



A Conversation with Louise Bourgeois

[Barbara Flug Colin](#)

I knocked on the door of Louise Bourgeois' home in Manhattan on November 21, 1982. "Why are you here?" she asked, angry. "We had a date," I said, putting my foot in.

I remember the room was dark, her clothes were dark. I remember my questions were overprepared. I was so scared I read them from the page, blocked out her answers my tape recorder caught, though not the sculpted face and my surprise as her whole demeanor reversed. She was interested, left the room, returned with champagne.

As a beginning art writer I had studied bodies of work chronologically then interviewed thirty painters, including Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Motherwell, Jack Tworkov... I wanted the answers to simple questions like why art lasts. I saw in some painters' work a slow, pervasive projection of the biological body into the art object. Louise Bourgeois had once said: "For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture." I wondered how this abstraction from the personal creates a personal identity.

At the MoMA retrospective of Bourgeois's work (November 6, 1982 - February 8, 1983) you could see an artistic genealogy. An early sketch hung beside the latest work — a juxtaposition like great-grandmother and great-grandchild, like an architect's plan and then the building. Bourgeois's imagery from the beginning was a self-split. The "*Femme-Maison*," or "Woman House," drawings from 1946-47 are houses instead of a head. The hips, vagina, legs are recognizable, sensuous.

"The vision of a little girl trapped and looking out at the world?" I used her own words as a question early in the interview. To which she answered: "Yes, the feeling of being trapped...and the theme of escape...On the one hand you are trapped by the past, and there is nothing you can do about it except running from it...the art comes from those unsatisfied desires."

Even then, married to Robert Goldwater and with three children she was physically trapped in another way.



Femme Maison, 1946-47.
Oil and ink on linen
36" x 14"



Pillar, 1949.
Bronze
63.75" x 12" x 12"

Louise Bourgeois: "All the drawings on linen and the tinted--not painted — *tinted* self-portrait at that period [the group of "*Femme-Maison*" ca. 1946-47] were...sketches or notations for sculptures. I had three children, and I didn't have a place, physically, to do the sculpture...In '41 we moved to..."Stuyvesant Folly" on 18th Street. It had an immense mansard roof...I went up to the roof and did the sculpture because I had the space...There is a very significant evolution there where the retirement, the withdrawal, in the *maison* evolves. And some kind of strength. There's no courage there. It's just strength to go on. Then the presences appear."

The "presences" are life-height polar-thin forms the features of which are abstracted to gesture and posture. They are a feeling, a presence. Some are called portraits of specific people, ("Portrait of C.Y.," "Portrait of Jean- Louis"). Some are named more generically: "Dagger Child," "Woman in the Shape of a Shuttle," "Pillar," "Pregnant Woman," "Spoon Woman."

Barbara Flug Colin: "Some were named for a state of mind, like 'Persistent Antagonism'...?"

Bourgeois: "So I have moved from the *maison* to the occupants of the *maison*, namely my father and my mother and the mistress and the children."

So, in the next phase of Louise Bourgeois's work, "presences" interrelate on the same base: two on "Brother and Sister," five on "Quarantania 1, 1947-53." The five tall, painted wood bodies have different features. One, cut out in the lower body, holds an oval similar to the form in others cut out

in the upper body. All attached to and by the wood base.

Bourgeois: "Attached. They are dependent on each other for better or worse."

By 1955 Bourgeois's group expands. In the painted wood sculpture "One and Others," there are many figures on one base. Some are tall, recalling the "presences." Some are short, predicting future phallic shapes that will grow tall.

At the beginning of the 1960's there is a visible departure into organic material: the use of plaster combined with wood and self-hardening clay. And the forms themselves — lairs and still lifes, spirals and amoebas — seem organic in shape and material. They seem an exploration of the body we had previously seen from outside, through holes and openings into the felt insides. Interiors of the body and maybe the mind. The "structure" of the original "*Femme-Maison*" is gone. Entered?

Bourgeois: "It is a progression. The strength you need to explore your own fate and your own situation...It is a psychological evolution."

Colin: "We name those 'people outside' but they're also something about us."

Bourgeois: "Definitely.... [The psychological evolution] is familiarization and acceptance that was not present at the beginning...it is a dissolution of the fear."

"If you ask me fear of what — fear of loneliness...fear of not being part of the cluster...fear of being unable to cope with the situations that you are in...and the desire to escape. So later on not only do I accept the self but I enjoy it."



Lair, 1962.
Bronze
14" x 16" x 16"

For the most part Bourgeois's works of the 40's and 50's are in painted and stained wood. In the 60's the body of work is increasingly sensuous, increasingly intimate with the self. White plaster and self-hardening clay (and infrequently bronze) are the artist's materials. The "*Lair*" ca. 1964-5, "*Torso/Self-Portrait*" ca. 1963-4, and other works of this period are white curvaceous housing for interiors that are somewhat exposed or that have access through holes.

Bourgeois: "'The Lairs' are a conscious view of the outside world where you are trapped."

Colin: "And the forms are of your self?"

Bourgeois: "Yes. Right."

Colin: "From the beginning there is some thread of consistency."

Bourgeois: "Oh yes. Definitely."

Later in the 60's Bourgeois's "*Unconscious Landscapes*" seem like images of the unconscious literally emerging. Because she entered?

Bourgeois: "It is not entering the self. It is consciousness of the self."

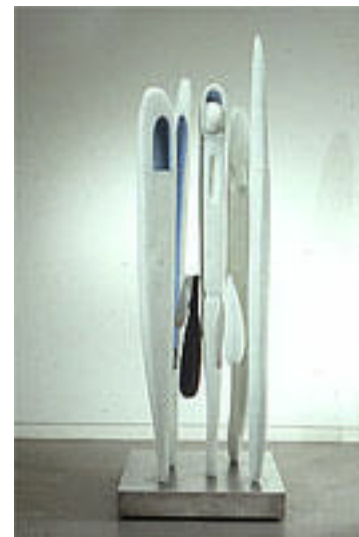
"*Unconscious Landscape*" and "*End of Softness*" (1967) have grounds from which rounded protrusions emerge, and thus these works are related to the groups from the 40's and 50's. In the early 60's the protrusions literally break through the ground. They get higher, become independent of their ground. Then they become the ground.

Colin: "The shapes that emerge in the 60's are sensuous, and they have something very much to do with the body. They are not something that you are seeing from the outside. It is something that you are —"

Bourgeois: "Experiencing."

"Experience," in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, is "a trial." At the beginning of the MoMA retrospective was a video in which Louise Bourgeois described an early trauma: her father and the mistress. A trial? Beginning experience metamorphoses.

Colin: "The 1974 work '*The Destruction of the Father*' is an extension of what preceded it?"



Quarantania, 1947-53.
Bronze with white and blue patina,
stainless steel base
80.5" x 27" x 27"

Bourgeois: " Right. It's an attempt at coming to terms with what was really overwhelming...It is related to 'Confrontation' later, where the father is actually transcended by the daughter..."

Colin: "The forms in both pieces are the forms that have emerged previously."

Bourgeois:"Oh yes."

Colin: "The forms of your self."

Bourgeois:"Yes. Right. Formally it's completely consistent. [Though] there are several themes quite different..."

The forms of your self. How old could Louise Bourgeois have been at the time of the interview in 1982? My age now, in 2000. She was full-bodied, sensuous, long hair in a bun. I with my athletic body and my short hair was and am as different from her as my students who are physically challenged are from me. Yet we all respond to one another. At the subsequent Brooklyn Museum show ("Louise Bourgeois: The Locus of Memory, Works 1982-1993")my students wrote poems in the museum.

Doors that won't open
can't close either.
Broken windows
angry people
glass thrown
through the window.

— Kelli, Grade 8

What did Kelli see? Herself. She was not yet a woman.

In the early works of Louise Bourgeois there is a disconnection, a disparity between the "given" facades and the hidden aspects of the self that cannot find expression. In the series of engraved prints "He Disappeared into Complete Silence," people are depicted as edifices. The accompanying one-page stories tell of a subject's disconnection from another person or from language or, in one story, from what is sweet and hidden — a coveted piece of sugar, uneaten, whole below ground. In the accompanying illustration an amorphous form is floating in the edifice floor. It is the form later integrated into "*Maison Fragile* , 1982." What is sweet and coveted is no longer buried below ground. It is available in the grounded self.

Bourgeois: "In the '*Femme-Maison*' the child was entrapped and at the end, forty years later — the '*Maisons Fragiles*' — they are fragile but they are free-standing. The differences have been built up. And this runs through many decades step by step."

The final "*Maison Fragile*" in Bourgeois's MoMA show is not as fragile as the 1978 one. In the '78 "*Maison*" the material is rusted. In the MoMA show, "Untitled, 1947," an ink-and-gouache on paper, a drawing made when Bourgeois didn't have the space to do sculpture, is shown on the wall beside her most recent work: six unevenly spaced floors held by four poles almost touching the ceiling. Your hand can enter the six floors if you can get behind the piece of organically shaped black wood, a remnant of a facade.

Hung on the wall beside her most recent piece, the drawing from forty years before predicts it, shows the consistency.

Bourgeois: "It's a...coming to terms with yourself, with your fears, and with your own position in the world, which is fragile, but oooh, you can cope with it."

Colin: "It's meant to be entered. It's opened."

Bourgeois: "Oh yes. It can be investigated. It can be questioned...discussed back and forth...it calls for respect."

Colin: "Can you talk about the material?"

Bourgeois: "Well, there's a great element of pleasure in the black marble. The pleasure to hack away at something which offers enough resistance.... The fact that you have found a — a somebody you can attack....the pleasure that comes from attacking a material that can resist you. And this has a direct symbolism with human relations.

"I enjoy a material I can wrestle with....the marble you cannot hurt: whatever you take away, whatever you chop away, whatever you sand away...you change that piece, but you do not destroy it. This is the kind of relation I enjoy with people. I enjoy people who can give me good resistance and take care of my attacking impulses...There are many kinds of aggression, all kinds of emotion. And what you have to say...it cannot be emotional. It has to be defined. It is a form of articulation. [The stainless steel "*Maison Fragile*" and the later marble one] are both right. They are both representing something I want to say. I suspect that I'm more articulate in the stainless steel...in the end it's the rational proof that I am looking after. But I had more fun with the marble. The marble was much more sensuous. I really had fun. I have fun carving marble. I can't destroy it. I'm not going to be destroyed either, by the way."



Femme Maison, 1981.
Black marble
48.125" x 47" x 49.875"

EXHIBITION CATALOGUES

Wye, Deborah. *Louise Bourgeois*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982.

Kotik, Charlotta; Sultan, Terry; and Leigh, Christian. *Louise Bourgeois: the locus of memory, works 1982-1993*. New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the Brooklyn Museum, 1994.

BOOKS OF INTEREST

Bernadac, Marie-Laure. *Louise Bourgeois*. Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1996. US distributor: Abbeville Publishing Group.

Bernadac, Marie-Laure, and Obrist, Hans-Ulrich. *Destruction of the father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923-1997*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press in association with Violette Editions, London, 1998.

Gardner, Paul. *Louise Bourgeois*. New York: Universe, 1993.

Weiermair, Peter, editor. *Louise Bourgeois*. Zurich, Switzerland: Edition Stemmler, 1995.

Bourgeois, Louise with Lawrence Rinder; foreword by Josef Helfenstein. *Louise Bourgeois, Drawings and Observations*. Berkeley, CA: University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California; Boston: Little, Brown 1995.

VIDEOS

Maybach, Chris and Paul Gardner, producers. *Art City: Making It in Manhattan*. Los Angeles, CA: Twelve Films, 1996.

Kent, James, producer/director. *The Age of Anxiety*. Alexandria, VA: PBS Home Video, 1997.

©2000 Frigate: The Transverse Review of Books www.frigatezine.com

All rights reserved on behalf of the authors.

We welcome your comments and suggestions on our site. Please email webmaster@frigatezine.com.

Back to [Frigatezine Home Page](#)