

The Museum of Modern Art

MoMA EXPLORES LOUISE BOURGEOIS'S PRINTS AND BOOKS, A LITTLE-KNOWN YET INTEGRAL COMPONENT OF HER PRACTICE

With Some 300 Works, the Survey Sheds New Light on Bourgeois's Creative Process and Places Her Prints and Illustrated Books in the Context of Related Sculptures, Drawings, and Paintings

Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait

September 24, 2017–January 28, 2018

Floor Three, The Edward Steichen Galleries, and Floor Two, The Donald B. and Catherine C. Marron Atrium

Press Preview: Tuesday, September 19, 2017, 9:30–11:30 a.m.

NEW YORK, August 7, 2017—The Museum of Modern Art's ***Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait***, on view September 24, 2017, through January 28, 2018, is the first comprehensive survey of Bourgeois's prints and illustrated books. It places these mediums within the context of the artist's overall practice and sheds new light on her creative process. The exhibition includes 265 prints (including those in books and series), 23 sculptures, nine drawings, and two early paintings. *Louise Bourgeois* is organized by Deborah Wye, Chief Curator Emerita of the former Department of Prints and Illustrated Books—a longtime friend of the artist and a leading scholar of her work—with Sewon Kang, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints.

Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), a celebrated sculptor who worked in multiple mediums, was motivated by emotional struggle. Through art, she made her emotions tangible and sought to understand and cope with painful memories, jealousy, anger, anxiety, loneliness, and despair. Art was her tool of “survival,” she said, and her “guarantee of sanity.” This exhibition highlights the themes and motifs that served as visual metaphors for Bourgeois and recur in her artistic practice across seven decades. They vary from architectural forms to growth and germination in nature, from the human body and sexuality to motherhood, and even include symbolic abstraction. Her illustrated books bring attention to another of Bourgeois's little-known creative outlets: her highly evocative writings, which form the texts for these volumes.

“Her prints and their evolving states of development are especially revealing as they provide the opportunity to see Bourgeois's imagination unfold,” says exhibition curator Deborah Wye. “To view such sequences is akin to looking over the artist's shoulder as she worked.”

The creation of multiple examples of the same composition is fundamental to printmaking, and this encouraged Bourgeois to re-envision her imagery in myriad ways by embellishing her prints with gouache, watercolor, pencil, and ink to reflect her changing moods. She also

benefited from printmaking's collaborative nature, which often entails the encouragement of publishers and the assistance of expert technicians. Bourgeois's printmaking relationships could lift her spirits, and the work she accomplished with her collaborators in her home/studio on 20th Street in Manhattan was creatively energizing.

The entire body of Bourgeois's printmaking comprises some 1,200 individual compositions, and constitutes a major component of her work overall. She created prints in two periods of her career. In the 1940s, she was an active printmaker and painter; she transitioned to sculpture only late in the decade. At that time, while raising three small children, she often made prints at home on a small press. She also frequented Atelier 17, a renowned print workshop that had relocated from Paris to New York in the war years. When Bourgeois turned definitively to sculpture, she left painting behind, but returned to printmaking many decades later, in the late 1980s. During the 1990s and 2000s—when Bourgeois was in her eighties and nineties—she made prints a part of her daily practice. She resurrected her old printing press from the 1940s, and eventually added a second, both located on the lower level of her home/studio.

The thematic sections of this exhibition bring together prints from both periods of Bourgeois's engagement with the medium. They also include related sculptures, drawings, and early paintings, to underscore her overarching concerns. She saw no "rivalry" between the mediums in which she worked. Instead, she said, they allowed her "to say same things, but in different ways."

Architecture Embodied

In pursuit of emotional balance and stability, Bourgeois often made use of visual symbols derived from architecture. Her early study of mathematics may have attracted her to the rationality of the built environment. Yet the idiosyncratic structures she created often exhibit human features or reflect personal vulnerabilities. In prints and in early paintings, they become "actors" in invented narratives, sometimes standing alone, but also interacting in pairs or groups, as in the illustrations for her celebrated book *He Disappeared into Complete Silence*. Architectural structures and room-like chambers could express safety and refuge for Bourgeois, but also entrapment, as seen in her early *Femme Maison* imagery or her later sculpture *Cell VI*.

Abstracted Emotions

Bourgeois is best known for huge Spider sculptures and provocative figures and body parts, but her art also incorporated abstract forms throughout her long career. Straight lines, curves, circles, grids, and an array of biomorphic formations are found in all the mediums in which she worked. In *Lullaby*, her array of abstract shapes superimposed on the horizontal lines of music staves conjures up an imagined musical score. Bourgeois employed such forms for the function they served within a complicated psychological domain. Abstraction could be calming, with repeating forms or strokes, or offer a sense of stability through geometry, but it also expressed tension and anger.

Fabric of Memory

Bourgeois was raised in a family of tapestry restorers, but introduced fabric into her art only when she reached her eighties. Deciding she no longer needed all the clothes she had saved for years, or the household fabrics she stored, she began to incorporate dresses, slips, and coats within her sculptures, and to cut up cloth for stuffed figures and patterned collages. Bourgeois also began to make prints on fabric, enjoying the tactile qualities of the surfaces and the way they absorbed ink. She went on to create fabric books, such as *Ode à l'Oubli*, using old linen hand towels from her trousseau as pages, filled with abstract designs made from bits of garments.

Alone and Together

Throughout her career, Bourgeois employed the human figure as self-portraiture, as seen here in the provocative *Sainte Sébastienne*. She also depicted her relationships with others through figurative symbolism, such as the representations found in *Self Portrait*, which features one of her sons between his two parents. The figure, she said, helped “dissolve or appease my anxiety,” and her highly inventive imagery often combines elements of the real and the surreal. After intense psychoanalysis in the 1950s and 1960s, Bourgeois turned more directly to the physicality of the body, including an explicit sexuality; she examined a female/male continuum, and interactions between men and women. She also explored motherhood, from birth to its inevitable interdependencies.

Forces of Nature

Bourgeois was a keen observer of nature from childhood on, and was familiar with a wide variety of plants, flowers, shrubs, and fruit-bearing trees. Although she lived in New York as an adult, she spent summers at a country house in nearby Connecticut. There, as a young mother, she enjoyed interacting in nature with her three sons. In her art, she often found human correspondences in such elements as wind, storms, and rivers, or seeds and germination. And she related the body to the topography of the Earth, expressing an ongoing mutability between natural and bodily forms, as evident in the undulating hills of *Lacs de Montagne* ("Mountain Lakes").

Lasting Impressions

In the last years of her life—between the ages of 94 and 98—Bourgeois developed a highly innovative form of printmaking on a large scale, with the soft ground etching technique and extensive hand additions with brushes and pencils. The exhibition features the installation set *À l'Infini*, a landmark of that period, demonstrating what might be characterized as Bourgeois's final “late style.” Here she creates a spontaneous, flowing, and tumultuous abstract world, suggesting primordial beginnings. Babies, a nude, and an entangled couple emerge from this whirling domain and call to mind many earlier figurative works by the artist, such as the bronze *Arch of Hysteria*.

Marron Atrium Installation

A series of large-scale soft ground etchings, completed when Bourgeois was in her mid-nineties, represents a period when her printmaking flourished. These works exhibit one of her singular visual strategies: the creation of highly suggestive yet abstract forms. They also

highlight a recurring theme of the natural world, with curvilinear lines and organic shapes calling to mind seeds, roots, vines, flowers, hanging fruit, and sheaves of wheat, while sometimes hinting at parts of the body. One such example is *Accumulations*. The spider is a creature of nature that Bourgeois called “a friend” when it caught bothersome mosquitoes. But she also saw this crafty arachnid in symbolic terms, as representing her mother, a tapestry restorer. That reference is vividly represented in the exhibition by her massive Cell sculpture, *Spider*.

Audiovisual Components

Bourgeois’s recording *Otte* is presented at the entrance of the exhibition. She sings her own invented lyrics—wordplays on French words and their masculine and feminine endings. To a rap beat, she contrasts the power of men and of women as communicated by the structure of language.

The exhibition also features a film clip from *Louise Bourgeois: La Rivière Gentille*, showing Bourgeois with *Ode à l’Oubli*, a fabric book she made in 2002, with pages made from monogrammed linen hand towels saved from her trousseau. (She married in 1938.) She filled this book with fabric collages made from bits and pieces of her old garments; stains, scorches, and cigarette burns testify to their histories. In the clip, Bourgeois is seen turning the book’s pages, patting and smoothing them as she views the volume from beginning to end. The film will be on view alongside the fabric book.

Bourgeois Archive at MoMA and Online Catalogue Raisonné

In 1990, Louise Bourgeois promised an archive of her printed art to the Museum, consisting of all the prints and illustrated books in her possession at that time, and the promise of an example of each new print going forward. MoMA now has in its collection some 3,000 printed sheets by the artist, a unique resource for the study and understanding of her artistic vision and creative process.

This vast archive of Bourgeois’s prints, as well as all others she created in the medium, is now accessible online through the highly innovative, interactive website *Louise Bourgeois: The Complete Prints & Books* (moma.org/bourgeoisprints). Edited by Deborah Wye, this site presents Bourgeois’s work thematically, placing her prints in the context of related sculptures, drawings, and early paintings. It also offers numerous access tools, including searches by chronology, technique, format, publisher, and printer. Special features allow for comparing works and zooming in on details. The website will be available to Museum visitors during the course of the exhibition at a special computer kiosk and seating area.

SPONSORSHIP:

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Special thanks to The Easton Foundation for its long-standing support of the Louise Bourgeois print archive at The Museum of Modern Art.

Additional support is provided by the Annual Exhibition Fund.

MoMA Audio is supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies.

PUBLICATION:

The exhibition is accompanied by *Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait*, a fully illustrated catalogue by Deborah Wye. This publication includes an introduction situating Bourgeois's prints and illustrated books within the context of her overall practice and alongside the personal and professional developments of her long life. Six chapters explore recurring motifs that served the artist as visual metaphors and that together offer a thematic framework for interpreting her work. Extended captions for many of the illustrations provide specific background on individual prints. A section titled "Working Relationships" is comprised of interviews with three of Bourgeois's most significant collaborators: Jerry Gorovoy, her assistant for 30 years; Felix Harlan, master printer of Harlan & Weaver workshop, who worked with her on a daily basis; and Benjamin Shiff, publisher of the Osiris imprint, who encouraged her in the production of text-based works and a late, highly innovative form of printmaking. A chronology focusing on prints and illustrated books, a detailed checklist of plates, and a selected bibliography complete the volume. 248 pages, 330 color and 27 black-and-white illustrations. Paper over board cover: \$55. ISBN: 9781633450417. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Available at MoMA stores and online at store.moma.org. Distributed to the trade through ARTBOOK/D.A.P. in the United States and Canada. Distributed outside the United State and Canada by Thames & Hudson.

AUDIO TOUR:

The audio tour accompanying this exhibition features commentary by exhibition curator Deborah Wye, along with three of Bourgeois's most important collaborators: Jerry Gorovoy, her assistant for 30 years; Felix Harlan, master printer of the Harlan & Weaver workshop; and Benjamin Shiff, publisher of the Osiris imprint.

MoMA Audio is supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies.

PUBLIC PROGRAM:

New Perspectives on Louise Bourgeois: A Conversation with Juliet Mitchell and Siri Hustvedt

November 7, 6:00 p.m.; Reception to follow
The Celeste Bartos Theater

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Museum will host a conversation between psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell, renowned author of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, and Siri Hustvedt, a celebrated novelist and essayist whose most recent work is *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women*. Both Mitchell and Hustvedt have written on Bourgeois and bring new insights to interpreting her work. Topics will include Bourgeois's intense engagement with psychoanalysis; the way art functioned for her; the connection between her moods, her body, and her imagery; literary dimensions of her provocative writings; and issues relating to feminism. Exhibition curator Deborah Wye, a longtime friend of the artist's and a scholar of her work, moderates.

Tickets for this program will be available beginning October 7. Tickets (\$15; \$10 members and Corporate members; \$5 students, seniors, and staff of other museums) can be purchased online, at the information desk, or at the Education and Research Building reception desk on the day of the program.

This program is made possible by the Anna Marie and Robert F. Shapiro Seminar and Lecture Endowment Fund, established by Jeanne and Bob Savitt, Kristen and A. Andrew Shapiro, and Robert F. Shapiro, Jr.

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For downloadable high-resolution images, register at moma.org/press.

Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019, (212) 708-9400, moma.org. Hours: Saturday through Thursday, 10:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. Friday, 10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m. Museum Admission: \$25 adults; \$18 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$14 full-time students with current I.D. Free, members and children 16 and under. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs). Free admission during Uniqlo Free Friday Nights: Fridays, 4:00–8:00 p.m. moma.org: No service charge for tickets ordered on moma.org. Tickets purchased online may be printed out and presented at the Museum without waiting in line. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs). Film and After Hours Program Admission: \$12 adults; \$10 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$8 full-time students with current ID. The price of an After Hours Program Admission ticket may be applied toward the price of a Museum admission ticket or MoMA membership within 30 days.