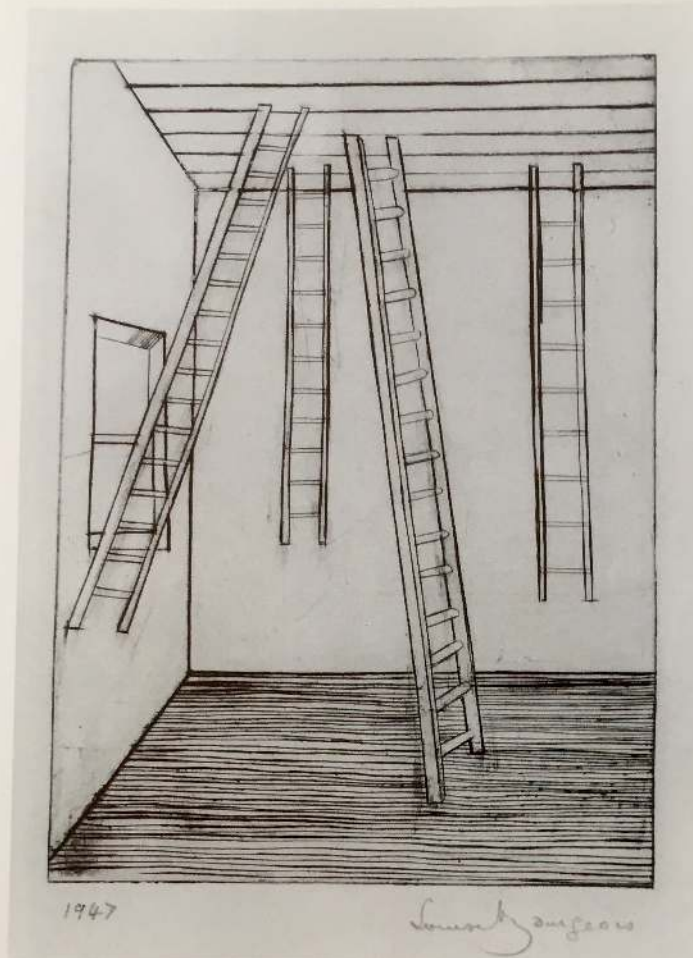


Fig. 7. *Femme Maison*.
ca. 1946–47. Oil and ink
on linen, 36 × 14 in.
(91.4 × 35.6 cm). Private
collection, New York



was to become the hallmark of Bourgeois's art. It also provided the foundation for imagery that would recur in her work throughout her career.

Images related to the house or dwelling—from the *Femme Maison* paintings of the forties and the eerily empty rooms of the published set of etchings *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* (1947), to the series of *Lairs*, to the *Cells* with their fusion of body parts with architectural constructs—are persistent themes in Bourgeois's work. This recurrence is understandable in view of the artist's concentration on the psychological drama evolving in her oeuvre for the past five decades; this drama takes place in the spaces of familial, social gathering or in solitary, isolated realms provided by man's habitat. The house becomes a major catalyst for memory, for it is in this certain and defined locale that the range of human relationships and feelings—from the most primary to the most complex—take place.

The image of the house represents the topography of our most intimate selves and relates to a spectrum of experiences connected with the universe of our first domicile. Humble or grand, tragic or nurturing, the impressions acquired in these first rooms, hallways, and staircases of our early years live forever within our imagination. In her artwork, Bourgeois has provided the means to give these memories and feelings a tangible reality:

Fig. 8. *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*, Plate 8. 1947. Engraving, 10×7 in. (24.5×17.8 cm). Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

I need my memories. They are my documents. I keep watch over them. They are my privacy and I am intensely jealous of them. Cézanne said, "I am jealous of my little sensations."

To reminisce and woolgather is negative. You have to differentiate between memories. Are you going to them or are they coming to you. If you are going to them, you are wasting time. Nostalgia is not productive. If they come to you, they are the seeds for sculpture.⁸

Bourgeois's memories become departures for an undertaking that is quite personal yet often recalls a sense of space that belongs to our shared experience of the home. In Bourgeois's imagery, the enclosure of the house, a room, or a staircase may either provide protective refuge or become a trap. In her early works, houses, rooms, and steps appear in self-contradictory constructs. One of the prints of the series *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* (fig. 8), for example, depicts a number of ladders floating in a room, leading upward toward the floor-ceiling. Similarly, in works such as *No Escape* and *No Exit*, both 1989 (pls. 16, 17), monumental staircases lead toward nothing. These steps are another dead end. Yet the stairs of *No Exit* house beneath them, like the ribs of the chest cavity, a hidden chamber with two suspended hearts. This work again alludes to Bourgeois's perception of her childhood home:

There was a grenier, an attic with exposed beams. It was very large and very beautiful. My father had a passion for fine furniture. All the sièges de bois were hanging up there. It was very pure. No tapestries, just the wood itself. You would look up and see these armchairs in very good order. The floor was bare. It was quite impressive. This is the origin of a lot of hanging pieces.⁹

Similarly, in a work entitled *Articulated Lair* of 1986 (pl. 9), another unlikely room constructed entirely of corners houses a series of hanging rubber forms. The Lairs (figs. 17, 24), unlike *No Escape* and *No Exit*, do have both entrances and exits. They represent a place of refuge, nurturing, and regeneration.

Bourgeois's ability to infuse her sculpture with emotive and psychological expression, together with her understanding of the mathematics of topology, has allowed her to pursue the study of form with a unique and unprecedented approach. Throughout her career, she has explored spatial relationships and developed a personal lexicon of figures that she initiated in her early work and has continued to build upon over the course of five decades. Combining both constructive and reductive approaches to making sculpture, she has employed the organizing principles of geometry and architecture to give foundation to her pieces, yet she has allowed for more fluid formations and organic compositions.

In her drawings and her three-dimensional work, Bourgeois recognized the human body as a unit composed of independent parts, which could be used as the elements of new and evocative configurations. In her early work Bourgeois composed some of her tall standing sculptural personages by stacking cut pieces of wood, literally building the figures. Increasingly, she used elements of the anatomy—cells, tissues, and organs—as the building blocks of her sculptures. The manner in which Bourgeois has fragmented and reconfigured the body is not unlike that in which life is segmented and

reexperienced through our memories. "Since the fears of the past were connected with the functions of the body, they reappear through the body,"¹⁰ Bourgeois has said.

Throughout her career, Bourgeois has experimented with various methods of composing the fragmented parts of the body in her sculptures, yet none are more brilliant than those employed in the past decade. *Nature Study*, 1984 (pl. 6), demonstrates her unique approach. Though reminiscent of ancient representations of mythical winged demigods, this bronze figure appears to have been fractured and reconstructed from its disparate parts. While the individual features of the sphinxlike figure correspond to natural shapes, the compounded effect of this imposing composition of both human and animal body parts suggests a supernatural creature, an anthropomorphic goddess. The polarities between man and beast, male and female, are well in keeping with the inherent contradictions of the artist's approach. The placement of the figure at eye level on a stemlike base both forces the viewer to confront the creature's genitalia and adds an element of precarious balance, rendering it at once aggressive and vulnerable.

While some works comprise numerous organic elements, others feature a single part isolated and decontextualized. *Nature Study (Velvet Eyes)*, also from 1984 (pl. 7), demonstrates the latter approach. In the marble block are two deeply carved holes, half-spherical in shape. Out of these craters emerge two eyes fully rendered with a definite stare. These "velvet eyes" are eternal, imploring, and doubtful, and suggest flirtation and seduction. *Legs*, 1986 (pl. 11), consists of pliable cast rubber. Linear and almost immaterial, two strips that appear to be the skin of two limbs are suspended in the air, hanging loose without any controlling force. With one "leg" slightly longer than the other, they allude to the rhythm of walking. Two hands carved in marble in *Décontractée*, 1990 (pl. 21), masterfully suggest not only the arrested tension of pain and exaltation, but also total relaxation and release.

Cast rubber is used for a wall relief entitled *Mamelles*, 1991 (pl. 32), which displays a series of female breasts. Although the work has a classical architectural construct, *Mamelles* does not unfold a procession of hardened warriors or gods, but rather one of soft, nurturing, female forms. The use of the ancient configuration of the frieze evokes a classical narrative, yet there is a typically subversive twist in this story. According to the artist, *Mamelles* "portrays a man who lives off the women he courts, making his way from one to the next. Feeding from them but returning nothing, he loves only in a consumptive and selfish manner."¹¹

While bronze, steel, and rubber have been used in numerous works, it was marble that most captivated Bourgeois in the 1980s, particularly in her large-scale work. The artist explores the range of effects this material offers, sometimes roughly chipping its surface and at others highly polishing it. The weight, mass, and density of the stone are underscored in *Ventouse*, 1990 (pl. 26), wherein a large piece of coarse black marble serves as a base for delicate, clear glass medical vessels of the type Bourgeois had used to treat her mother during her frequent illnesses. The noble beauty of this venerable material is nowhere more apparent than in the brilliantly carved *The Sail*, 1988 (pl. 15). Competing with masters of classical and Baroque drapery alike, Bourgeois accentuates the play of light and shadow by illuminating the hollow interior of the carved marble block and allowing

light to emanate from the core of the exquisite stone through the windowlike openings in the work.

Untitled (with Growth), 1989 (pl. 19), addresses the artist's most challenging recurrent themes. From the roughly hewn marble block grows a superbly polished cluster of organic forms. Although they consist of the hardest stone, their fragile beauty is exposed and vulnerable. Suggesting life and regeneration, they represent the span of the biological spectrum. They grow from the formative matter of their own unarticulated universe, the burgeoning forms both of nature and of sculpture. It is a story of creation, wherein the artist gives inanimate material a spark of life and shapes start to emerge.

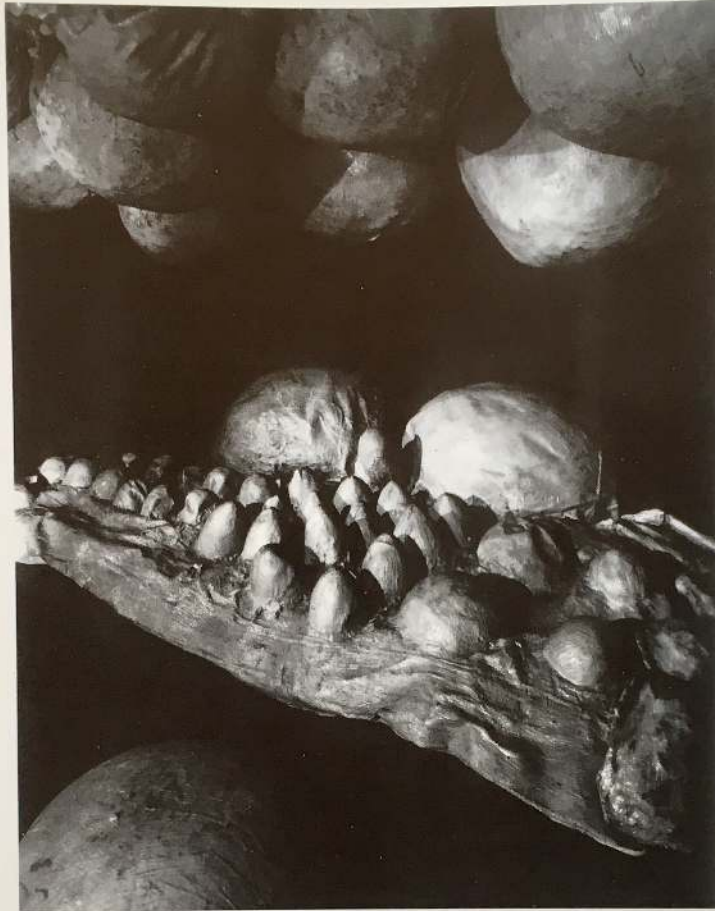
In her recent works, Bourgeois has focused her creative microscope on organic matter and objects related to her early memories. In *Gathering Wool*, 1990 (pl. 23), she monumentalizes the balls of yarn that surrounded the young Bourgeois in her family's tapestry restoration studio. *Needle (Fuseau)*, 1992 (pl. 33), is part of a larger series of sculptures of that title created to commemorate the mending power of this instrument. The needle is given epic proportions to signify that it is a prominent object of the artist's memory, again reminiscent of her parents' livelihood. Bourgeois explains her feelings about the needle as follows: "When I was growing up, all the women in my house used needles. I've 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. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin."¹² Focusing on this object of personal significance from her childhood is perhaps an act of self-reparation and reconciliation with the past.

Bourgeois's desire to give physical presence to memories, or to re-create the experiences of her life, was manifest as early as 1949, in her already-mentioned exhibition of sculptural personages, and has continued throughout her career in such projects as *The Destruction of the Father*, 1974 (fig. 9), and *The Confrontation*, 1978 (fig. 10). In the late 1980s, Bourgeois once again turned to large installation pieces and began to concentrate on a series of works called Cells (figs. 25–27; pls. 27–29). The title alludes both to cells that form living organisms—the most basic body unit—and to cells that impose desired or enforced solitude. Bourgeois's Cells are places of contemplation, with veritable prison walls of found steel or of glass doors or windows and containing objects used as memorial documents. Every item has significance for the artist and for the viewer, who is often invited to enter the Cell's chamber. Where one may find solace behind the protective walls of heavy steel, another might suffocate within the oppressive barriers of doors that do not open. Bourgeois explains:

The Cells represent different types of pain: the physical, the emotional and the psychological, and the mental and intellectual. When does the emotional become physical? When does the physical become emotional? It's a circle going round and round. Pain can begin at any point and turn in either direction.

Each Cell deals with fear. Fear is pain. Often it is not perceived as pain, because it is always disguising itself. . . .

The Cell with the figure or arch of hysteria deals with emotional and psychological pain. Here in the arch of hysteria, pleasure and pain are merged in a state of happiness. Her arch—the mounting of tension and the release of tension—is sexual. It is a substitute for orgasm with no access to sex. She creates her own world and is



very happy. Nowhere is it written that a person in these states is suffering. She functions in a self-made cell where the rules of happiness and stress are unknown to us.¹³

The most recent group of Cells, created in late 1992 and 1993, presents the dichotomy between the impersonal, strictly geometric enclosures and the highly evocative objects they contain (pls. 35–40). While a bed in *Cell (Arch of Hysteria)* suggests a bedroom, a table with chairs in *Cell (Glass Spheres and Hands)* alludes not only to a dining room in a home, but also to a classroom in which disciples are gathered around a teacher. The installation of the Cells in close proximity to one another with little or no passage between them brings to mind the ground plan of a house. *Cell (Choisy)* shelters a small replica of Bourgeois's childhood home carved in flesh-toned marble, reinforcing the house-body metaphor. The Cells also contain the fragmented body parts from which many of her sculptures are built: severed arms rest on the table of *Cell (Glass Spheres and Hands)* in a gesture of anguished prayer, while a pair of enormous eyes guards the entrance of *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)*. These and a seemingly decapitated, distended figure in *Cell (Arch of Hysteria)* are accompanied by instruments of dismemberment—a band saw and a guillotine, which looms large above the house of Choisy. In her recent Cells, Bourgeois has synthesized the forms, methods, and themes that have prevailed in her art throughout her career. Once again fusing the body with the home as she had in those early *Femme Maison*

Fig. 9. *The Destruction of the Father*. 1974. Latex, plaster, and mixed media, 93 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 142 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 97 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (237.8 × 363.3 × 248.7 cm). Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York



paintings, she has developed works of unprecedented scale and energy. These sculptures are both a result of and a departure from Bourgeois's achievements of the past.

Louise Bourgeois is endlessly resourceful. In the universe of her creation, the feeling of loneliness can be turned into celebration, humiliation into victory, and despair into assurance. Much as our experiences inform the landscape of our dreams, Bourgeois's memories provide her with the vocabulary of figures within her sculptural world. As the architect of that environment, she uses locales of her past and present and the cells, organs, and tissues of her own making as her building blocks, delving deeper and deeper into her own psyche. Her courage to share with us her anxieties and obsessions has produced a body of bold and monumental work unique in the history of sculpture. It is said that we bring our Lares with us—that these gods and guardians of the household from classical mythology accompany us in our journey through life. It would seem that Louise Bourgeois has not only brought her Lares with her, but has engaged them in a constant and creative discourse.

¹ Louise Bourgeois, "Self-Expression Is Sacred and Fatal: Statements," in Christiane Meyer-Thoss, *Louise Bourgeois: Designing for Free Fall* (Zurich: Ammann Verlag, 1992), 195.

² Louise Bourgeois, "In Conversation with Christiane Meyer-Thoss," in *ibid.*, 139.

³ Christiane Meyer-Thoss, "Designing for Free Fall," in *ibid.*, 53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 53–54.

⁵ Bourgeois, "Self-Expression Is Sacred and Fatal," 179.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹¹ Conversation with the artist, December 1992.

¹² Bourgeois, "Self-Expression Is Sacred and Fatal," 178.

¹³ Louise Bourgeois, "Louise Bourgeois," *Balcon* (Madrid), issue 8–9 (1992): 44, 47.

Fig. 10. *The Confrontation* (a banquet/fashion show of body parts). 1978; performed at Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art, New York. Painted wood, latex, and fabric, ca. 37 × 20 ft. (11.3 × 6.1 m). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York