

Louise Bourgeois, Freud's Daughter

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1. INTRODUCTION

CLAUDIA GOULD:

Hello, and welcome to *Louise Bourgeois, Freud's Daughter*. I'm Claudia Gould, Director of the Jewish Museum.

This exhibition explores the artist Louise Bourgeois's complex and lifelong engagement with psychoanalysis, the set of theories and therapeutic practices first developed by Sigmund Freud.

In 1952, when she was 40 years old, Bourgeois began undergoing analysis in New York. She saw her analyst, Dr. Henry Lowenfeld, four or five times a week for hourlong sessions. At this point, she was already steeped in the writings of Freud and many of his followers. And she continued to undergo analysis until 1985, in an ongoing attempt to come to terms with her current emotional reality and her relations with her family and other people in her life.

In particular, Bourgeois felt that she'd never moved beyond Freud's Oedipal stage, which is the crucial moment where the child's psychosexual development becomes set. She perceived herself as trapped in the past, tormented by conflicted feelings about her mother and father that she played out in her relationships in the present. Phillip Larratt-Smith is the curator of this exhibition.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

Louise was tortured by the past, and yet she was enamored of it. She once said that her childhood never lost its magic, it never lost its mystery, and it never lost its drama, and that all of her work was rooted there.

CLAUDIA GOULD:

Alongside her sculptures, Bourgeois produced a parallel body of *written* work. She recorded her anxieties, thoughts, and dreams, her reactions to the analytic process, and notes on her artmaking. This is the first time these psychoanalytic writings have been exhibited in New York, and they are an integral part of this exhibition.

Taken together, Bourgeois's writings and sculpture demonstrate how central her experience of Freudian psychoanalysis was to her thinking and her practice. But she wasn't just passively "influenced" by Freud.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

Through her writings, Louise made her own contribution to the field of psychoanalysis. She took issue with Freud's account of female sexuality, and always maintained that he had no insight into the nature of creativity; that he had nothing to offer the artist. Yet she also called psychoanalysis her religion and thought everyone should be analyzed. She found psychoanalysis useful, but also, in certain areas, that it fell short.

Part of the argument of this show is that Louise's work and Louise's writings, represent a contribution, and in some sense a corrective, to classical Freudian psychoanalysis.

CLAUDIA GOULD:

In addition to Philip Larratt-Smith's commentary, you will hear Louise Bourgeois's words brought to life by award-winning actor Rachel Weisz.

2. CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS

NARRATOR:

Louise Bourgeois created this sculpture, titled *Conscious and Unconscious*, during the last five years of her life.

The fabric progression on the right represents the conscious mind—an image of geometric order and rational activity. And the organic teardrop shape in blue rubber alludes to the realm of the *unconscious*. Guest curator Philip Larratt-Smith:

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

So, the exhibition begins with the relationship between conscious and unconscious, which, in a sense, is the underpinning of the entire system of psychoanalysis. And the relation between conscious and unconscious is dynamic and everchanging.

Louise Bourgeois often spoke about her own volcanic unconscious. She felt that through her work she had access to unconscious impulses, fragments of the past, past traumas, and that she was able to bring them into the present in a conscious form.

When she made a sculpture, she often referred to it as a kind of exorcism, as if she were working through and abolishing the past by making a sculpture; taking past feelings of guilt or abandonment or rejection, and transforming them into a physical form. By doing so, she alleviated her own psychic tension but also created a form that was accessible to others.

NARRATOR:

For Bourgeois, conscious and unconscious are both in opposition and interrelated.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

And the same is true of many of the binary oppositions that run through Louise's work. These include male and female, passive and active, murder and suicide, geometric and organic, maternal and paternal, abstract and figurative, architecture, and the human body.

NARRATOR:

And as you continue through the exhibition, you'll see how these oppositions emerge again and again in Bourgeois' work.

3. COUPLE III

NARRATOR:

In this sculpture, we see two headless figures holding onto each other, in a kind of tight embrace.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

For Louise, the self is defined in relation to the other. And the idea of the couple, or twosome, or pair, as the fundamental structure of identity, is found throughout Louise's work.

Louise suffered from a lifelong fear of abandonment, which here finds expression in *Couple III*, an image of desperate or extreme dependency.

The color black for Louise always connoted melancholy, mourning, and depression, so that even though this couple is holding onto each other, it's not a happy picture. And it speaks more to the fear of being alone, of being abandoned.

NARRATOR:

Here, one of the two figures includes a prosthetic arm.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

And the prosthesis recalls a theme that was important to Louise. Louise saw herself as a survivor, but also as radically incomplete.

NARRATOR:

She'd survived the traumas of her past: the early loss of her mother, the later deaths of her father and husband, and her lifelong feelings of inadequacy and powerful fear of abandonment.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

The prosthesis adds a note of violence, even of sadism, to this image of coupling. There is an element of fear in sexuality and sex is equated with death. At the same time, the prosthesis is a symbol of Louise's art, which is an instrument that allows her to continue to survive, despite her vulnerabilities and inadequacies.

4. ARCHED FIGURE NUMBER THREE

NARRATOR:

This piece relates to Bourgeois' interest in hysteria, which Freud said was one of the major neuroses. It's semi-abstract, but we can see how the black fabric component represents a figure with an arched back.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

The arching of the hysteric's body when he or she is undergoing a hysteric fit is a state of extreme physical tension that expresses underlying psychic distress.

Louise always believed in the primacy of the body. She felt that the body could not lie. That the bodily symptom gave her access to her unconscious life.

NARRATOR:

Even though she wrote extensively, Bourgeois mistrusted words. She felt that words could be used to deceive, whereas the body revealed the truth.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

In her writings from the 1950s and '60s, she very carefully monitored her own bodily symptoms; when she had a stomach upset, when she had a headache, when she had insomnia. By monitoring these symptoms and analyzing them, Louise gained insight into the dynamic relationship between conscious and unconscious.

Part of Louise's contribution to psychoanalysis is her insight into the nature of symbol formation. In a sense, her sculptures were symbolic equivalents of her own physical and psychological symptoms.

5. VENTOUSE

NARRATOR:

Ventouse is the French word for the glass “cupping jars” dotting the surface of this piece. Jars like these are heated and then placed on a person’s back. As they cool, the suction created brings blood to the surface, alleviating muscle tension, stress, and other ailments.

The piece refers to a specific period in Bourgeois’ youth, when she looked after her sick mother Joséphine and often applied cupping jars to her mother’s back to relieve her pain.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

Louise’s mother fell sick in 1917 and her condition steadily worsened until her early death in 1932.

NARRATOR:

Bourgeois was only a teenager, but she took on the responsibility of caring for her mother, repeatedly traveling with her to the South of France, where the climate was better for her mother’s health.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

She was effectively the mother to her own mother, and in this reversal of roles dealt with her doctors and also treated her mother’s symptoms, for example by placing these *ventouses* on her mother’s back when she was in extreme pain.

Yet the writings reveal that Louise experienced unconscious hostility towards her mother. And when her mother died in 1932, she experienced it as an act of abandonment. The sculpture *Ventouse* gives expression to this complex interplay of feelings. The black marble gives it a kind of funereal aspect. It is almost like a funeral barge or a sarcophagus, even a tomb.

And yet it’s studded on top with these lights as if the marble were somebody’s back. It’s lit up from within, which speaks to the persistence of the past within the present, to the radiant light of the unconscious.

So the cupping jar is also an emblem of what artmaking was for Louise. Much as she used it to alleviate her mother’s physical suffering, in *Ventouse* it becomes metaphorically transformed into a symbol of art as an instrument that allows Louise to alleviate her psychological pain.

6. PASSAGE DANGEREUX

NARRATOR:

Passage Dangereux is the largest of the so-called *Cells* that Bourgeois began creating in the 1990s.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

Bourgeois' *Cells* are architectural installations that deal with memory, desire, and the five senses.

These large enclosures were containers, so in a sense, they were a metaphor for the human body.

In the *Cells*, Louise would display objects that she had made along with found objects, objects from her own life.

NARRATOR:

For example, at the near left, you'll see one of the found objects: a bottle of Shalimar perfume. This was Bourgeois' favorite scent. For her, it symbolized sexuality. Bourgeois also includes several objects associated with her father—like his starched white shirt cuffs, which are printed with the Bourgeois family name.

There's also a glass horse with a dead fly inside.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

Louise was given this glass bottle by Le Corbusier, whom she knew in the 1940s. The fly that went inside this bottle to get a little dried liquor, sugar, that was collected at the bottom, got stuck and couldn't get out. Louise loved this as a symbol of what happens if you pursue your desire. She once said, "self-expression is sacred and fatal."

For Louise art was a way of re-experiencing, and restaging past trauma, in order to master it. Like a tapestry, *Passage Dangereux* has a pronounced narrative quality, with multiple episodes, or bays, off the central nave. The *Passage* culminates in a diagrammatic depiction of a couple in bed. Here again, sex is equated with death.

7. PERSONAGES

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

The *Personages* are the first major body of sculpture that Louise made, between 1946 to 1954. The *Personages* were originally carved in wood and later cast in bronze. Louise intended them to be symbolic surrogates for people that were close to her, that she missed. In some cases people she'd left behind when she left France and moved to the United States. They were also symbolic representations of specific qualities about these people.

The *Personages* are fairly top-heavy and precarious. They were originally bolted directly into the floor to make sure that they didn't topple over. Hence, they were also a portrait of Louise's own psychic instability.

She later identified them as "aggressive darts". They have a slightly phallic quality that relate to Louise's defensiveness. And as she would learn through her analysis, they are an expression of aggression as a form of defense.

NARRATOR:

Bourgeois carved her first *Personages* from a single block of wood. Several years later when making the third *Personage*, Bourgeois changed her method – assembling it from a number of stacked segments. For Philip Larratt-Smith, that change might reflect her evolving relationship to psychoanalysis.

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

If the earlier *Personages* represent a sort of stiff resistance, then the stacked personages, show a loosening up, a movement away from rigidity, which perhaps corresponds to the process of breaking up resistance on the part of the patient that occurs in the analytic situation.

8. JANUS FLEURI

PHILIP LARRATT-SMITH:

Louise once described *Janus Fleuri* as a self-portrait of sorts. It is a fusion of male and female sexual characteristics. Two phallic forms are merged in a central scene that resembles a vagina. As Louise once said, "We are all male and female, and we all have male characteristics and female characteristics."

I think this sculpture also speaks to the persistence of Louise's Oedipal deadlock - the desire to hold the mother and father together in a single form, to merge with them and fuse with them.

The title refers to the Roman god Janus, who famously faces in both directions at once. Louise was interested in Janus as an emblem of ambivalence.

And *fleuri* is French for flowering. Which speaks to the fact that this ambivalence continues to exist and exert its power in the present, despite the fact that it is rooted in a past situation.

The fact that the work is hanging is significant. By hanging a work, Louise emphasized its fragility, after all, it hangs from a single point. But she also stabilized it and protected it by hanging it up, almost like food that's been hung out of reach of a predator. The hanging piece is capable of turning and spinning which means that it's subject to new configurations and reconfigurations.

Thus *Janus Fleuri* is a portrait of a situation from the past that continues to live and exert its influence in the present.