

# That kindly spider

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Louise Bourgeois | A New York exhibition unpicks the intricate web of metaphor that the artist wove over a long career. *By Ariella Budick*

Louise Bourgeois has been terrifying the world for 20 years with colossal spiders that spring up in public squares and museum galleries, their sinistral spindly legs looming over puny humans. These bronze, marble and steel arachnids won her global fame. Christie's auctioned one for \$4m in 2006; another sold for seven times that less than a decade later. These scary sculptures have come to overshadow an imagination that could be as delicate as it was muscular, at once subtle and brazen, cheeky and deadly serious.

Bourgeois died in 2010, two years shy of her centennial, and the Museum of Modern Art has mounted a stunning show of her prints and illustrated books: *Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait*. Organised by emerita curator and Bourgeois expert Deborah Wye, the exhibition reveals unsuspected layers in an artist whose fame blotted a career full of variety and nuance.

It was Wye who proposed MoMA's first Bourgeois retrospective — the first Bourgeois retrospective anywhere — in 1982, turning the 70-year-old into a late-life celebrity. She had spent nearly 50 years plugging away in the shadows; now the show's triumph spurred her into a frenzied bout of creativity. Almost all her illustrious masterpieces were produced in her eighth, ninth, and 10th decades.

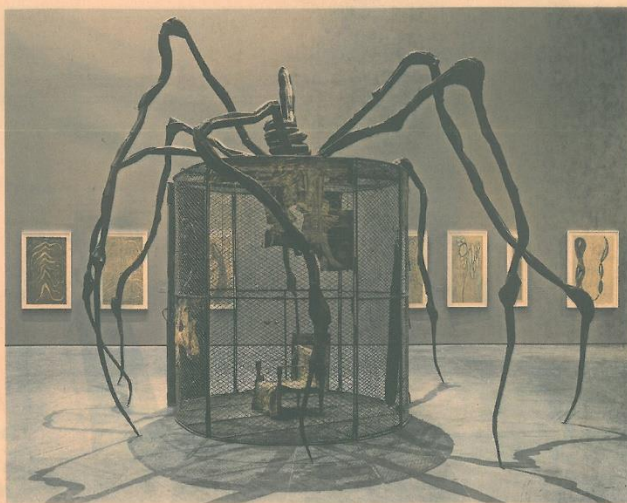
Wye has a different agenda this time: to understand Bourgeois not as an explosive phenomenon, but as a

slow-burning spirit who cultivated a consistent set of themes over a very long time. Let's start with the spider, which first emerged in a 1947 drawing as a series of straight, grid-like segments.

"My best friend was my mother," she famously explained, "and she was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable . . . and useful as a spider." Her mother, a tapestry restorer, could be counted on to keep her family's web in good repair. To Bourgeois, the spider was not a fearsome figure but a protective one, shielding her offspring from a world full of parasites and malicious mosquitoes.

Yet when Bourgeois returned to her eight-legged "friends" in the mid-1990s they defied her description, which was either tongue-in-cheek or disingenuous, or both. The spider is a killer, after all, a predator as well as protector. The tapestry she weaves is a trap. The later prints, realised on fabrics from her trousseau, continue to work out the complex emotional meanings she found in this motif. In "Hairy Spider" (2001), printed on a white damask napkin, the creature spreads its legs to reveal the egg sack it will imminently "give birth" to. "Spider Woman", etched on to a lace handkerchief, is a female face that sprouts a mane of waving limbs.

These images evoke the artist herself, whose waist-length hair acted as both weapon and shield. We first see that defensive coiffure in a 1948 drawing of a protuberant, primitive Venus engulfed in her own locks. Six decades later, in



the 2000s, Bourgeois was still choreographing exuberant tresses that shoot from a woman's head in a series of dry-points called "Femme". The hair twists like snakes, droops like the stems of a dying plant, waves upwards like seaweed or swells like sturdy branches.

Trees, too, served as alter egos, culminating in a series where arms morph into boughs and legs into roots, portraits

Clockwise from main: installation view of Louise Bourgeois: *An Unfolding Portrait* at MoMA, New York; Plate 8 from Bourgeois' illustrated book *Ode à Ma Mère* (1995); No. 5 from her installation set *'A l'Infini'* (2008) — Martin Beck, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/The Estate Foundation/VAGA, NY

of a contemporary Daphne metamorphosing into a laurel tree to wriggle away from Apollo. Bourgeois saw herself in practically every shape she depicted. She translated her emotional life into abstract spirals, bewigged an apartment building with extravagantly long hair, and topped a female torso with a multi-storey barn.

The "Femme Maison" — woman as house — recurs first in paintings and drawings from the 1940s and later in marble and fabric. Like the web-bound spider or the immobilised tree, this vision of a woman planted on foundations and built out of mortar and stone hints at deep conflicts about femininity. Bourgeois' half-women are comforting and claustrophobic, liberated and trapped, seductive and monstrous.

The show is ingeniously installed and edited to give each piece breathing space, and to encourage us to see lurking connections. The spiral and the electric hair re-emerge towards the very end of her life, this time in red gouache.

Abstract lines twist and turn, evoking umbilical cords or guts — or spider's legs. Red and pink washes whisper of blood cells and body fluids. These pervasive motifs toll through a long career, repeated notes that keep changing harmonic meaning.

Bourgeois has at times been lumped with Frida Kahlo as a feminist victim, constantly trumpeting the trauma of being a woman. She did play into that role, casting her art as a form of therapy, an exorcism for abuses she endured and a channel for violent impulses. In the mid-1980s, she began to talk about the pain behind her creativity: rage over a prolonged affair between her father and



her English governess, plus her mother's infuriatingly silent forbearance. She began to "explain" her work in too much detail, playing up the fashionable narrative of family dysfunction.

The MoMA show argues against such facile self-interpretation. Wye rejects the one-to-one correspondences that Bourgeois advanced about her sculpture ("The three hands are a metaphor for psychological dependency"; "The transparent glass represents a sickness") and refuses to read all those self-portraits merely as the vehicles for an aggrieved narcissism. Instead, Wye presents Bourgeois' body of work as a complex expressive project, in which symbols intertwine with mysteries and revelations hide deeper veins of reticence. Her artistic life did not develop in a straight line, but in thematic threads that crossed and laced and doubled back: a web that took nearly 100 years to weave.

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