

The Observer Louise Bourgeois

Rachel Cooke

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'My art is a form of restoration'

In a rare interview with one of the world's greatest living artists, Rachel Cooke asks Louise Bourgeois to reflect on her extraordinary career

RC: You moved to New York early in your career. What effect did this have?

LB: I was a 'runaway girl' from France who married an American and moved to New York City. I'm not sure I would have continued as an artist had I remained in Paris because of the family setup. In coming to New York, I was suddenly independent from them. I did feel the affects of being French. There was both isolation and stimulation. Homesickness was the theme of the early sculptures.

RC: Do you think women artists have an easier time of it today, particularly in terms of the market?

LB: To survive as an artist is difficult. The market is only one issue, and it follows its own logic. Even though what I do does enter the market, it doesn't interest me. I am exclusively concerned with the formal qualities of my work. It is about the need and the right to self-expression. There are plenty of good artists that don't have a market at all. In terms of the market, things have improved for women, but there is still a big disparity.

RC: The main focus of your work, according to some, is the relationship between an entity and its surroundings. But you have also been influenced by human relationships. Can you explain more about this aspect of your work?

LB: My works are portraits of a relationship, and the most important one was my mother. Now, how these feelings for her are brought into my interaction with other people, and how these feelings for her feed into my work is both complex and mysterious. I'm still trying to understand the mechanism.

RC: In the Fifties and Sixties, the art market ignored you a little. Was this frustrating? Was it connected to your sex? How and why did things change?

LB: The Fifties were definitely macho and the Sixties less so. The fact that the market was not interested in my work because I was a woman was a blessing in disguise. It allowed me to work totally undisturbed. Don't forget that there were plenty of women in a position of power in the art world: women were trustees of museums, the owners of galleries, and many were critics. Surely, the Women's Movement affected the role of women in the art world. The art world is simply a microcosm of the larger world where men and women compete.

RC: Today, your most famous works might be your 'spider' structures. Is this pleasing? Can you talk a little about how they came about?

LB: The spiders were an ode to my mother. She was a tapestry woman, and like a spider, was a weaver. She protected me and was my best friend.

RC: Your parents worked with tapestry, and you initially studied mathematics. Some critics have traced both these influences in your work. How separate is the mathematician in you, from the artist, or are the two intimately connected?

LB: My love of geometry is expressed by the formal aspect of my work. From the tapestries, I got this large sense of scale. I learned their stories, the use of symbolism and art history. The restoration of the tapestries functioned on a psychological level as well. By this I mean that things that have broken down or have been ripped apart can be joined and mended. My art is a form of restoration in terms of my feelings to myself and to others.

RC: You work on a grand scale. Why?

LB: I want to create my own architecture so that the relationships of my forms and objects are fixed. Sometimes I need the large scale so that the person can literally move in relationship to the form. The difference between the real space and the psychological space interests me and I want to explore both. For example, the spiders, which are portraits of my mother, are large because she was a monument to me. I want to walk around and be underneath her and feel her protection.

RC: How do you feel now about Robert Mapplethorpe's famous photograph of you?

LB: I am still fond of Robert Mapplethorpe's portrait. People seem to like it very much because they thought Robert and I were both 'naughty'.

RC: Can you tell us a little of how you have worked over the years? Do you work only when inspiration strikes?

LB: I only work when I feel the need to express something. I may not be sure of exactly what it is, but I know that something is cooking and when I am on the right track. The need is very strong. To express your emotions, you have to be very loose and receptive. The unconscious will come to you, if you have that gift that artists have. I only know if I'm inspired by the results.

RC: A retrospective at the Tate. This isn't the first, but how does it make you feel? Have you ended up making any reassessments of your career?

LB: When I see all the work that I have produced, I realised how consistent and persistent I have been. But I'm much more interested in what I'm working on now.

• Louise Bourgeois, featuring over 200 works, is at Tate Modern, London SE1, until 20 Jan 2008. A new monograph of her work, by Marie-Laure Bernadac, is published by Flammarion, £25

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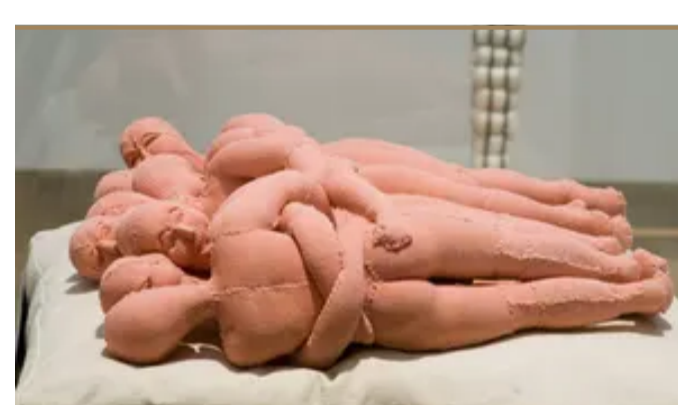
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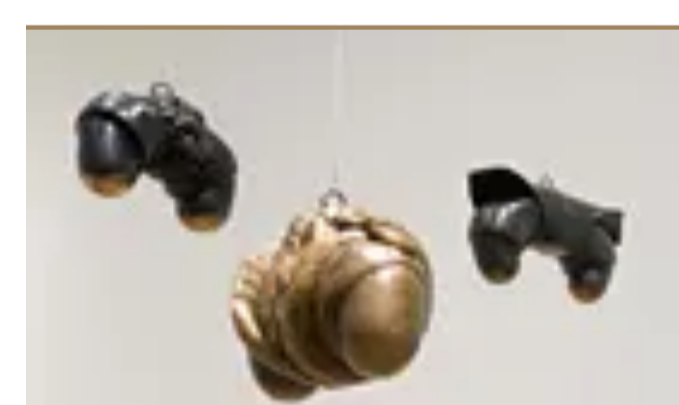
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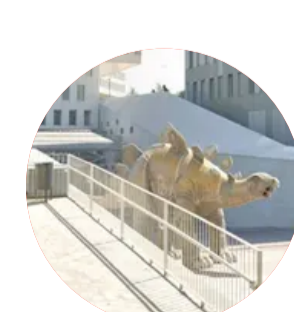
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