

NEWS

Louise Bourgeois died on May 31 at the age of 98 and a half. Her death seemed premature. An institution in the best sense of the word, she was, as a friend remarked, the art world's prime contrarian. The older she got, the younger and more daring her work became. Almost approaching Picasso in octogenarian inventiveness and fearless formal innovation, she created sculptures and installations using wood, marble, bronze, rubber, and glass, as well as old doors, underwear, and sweaters.

Bourgeois was unrivaled in her ability to render psychological states physical. In her case, they were the wounds of early childhood, which she often attributed to her father's relationship with her governess, who was his mistress. She blended nurture, torture, ecstasy, and malice. Her early-'90s "Cell" installations encase, within encircling frameworks of old doors, metaphoric and sculptural mysteries—beds, mirrors, toy trains, surrealist dresser ornaments—and her very personal sense of trauma. Her huge, heavy metal machine *Two-some* (1991) is as overtly sexual as the giant latex phallus she tucked under her arm in a famous photograph taken by Robert Mapplethorpe a decade earlier. She transformed flesh-colored underwear into wonderfully clumsy fornicating fabric figures.

An emblematic if ambivalent feminist employing aggressive, not-quite-domesticated subject matter that revolved around the so-called primal scene ("problems that are pre-gender," as she put it), she had an enormous influence on many younger artists. Women especially are indebted to her—from Eva Hesse (with whom she showed in Lucy Lippard's "Eccentric Abstraction" exhibition at Fischbach Gallery in New York in 1966) to Jenny Holzer, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, and a multitude of others.



▲ Louise Bourgeois in her studio, ca. 1946.

Where Ecstasy Met Malice

Louise Bourgeois: Innovator, Role Model, Contrarian

BY KIM LEVIN

However, for the artist, who studied with Fernand Léger and whose life spanned the modern century, recognition came late. Her first show of totemic wood sculpture was held at Manhattan's Peridot Gallery in 1949, but her work was largely ignored throughout the '50s and '60s. It wasn't until 1982, when art dedicated to imperfection, abjection, and private narrative was coming into favor, that Bourgeois became the first woman to be given a retrospective at MoMA. By then she was already in her 70s.

Born in Paris on Christmas Day 1911 to a family that restored tapestries, Bourgeois was often claimed by the French as one of their own, but we knew her as a New Yorker. She lived and worked in the city from 1938 onward and was married to the eminent art historian Robert Goldwater, with whom she had three sons. She alluded to weaving and her family's tapestry business in some of her "Cell" installations, in her fabric sculpture, and in her 30-foot spider, titled *Maman* (1999). She also alluded to them in the repeating lines and plaids of her red and blue drawings, but the geometric patterning may have owed something, as well, to her studies of mathematics and geometry at the Sorbonne. A show of her fabric works is on view at the Fondazione Emilio e Annabianca Vedova in Venice through September 19.

Bourgeois worked until the week before she died. And nearly to the end she held her legendary Sunday salons, where artists from around the world would bring and show their work. In their 30-year run, the salons often operated as group therapy sessions, and Bourgeois's biting honesty could still make some of the artists cry. ■

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