

LOUISE BOURGEOIS

Femme Maison



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The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago

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Acknowledgments

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Susanne Ghez
Director of Exhibitions

Louise Bourgeois: From the Inside

J. Patrice Marandel

Many years ago, on the occasion of a retrospective exhibition of the Duchamp Brothers in Rouen, a local confectioner had the idea to reproduce in chocolate Raymond Duchamp-Villon's most famous sculpture, the *Cheval Majeur*. I had then the privilege to converse at length with the *chocolatier* about his project, which successfully executed, was proudly exhibited in his shop, complete (or completed) with colorful sugar flowers around the base, a detail which particularly delighted Marcel Duchamp. In the discussions I had with him, the confectioner confessed that a first attempt at carving the *Cheval* out of a square mass of chocolate had proven unsuccessful, and that it was only after reversing the process, that is, after starting from a core to which various elements were added, that the project took a positive turn. In his own words, the sculpture "had begun from the inside."

The gifted confectioner's creation, and his enthusiasm, triggered in me an idea: that of a sculpture that would be "inside" and "outside" at the same time, seen and experienced—an object which would be comprehended in *toto* while the spectator would be at its very center. Environments and happenings of the 1960s provided only partial, and somewhat unsatisfying, answers to the idea. Too many environments ended up being large sculptures, roped off from the public, inaccessible. As for the happenings, their manipulation of time and space seemed far away from the traditional idea of sculpture—in which I was more interested—based upon permanence and the prevalence of the finished object.

I first encountered Louise Bourgeois' work in the late 60s, after moving to New York. We had met at a mutual friend's, and shortly after this initial encounter, I was invited to her place. I do not remember this first visit very distinctly. I remember however the attraction I felt then, as I still do today, for an impressive body of work, most of which was stacked, huddled, and lying around in every corner of the house. I also remember that these objects, often reminiscent of parts of the human body, half-hidden, conjured a presence which, for reasons I still find hard to explain, recalled the



Louise Bourgeois with wood figures from 1941–51 (photo 1979).



Left to right: *Breasted Woman*, 1946–48, 57 inches high; *Black Flames*, 1951, 76 inches high; and *Persistent Antagonism*, 1946–48, 70 inches high.



Untitled, 1968, 24 inches high.



Brother and Sister, 1945–46, 69 inches high.

“inside-outside” sculpture I had been looking for. I was quite unaware at the time of Louise Bourgeois’ early work, of her etchings, drawings and prints of the 40s and early 50s with their recurrent theme of the habitat, or the *femme maison*, a subject which implies both an exterior to be contemplated, and an interior to be discovered.

Femme maison is the generic title given to this exhibition, a cut across Bourgeois’ work from the 40s until the present, suggesting the continuity of a theme throughout the work and to present an *oeuvre* whose coherence often hides behind its diverse manifestations. Louise Bourgeois is indeed a versatile artist who has worked in materials as different as plaster, wood, steel, marble, latex, stone, not to mention her early paintings and works on paper.

Over the past ten years, great critical attention has been given to her work. Her sculptures and constructions have defied stylistic classification, and for that reason, have appealed to a generation of art critics, and public, for whom the complexities and ambiguities of her work are more rewarding than the pious and obvious statements of established “movements.” To establish an entire *oeuvre* on ambiguities has seemed to be Bourgeois’ aim for decades. Her work, highly evocative, is on the borderline of abstraction and figuration. It is resolutely modern in that it is open to interpretations, obvious and misleading at once, a Rorschach test for gallery visitors. At the same time, it can be disconcertingly traditional in appearance and it takes all of Bourgeois’ subtlety of mind and technical *adresse* to eschew academicism in pieces which clearly proclaim her lineage to the greatest sculptors of the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth.

Many attempts have been made to decipher Bourgeois’ complex iconography. This is usually done, from the start, with a sense of helplessness on the part of those who try it. Indeed, how would it be possible to explain a work which is so direct that it can be understood without the help of words, and at the same time so refined, personal, and perhaps deeply ironic that the mind is constantly puzzled by it? In conversation, Bourgeois accepts with a smile the interpretations of her work put to her, usually with a question mark. She also occasionally reveals some elements of her own life to allow a reading of her work. These elements, however, do not belong to the *petite histoire*, but relate to more general situations: childhood, fear, parental links, being a woman, the house, the shelter. It should be noted that complex and universal themes such as these are not unusual in the work of an artist who grew to maturity during and just after World War II. They found their counterpart in the early work of many Abstract Expressionist painters, as well as



Left to right: *Maison Fragile*, 1978, 84 x 27½ x 14½ inches; and *Maison Fragile*, 1978, 72 x 27¼ x 14¼ inches.

in the literature, mostly European—and not unsurprisingly, French—of the late 40s and early 50s.

Inside/Outside: To make a comment on the universe in personal terms, or to bring to universal dimensions a personal situation is Bourgeois' typical way of dealing with images. If an exact reading of her work is impossible—such literalness is only proper for narrative art anyway—the course of her mind is clearer. Bourgeois' images are continuous: as if the world around her, her world, the world she describes and to which her sculptures belong was made of the same substance. Her images never differentiate clearly the house from the woman, the window from the eye, the breasts from spirals, the doors from the genitals. Each one is the mirror of the other, identical yet reversed. What belongs to the realm of inside—the naked woman, for instance—is also exposed, becomes a house. The house itself can occasionally be found inside a larger, more “natural” environment: the lair. This reversed and equalized world, this world of inside and outside, is also reflected in her choice of materials. Soft human shapes, delicate and fragile, are carved out of the hardest marble, while the elements of a house or of a whole city are made of tender plaster, destroyable cardboard, or are so precariously balanced that they might fall (*Maison Fragile*).

Scale is another important issue when Bourgeois' work is considered as a whole. Bourgeois favors a human scale. Her smallest sculptures fit in the hand, her largest can be seen at a glance. Most of them address the spectator directly, in an immediate dialog. As with her materials however, Bourgeois often reverses the logical order of things: images of large habitats are reduced to smaller scale while shapes suggestive of the human body are blown up, or else repeated almost *ad absurdum*, like series of identical houses.

The homogeneity of this work goes beyond the refinements of a personal and highly sensitive iconography. In her sculpture work, Bourgeois displays a profound truthfulness to its materials. When she carves the wood or the stone, Bourgeois adapts her image fully to the material, as if it already preexisted within the massive block of marble or the large piece of wood. Her sculpture often reminds me of a midwife's task: to bring life out of the womb. In her case, it is the bringing of a dynamic image out of an inert mass, the inside out of its shell.

Catalogue

1. *Pillar*
1941–1945
Wood
2. *Portrait of C.Y.*
1941–1945
Wood
3. *Pregnant Woman*
1941
Wood
4. *Figures*
1941–1943
Wood, two elements
5. *Fallen Woman*
1944
Oil on linen
6. *Portrait of Jean Louis*
1944
Wood
7. *Brother and Sister*
1945–1946
Wood
8. *Femme Maison*
1945–1947
Oil and ink on canvas
9. *Femme Maison*
1945–1947
Oil and ink on canvas
10. *Femme Maison*
1945–1947
Oil and ink on canvas
11. *Blue Woman*
1946–1947
Wood
12. *Breasted Woman*
1946–1948
Painted wood
13. *Figures Pour Une Niche*
1946–1948
Wood, three elements
14. *Friendly Evidence*
1946–1948
Wood
15. *Pillar*
1946–1948
Painted wood
16. *Pillar*
1946–1948
Painted wood
17. *Spring*
1946–1948
Wood and bronze
18. *Untitled*
1946–1948
Oil on canvas
19. *Window Woman*
1946–1948
Wood
20. *He Disappeared Into
Complete Silence*
1947
Series of nine etchings
21. *Black Flames*
1951
Wood
22. *Labyrinthine Tower*
1962
Cast iron
23. *Lair Series (Homage
to Bernini)*
1963–1967
Bronze
24. *End of Softness*
1965
Polished bronze
25. *Chapiteau*
1968
Marble
26. *Clamart*
1968
White marble
27. *Untitled*
1968
Marble, two elements
28. *Janus Fleuri*
1968–1969
Bronze
29. *Lair of 5*
1977
Steel
30. *Maison Fragile*
1978
Steel
31. *Maison Fragile*
1978
Steel

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