

### THE ARTS

Louise Bourgeois gets a retrospective at the Guggenheim. At 96, she's got a lot of retro to show.

By PETER PLAGENS

**N**OBODY SHOULD GO TO see Louise Bourgeois's retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York just because she's 96. People should see it instead because, as the catalog essay by Frances Morris says, the diminutive sculptor "rarely makes work to order and never makes work to please."

Which means that the more than 150 sculptures, installations, drawings and prints on view starting June 27 are by turns—and sometimes all at once—pioneering, quirky, technically breathtaking, disturbing, confessional and very, very sexual in a spooky kind of way. Bourgeois's art is a succession of modernist and postmodernist styles—all decidedly unpretty, all wonderfully reckless and all pleurably disquieting. They make sense as a continuum only when seen in the long view. Which is why this retrospective is so essential. It was utterly convincing when I saw it in London, and it promises to be even more spectacular on the Guggenheim's viscerally appropriate spiral ramps.

Her first gallery show in New York, in the 1940s, consisted of tall, narrow, not-quite-abstract figures, a kind of synthesis of Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti and Isamu Noguchi. In the '60s, Bourgeois started playing with such then-unconventional materials as resin and latex. She began a somewhat sci-fi-looking, but also weirdly sexual, biomorphic mode (think "Alien" designer H. R. Giger doing soft-core) that continues to this day. Nothing conveys Bourgeois's attitude toward sex better than a 1982 Robert Mapplethorpe photograph of the artist looking slyly at the camera while holding "Filleto"—a very, very phallic 1968 sculpture—casually under her arm.

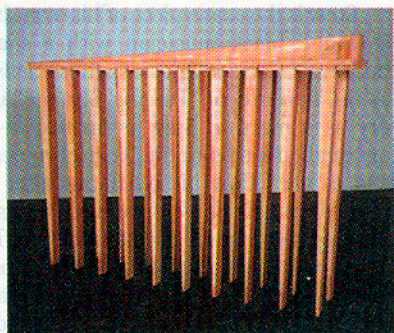
Bourgeois was born in Paris on Christmas Day. Her parents repaired tapestries, and Louise's first art experiences were in pitching in on the mending. Her mother, Joséphine, was an ardent follower of the feminist Louise Michel, after whom she named her daughter. Dad, however, was



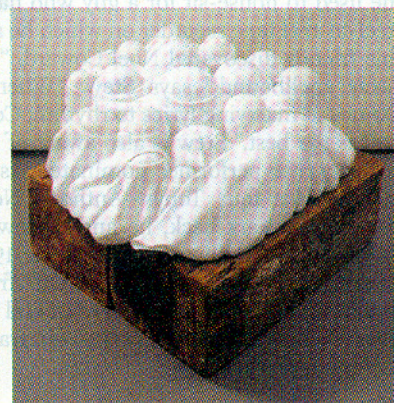
## The Lady and the

another kettle of fish. He moved his British mistress, Sadie, into the house under the guise of her being the children's tutor. Sadie stayed for 10 years while Joséphine quietly seethed. What did little Louise think of the arrangement? One night at dinner she modeled a figure of her father from bread and then ate it, piece by piece. Even today, it's apparent that the papered-

over family dysfunction still resonates with the artist. When asked via e-mail—she doesn't do in-person interviews anymore—why there's so much sex in her work, the artist who's always reminded me of Ruth Gordon with a French accent says, "The work has to do with so much more than just sex. That's just the mechanics. My art is about seduction and rejection.



**ROCKS OF AGES:** Bourgeois's work reflects what is real and raw about being alive: 'The Blind Leading the Blind' (top), 'Maman' (above), 'Cumul I' (below) and in 1990 with 'Eye to Eye'



# Ramp

It's about flirtation and frustration. It's about desire and anger, anxiety and fear. There is abandonment and there is violence. "In Choisy," a 1993 work that's relatively recent on the Bourgeois timeline, contains a guillotine blade poised scarily over a marble model of the Bourgeois family house. Here's a work of modern art whose meaning isn't hard to figure out.

After studying math at the Sorbonne, Bourgeois switched to art school in the early 1930s and became an assistant to the modernist painter Fernand Léger. In 1938, she married the American art historian Robert Goldwater and immigrated to New York. Thirty-five years later, Bourgeois was a widow. What effect did being the wife of a prominent scholar-connoisseur have on her art? With typical affectionate irreverence, she replies, "Art history is OK, but it's not my bag. I detest how art history is used to justify, validate, boost and give meaning to a work of art. My art is about flesh and blood. It's about raw emotions. It is not just about ideas. It's about being alive." In case you miss the point that art for her is a tough business, she adds, "My work deals with problems that I am trying to solve. There is obsession, compulsion and repetition in the work because I continually suffer."

She wasn't an instant success. Although she sold a piece to the Museum of Modern Art in the late 1940s and became friends with Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell, Bourgeois never gained much traction in the art market of the 1950s and '60s. Always copacetic with younger artists, however, the 54-year-old Bourgeois was included with twentysomethings Bruce Nauman (he cast his armpit in fiber glass) and Eva Hesse (she deflated minimalism in latex) in the 1966 "Eccentric Abstraction" show, which signaled the arrival of another kind of postmodernism than pop art. It was only after the move to a big Brooklyn studio in 1980 that Bourgeois could resurrect and transform her childhood environment of all that incredible stuff. Out of that spacious studio came the "Cells"—room-size, sanctum-sanctorum-like installations employing both found objects (old wooden doors, chairs) and individual Bourgeois sculptures (irregular glass globes, clasped hands cut off at the wrists). The effect these works have on one who enters them is, for a few seconds or even a few minutes, wonder at being let loose in an attic. But stay any longer, and the strange, claustrophobic combinations of objects is psychologically intense to the point of necessitating escape. As Bourgeois said to me back in 1993 at her U.S.-pavilion exhibition at the Venice Biennale, "I want to bother people. I want to worry them."

So it's not surprising that Bourgeois owes her greatest acclaim—at least among the majority of the art public—to one of her creepiest pieces: a 30-foot-tall black spider made from steel and marble. Bourgeois designed the tellingly titled "Maman" ("Mommy" in French) in 1999, and it was cast in parts in 2001. Ar-

tistically and personally, the sculpture is rather a grand summation. The spider's pointy, disjointed legs recall Bourgeois's totemlike work of the '40s; the abdomen echoes her '60s biomorphism, and the odd feeling of imprisonment you get when you're under the creature, with legs all around you, continues the claustrophobia of the "Cells." The arachnids (a 2003 "Spider Couple" will greet you in the Guggenheim's atrium) clearly express the simultaneous power and vulnerability of Louise's mother, the cheated-on Mme. Bourgeois. "I hope [people] perceive the intensity of my relationship with her," Bourgeois says. Oh, do we.

Whenever a woman artist has survived in the (still) male-dominated art world long enough to earn a major retrospective, she becomes something of a feminist icon. Sixty years ago, a major leitmotif of the picket-fence-like sculpture "The Blind Leading the Blind" (1949) was women being confined to the home. Many view the 21st-century spiders as a further comment on that social injustice. Moreover, there's the sheer volume of Bourgeois's output. Even allowing for the fact that she's been at it for seven decades, the totality of her

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work represents a defiance of the art historian Whitney Chadwick's observation that women's "attempts to juggle domestic responsibilities [Bourgeois has raised two sons] with artistic production have often resulted in smaller bodies of work, and often works smaller in scale, than those produced by male contemporaries." Finally, she was belatedly—if not rediscovered, at least elevated to a status commensurate with her talent in the 1970s, concurrent with the rise of feminism in the art world. The feminist activist Arlene Raven said flatly, "Feminist" is what Bourgeois's art is and always has been." Bourgeois herself says, "There are inequities in our society between men and women, but they have never kept me from saying or doing what I want." In a way, Bourgeois can't help being a feminist. Her charmingly gritty persona and her long, long career make her an exemplar for women whether she wants to be or not. But the complex craft and deep emotional impact of her sculpture make her a great artist for everybody—male or female—with an inclination to look. ■