

## Louise Bourgeois' etchings turn inward to explore motherhood, nature

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Louise Bourgeois' "Turning Inwards Set #4 (The Smell of Eucalyptus (#1))" (2006), left, and "Turning Inwards Set #4 (I See You!!!)" (2007) / Courtesy of the Easton Foundation/VAGA at ARS, New York/SACK, Seoul

"Art is a guarantee of sanity." This sentence famously declared by Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) reflects the role that sculptures, paintings and etchings played throughout the life of the prolific French-American artist.

In Korea, she is arguably best known for her gigantic bronze spider sculpture series, "Maman," one huge piece of which used to sit in the courtyard of Leeum Museum of Art in Seoul before being relocated this year to the Ho-Am Art Museum in Gyeonggi Province. Representing protection and nurturing, the creature was an ode to her own beloved mother.

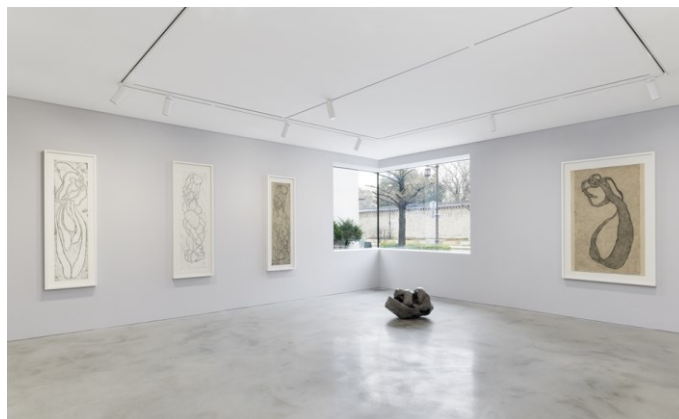
For Bourgeois, whose unresolved childhood traumas stemmed from resentment of her father's years of infidelity and sympathy for her invalid mother's silence, art was a tool for addressing her bottled-up fears and insecurities.

"But in comparison to her earlier works that are more piercing and emotionally intense, the artist's pieces created during the final years of her life turned inward — to herself," said Yoon Hei-jeong, the managing director of Kukje Gallery, where the artist's lesser-known, soft-ground etching series "Turning Inwards #4" is currently on view.



Louise Bourgeois descends the stairs in her home on West 20th Street in New York City in 1992. /  
Courtesy of Easton Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at ARS, NY

"The series indicates a phase of self-reflection, as she turns her attention to her inner self, away from the resentment, wounds and hatred that consumed her in the past."



An installation view of "The Smell of Eucalyptus" exhibition at Kukje Gallery in central Seoul / Courtesy of Kukje Gallery

In "The Smell of Eucalyptus" exhibition, a total of 39 etchings produced between 2006 and 2009 are shown together for the first time in Korea. With these large prints at the forefront, there are also eight sculptures nestled throughout the gallery space that share similar formal and thematic concerns, thereby creating a point of dialogue between the two different genres of her work.

The primary themes and iconography addressed in her "Turning Inwards" series are a continuation of her years-long artistic exploration of motherhood, sexuality and interest in nature — especially plants in relation to human bodies.

One of the pieces on display, from which the show's title derives, underlines the central importance of memory as well as the sense of healing that materialized in her later work.

In the 1920s, the artist nursed her ailing mother in the south of France, often using eucalyptus oil as a treatment. The plant eventually came to symbolize her time and relationship with her mother, later transforming into a means of visualizing maternal identity.

It also became a sensory trigger — a means to evoke her past memory — as she burned the plant in her studio to cleanse the aura.

"Ultimately, considering how art became a tool for coping with her emotions throughout the years, eucalyptus was both a physical and symbolic motif that provided her with a sense of healing," Yoon said.

A handful of her other pieces from the series draw an intricate connection between the human body and plant forms from nature, such as coiling stems reminiscent of a person's internal organs and an anthropomorphic creature filled with countless eyes, resembling a fruit-bearing tree.

"Our own body could be considered, from a topological point of view, a landscape with mounds and valleys and caves and holes," the artist once said. "So it seems rather evident to me that our body is a figuration that appears in Mother Earth."

"The Smell of Eucalyptus" exhibition runs through Jan. 30, 2022, at Kukje Gallery.