

Is It Fair to Call Louise Bourgeois “Freud’s Daughter”?

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Page 1 of 10

It's a good bet that being called his daughter would have made Bourgeois hopping mad.



Installation view *Louise Bourgeois: Freud's Daughter*, The Jewish Museum, NY, May 21-September 11, 2021 (Photo by Ron Amstutz. © The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY) Pictured: "The Destruction of the Father" (1974), latex, plaster, wood, fabric, and red light. Collection Glenstone Museum, Potomac, MD

Several interesting questions are illuminated by the Jewish Museum's exhibition *Louise Bourgeois, Freud's Daughter*. One is, how strong a grip does Freud have on contemporary culture? Another, what do artists have (consciously) in mind when they point to the unconscious as a creative source? It's safe to say that Freudian terminology still shapes the language of introspection and, with sometimes perplexing consequences, what we understand as guilt and innocence. Freud's focus on real bodies rather than ineffable mindstuff matters greatly at a time strikingly receptive to all things spookily spiritual. Still important, too, is his conviction that early psychic damage is an endlessly renewable source of both pain and creative energy. But the uncritical homage paid to Freud in this exhibition is rare. And it's a good bet that being called his daughter would have made Bourgeois hopping mad.

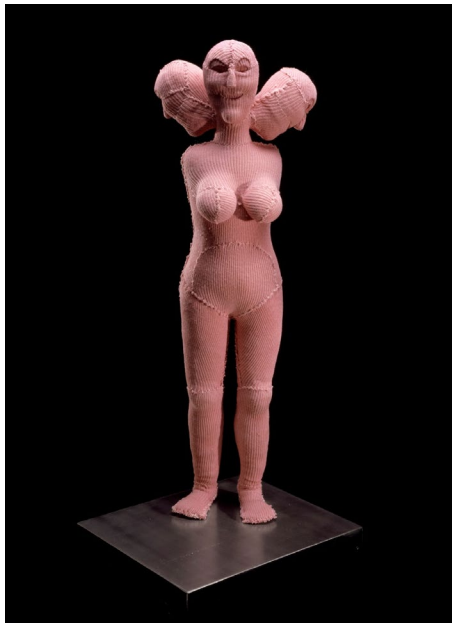
True, Bourgeois underwent a three-decade-long course of variably intense analysis with a classical Freudian, which began shortly after the 1951 death of her actual father, and gained renewed urgency after the death of her husband, in 1973. She kept extensive notes about her sessions and her readings of Freud, as well as Jacques Lacan, Carl Jung, Ernst Kris, Melanie Klein, Wilhelm Reich, and many others. As early as 1950, she was exploring the psychological source of art-making, proposing that a panel moderated by Robert Motherwell address the question, "What causes the work of art to be born? ... is it to escape from depression? ... to record confidence or pleasure?"



Installation view *Louise Bourgeois: Freud's Daughter*, The Jewish Museum, NY, May 21-September 11, 2021 (Photo by Ron Amstutz. © The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY)

Crediting Freud as a powerful healer, Bourgeois disputed the notion that psychoanalysis inhibits creativity: "Some people have declared that if artists were analyzed they would stop being artists. I disagree. Self-knowledge makes artists better artists," she wrote in a 1993 exhibition catalogue, "Ignorance is bliss, but its ransom is to keep you a prisoner of your own fears." In an interview the same year, she described the unconscious as "something you do not want, that you undergo," a "volcanic" force that is sometimes irascible, sometimes a friend, but in either case inescapable. Access to it, she added, was "a fantastic privilege," and she felt lucky to be able to sublimate it — an admittedly Freudian term — in her work.

But Bourgeois took a dim view of Freud's real understanding of the creative process, writing flatly, in a statement published in 1992, that Freud "did nothing for the artist." Perceptive, wry, deeply literate (her baccalaureate degree was in philosophy) and inveterately contrarian, she deemed Lacan "a con man" who, like Freud, was "barking up the wrong tree," and judged both "just like my father: to promise so much and deliver so little." Spurning a resource often identified with Freud, Bourgeois repeatedly insisted that she had no use for dreaming, which she felt "softens you and makes you unfit for daily work." In fact, the irremediably insomniac artist declared to critic Donald Kuspit, "I don't dream."

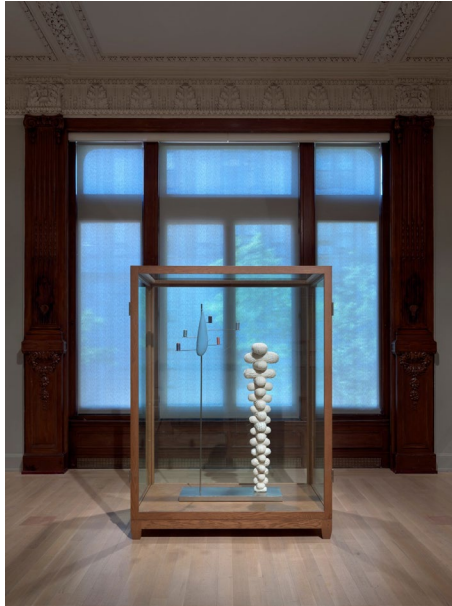


Louise Bourgeois, "Hysterical" (2001), fabric, stainless steel, glass, wood, and lead. Collection The Easton Foundation (© The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Photo: Christopher Burke)

Suggesting otherwise are several long accounts of her dreams among the texts in *Freud's Daughter*. Equally contrafactual is her answer to one interviewer's point-blank question, "Have you ever been through analysis yourself?" "No," she responded, "but I have spent a lifetime in self-improvement." Helpfully, she also warned a critic, "I never talk literally. Never, never, never." In her art, though, she was ferociously honest.

Toggling between considering her work in the light of psychoanalysis and presenting her as a case history, the exhibition, curated by Philip Larratt-Smith, mixes a strong selection of sculptures and works on paper with both private writings and those meant for public consumption — a distinction to which she declared herself indifferent. Indeed, Bourgeois actively invited consideration of her personal life when, at 70, on the occasion of a long-overdue 1982 survey at MoMA, she began speaking of her work as inextricably bound up with the charged relations among her father, her governess, who was his mistress, and her spurned mother.

If Bourgeois's account of this situation, titled *Child Abuse* and published in *Artforum*, is drily funny ("Sadie, if you don't mind, was mine. She was engaged to teach me English," she says of the tutor), Larratt-Smith's commitment to orthodox Freudianism is dead serious. An introductory wall text announces his intention to frame Bourgeois through the Oedipus complex, and so he does, for instance, with a solemn disquisition on penis envy that appears beside the show's grand finale, 1974's "Destruction of the Father." But it surely can be said that this famous, undeniably dark installation is also more than a little comical. With its luridly red-lit table littered with casts of butchered meat, set on a small curtained stage ringed with what look like nothing so much as bean-bag chairs, it suggests a Victorian entertainment staged by creatively naughty children, updated for the 1970s.



Installation view *Louise Bourgeois: Freud's Daughter*, The Jewish Museum, NY, May 21-September 11, 2021 (Photo by Ron Amstutz. © The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY) Pictured: "Conscious and Unconscious" (2008), fabric, rubber, thread, and stainless steel. Collection the Easton Foundation

Other more deeply provocative (and equally well-known) sculptures of the 1960s and '70s also appear in this final room, including the androgynous "La Fillette" (1968) and the floridly female "Janus Fleuri" (1968/92). Cordoned off rather ominously in a closet nearby are three bronze totems from the late 1940s and early '50s. Later work, which viewers encounter first, includes the terrifying cloth sculpture "Couple III", in which the copulating pair, both over life-size and headless, embrace with a single, nightmarishly menacing prosthetic arm. Similarly disturbing is the exhibition's haunting centerpiece, "Passage Dangereux" (1997). The largest of a series of "Cells" Bourgeois commenced in the early 1990s, it arrays relics of her life and art — a frayed tapestry (metonym for the family business), glass globes and mirrors, dozens of old chairs — in a multichambered cage, part sanctuary, part prison.

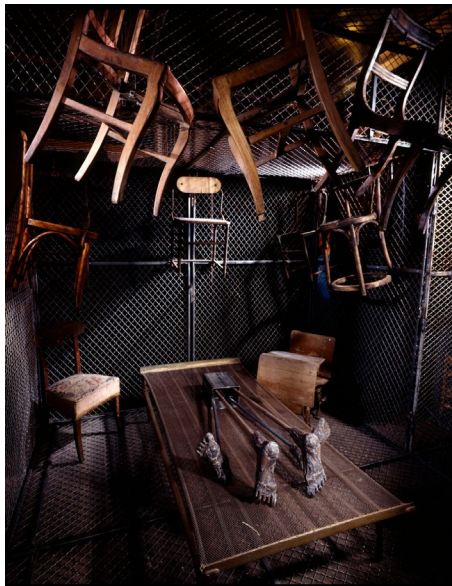
As to Bourgeois's writing — shown in handwritten, typescript, and printed examples — it is frank, sometimes anguished, and often sharply insightful. But it doesn't reach the harrowing lyricism of, say, Antonin Artaud's ruminations about psychological distress, nor the lapidary concision of Jenny Holzer's language, which is strongly evoked in Bourgeois's two terse texts about assault and guilt, stamped into lead plaques. Least of all does Bourgeois adopt Larratt-Smith's language, as when, in the exhibition catalogue, he compares the resistance that emerges during analysis to a sculptor's struggle with refractory material, and argues that for Bourgeois, making art "activated a link between her aggressivity and her libido."



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Freud first entered the visual arts through heatedly sexual paintings by his peers in Vienna (for instance, Oskar Kokoschka, Egon Schiele) but it was with André Breton's definition of Surrealism in the 1920s that he was apotheosized as an art god — a compliment that Freud did not return. While he pursued a scientific model of mental experience measurable in cathexes and discharges, the Surrealists wielded his therapeutic methods — free verbal association, as in interpreting dreams; "thinking in pictures" because, as Freud wrote, it "stands nearer to unconscious processes than does thinking in words" — precisely as weapons against logic. In any case, Bourgeois, who is invariably identified with Surrealism because it dominated the Parisian art world within which she emerged, firmly rejected the affiliation, repeatedly insisting that she was instead an Existentialist.

As it happened, her belated fame, following the MoMA show, coincided with the rise of post-structuralist theories that again invoked psychoanalysis, but from a coolly depersonalized perspective hardly more to Bourgeois's taste. For a longtime New Yorker who hastened to claim she was American rather than French, it is unsurprising (though seldom remarked) that she had a strong interest in Jung, whose investment in visual art was broader and better informed than Freud's, and whose inclination toward an ecumenical spirituality — along with the provision of an elaborate visual symbol system — proved appealing to many postwar American artists.



Louise Bourgeois, "Passage Dangereux," detail (1997), metal, wood, tapestry, rubber, marble, steel, glass, bronze, bones, flax, and mirrors. Private Collection, Courtesy Hauser & Wirth (© The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Photo: Peter Bellamy)

In a 1951 diary entry, she reports reading Jung "all day" and calls him, approvingly, a modern man in search of a soul, "much less dogmatic than Freud and less worrisome." And in a 1990 *Artforum* essay on Freud's beloved antiquities (she called them his "toys"), she again compared him unfavorably to Jung, noting that Freud was neither visually inclined nor interested in the art of his day, and observing, shrewdly, "I also think you have to see the enormous, threatening presence of Jung behind Freud's collection."

It is worth remembering, in connection with antiquities, and the "primitive" cultures, from Greece to Africa and the South Seas, that provided Freud not only with toys but also with so many of his metaphors, that Bourgeois's husband, Robert Goldwater, was the author of an indispensable 1938 book exploring the link between modernism, tribal art, and the language of psychoanalysis. Modernist primitivists, Goldwater wrote, assume "that any reaching under the surface, if only it is carried far enough and proceeds according to the proper method, ... will be more emotionally compelling."

A conflation of subterranean darkness and “primitive” cultures tied the language of psychoanalysis not only to that of modernist art but also to the racist assumptions that compromised both. In *Freud's Daughter*, the issue is reprised, though hardly resolved, with a decidedly anthropology-museum-like glass case crammed with all manner of small sculptures and drawings.



Louise Bourgeois, “The Destruction of the Father” (1974), latex, plaster, wood, fabric, and red light. Collection Glenstone Museum, Potomac, MD (© The Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, Photo: Ron Amstutz)

Robert Storr writes, in his biography *Intimate Geometries*, that Goldwater's sudden death was an "incalculable" shock to Bourgeois. But it freed her — required her — to consolidate her narrative as a solitary survivor, a black widow spider. Telling Storr, "we talked of nothing but history," she added, "It's not what art is made of." And despite the connection so often made between her totems and tribal artwork, she also declared, "I detest anything primitive."

Amid the many intellectual paths Bourgeois pursued (and rejected), there is one Freudianism, quoted by Juliet Mitchell in the exhibition catalogue, that she would surely have embraced: "There are no contradictions in the unconscious." For artists, it may be Freud's sturdiest insight.

Louise Bourgeois, *Freud's Daughter continues at the Jewish Museum (1109 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan) through September 12.*