

## TEACHERS' NOTES

### Louise Bourgeois

### Drawing Intimacy 1939 – 2010

Hauser & Wirth Somerset, 1 October 2022 – 2 January 2023



Louise Bourgeois in her home on 20th Street in New York City, 2003 © The Easton Foundation / DACS, London 2022.  
Photo: Pouran Esrafil

### About Louise Bourgeois

Louise Bourgeois is recognised as one of the most important and influential artists of the past Century. Her career spanned over 70 years, during which time she employed a wide variety of working methods and materials, across genres of drawing, printmaking, painting and sculpture.

Bourgeois was born in Paris on Christmas Day in 1911. She was the middle of three children. Her parents ran a tapestry restoration business in the suburbs of Paris, and a tapestry gallery in Paris. As a child she regularly helped with the family business by drawing in missing fragments of damaged tapestries.

In the early 1930s, Bourgeois studied Mathematics at the Sorbonne in Paris, before deciding to focus solely on art. She trained with other artists in their studios, including Fernand Léger (1881 – 1955). In 1938, she opened her own gallery in a space partitioned off from her father's tapestry gallery where she showed the work of artists such as Eugène Delacroix (1798 – 1863), Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864 – 1901), and Suzanne Valadon (1865 – 1938).

After emigrating to New York in the fall of 1938, Bourgeois enrolled in the Art Students League and studied painting, life drawing and printmaking. From the 1940s onwards, Bourgeois raised her family and worked as an artist. She was included in many group shows and held solo exhibitions. Her work was also collected by major museums including the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. In the 1970s, Bourgeois was involved in demonstrations and exhibitions

associated with the feminist movement. Themes pertaining to female identity, motherhood, love, fear, abandonment and reconciliation are at the core of her complex oeuvre. Bourgeois died in 2010 at the age of 98.

In 1982, Bourgeois was the first female sculptor to be the subject of a large-scale career retrospective at the MoMA. Between 1977 and 2002, she was the recipient of seven Honorary Doctorates of Fine Arts. In 2000, she was awarded the inaugural commission for the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. For this monumental installation, she presented 'Maman' (1999), a huge sculpture of a spider constructed from steel and marble, and three steel towers called 'I Do,' 'I Undo' and 'I Redo'. From 2007–2009, she was the subject of a major travelling retrospective organized by the Tate Modern and the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.



Blue Confrontation, 2006 © The Easton Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2022.  
Photo: Peter Butler

## What are the major themes within this exhibition?

### Memory

Bourgeois said, 'I need my memories: They are my documents.'<sup>1</sup> Throughout her career, Bourgeois used her life experiences, in particular her childhood memories and relationships with others, as fuel for her art. She often described herself as a 'woman without secrets.' She recorded deeply personal thoughts across a range of formats: in a traditional written diary, on various loose sheets of paper and on the backs of drawings. At certain times, she also kept an audio diary, in which she recorded her feelings and ideas.

The mixed-media works on paper in the exhibition often feature handwritten words and phrases from Bourgeois's writings. Many of these evoke associations and memories of people and places she had known. The interaction of image and text contributes to this interplay of past and present. The introspective nature of the works in the exhibition and their curation – which allows space around each work – encourages close inspection and intimacy with Bourgeois's memories and emotions.

### Childhood

The earliest painting in the exhibition titled 'Portrait' (1939), depicts a child in dark tones of grey, blue, orange and brown. One of her arms is lifted toward the sky. The subject evokes innocence and youth, yet the colour palate and dark lined clouds suggest difficulty and unsettled memories. Bourgeois had a troubled childhood. She navigated a complex relationship with her parents, who had very different personalities and attitudes. Her mother suffered from chronic illness, and Bourgeois often cared for her in her teenage years. She died when Bourgeois was 20 years old. Later in life, Bourgeois suffered from depression and anxiety, and engaged with psychoanalysis to help deal with her emotions, as well as process her childhood experiences.



Orbits and Gravity, 2007 © The Easton Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London  
2022. Photo: Peter Butler

### Colour

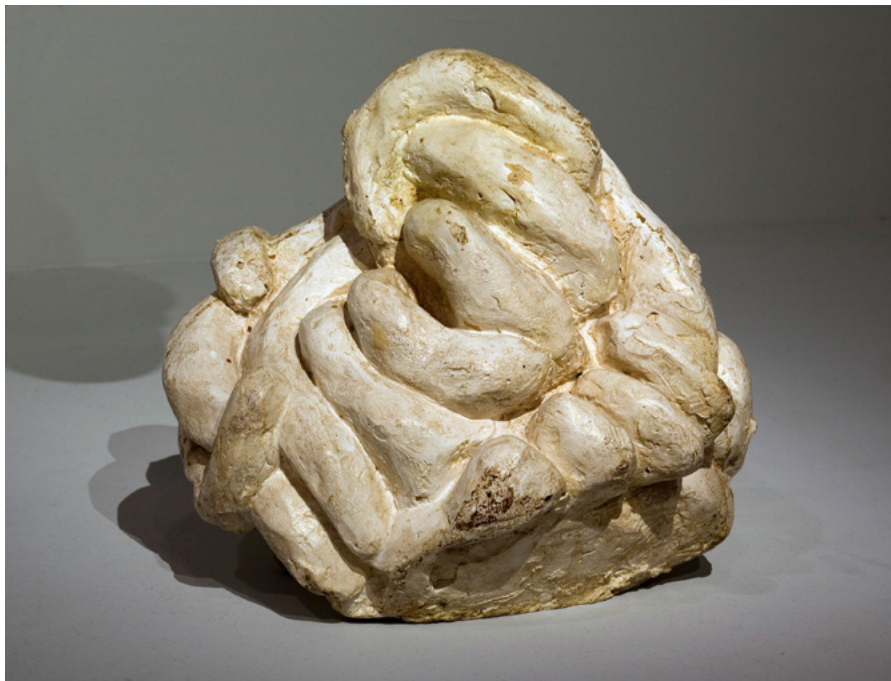
Bourgeois used colour to reflect emotion. The mixed-media works on paper in this exhibition, for the most part, employ a limited palette, which imparts a feeling of calm. One of her favourite colours was blue, which for her represented peace, meditation and escape. She especially liked the blue of the sky. Red is a recurring colour in Bourgeois's practice as well. She often used it to display the extremes of human emotion: rage, pain and fear. Red also suggests sexuality, warmth and blood, which alludes to both birth and death.

### Nature

In her mixed-media works on paper, Bourgeois investigated the natural world, drawing individual leaves and flowers, landscapes of mountains, hills, rivers and the ocean, and larger cosmic scenes referencing planets in perpetual orbit or the rays of the sun. From a young age, Bourgeois keenly observed nature, and had a sound knowledge of plants, flowers and trees. Imagery of rivers evoke memories of the places she lived throughout her life: the Creuse and Bièvre from her childhood, the Seine in Paris and the Hudson for its proximity to her home in New York City.

### Touch

Working with her hands and the sensation of touch was important to Bourgeois's process. Images of hands reoccur throughout her work. The plaster sculptures in this exhibition appear abstract, yet the curves and textured surfaces are also organic and bodily in form. The protuberances in 'Germinal' (1967 – 1988) and 'Untitled' (1964) could be fingers, reaching out to touch or be touched.



Louise Bourgeois, *Clutching*, 1962 ©The Easton Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2022. Photo by Adam Rzepka

## **Working methods**

The works presented in this exhibition span the breadth of Bourgeois's oeuvre, from rarely exhibited early works from the 1930s, to a selection of plaster sculptures from the 1960s, and multi-layered works on paper created in the final years of her life.

Early in her career, Bourgeois made paintings and drawings that were relatively modest in scale compared to the large bold paintings of the abstract expressionists or the complex and imaginary paintings of the Surrealists, with whom she was familiar.

In the mid-1940s, Bourgeois started to work in three dimensions. Whilst the tradition of drawing and painting is based on illusionary space, sculpture allowed her to make work that created a different type of engagement with its viewer. She also loved the physical aspect of making sculpture, of carving and cutting.

By the early 1950s, Bourgeois began to think about her sculptures as environmental installations, assembling works in the gallery so that the viewer had to physically navigate the space. In this way, the space itself became part of the sculpture. In the 1960s, she began working in marble and bronze and from the mid 1990s onwards, she created work with textiles, often incorporating old clothing.

In the last four years of her life (2006 – 2010), Bourgeois created mixed-media etchings, some of which are displayed in this exhibition. The etchings were created on copper plates, printed and then enhanced by hand in watercolour and gouache.



## **What artists does her work relate to?**

### **Ida Applebroog (born 1929)**

American artist who explores themes of power, gender, politics and sexuality in painting, drawing, sculpture, installation and writing.

### **Eva Hesse (1936 –1970)**

German born American sculptor who is best known for making abstract sculptures from soft and flexible materials such as latex, fiberglass and plastics.

### **Camille Henrot (born 1978)**

French artist who discusses the influence of Bourgeois on her work across mediums of film, painting, drawing, bronze, sculpture and installation.

### **Lee Lozano (1930 – 1999)**

American painter and conceptual artist who investigated the body and issues of gender. Autobiographical writing plays an important role in her conceptual art practice.

### **Alina Szapocznikow (1926 –1973)**

Polish sculptor and Holocaust survivor who created work dealing with trauma and her own body, often displayed in fragments.



La Plage, 2007 © The Easton Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2022.  
Photo: Peter Butler

## **Glossary**

### **Abstract expressionism**

A post-World War II art movement that originated in New York City and is characterised by abstract gestural mark-making.

### **Curation**

The process of selecting and organising art in an exhibition or collection.

### **Etching**

A method of printmaking in which lines are incised into a metal plate using acid to create a design that will hold ink.

### **Feminism**

A range of political movements and ideologies that advocate for women's rights and equality.

### **Installation art**

A term used to describe large-scale, three-dimensional works of art that are often site-specific and transform the space they inhabit.

### **Introspection**

The examination of one's internal thoughts and feelings.

### **Narrative**

A spoken, written or visual story that is made up of a sequence of events or experiences.

### **Oeuvre**

All the work created in an artist's lifetime.

### **Oil painting**

A process of painting that uses oil to bind different coloured pigments together.

### **Psychoanalysis**

An area of psychology founded by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) who believed that people could be cured by making their unconscious thoughts and motivations conscious. The aim of psychoanalytic therapy is to release repressed emotions and experiences.

### **Sculpture**

Three-dimensional artworks created using carving, casting or modelling techniques.

### **Surrealism**

An art movement that began in the 1920s when writers and artists began to experiment with ways of unleashing the subconscious imagination.

## **Trauma**

A continued emotional and physical response to a deeply distressing or disturbing experience.

## **Watercolour**

Paint used by artists that can be thinned with water to create a transparent colour. Gouache is an opaquer form of watercolour.

## **Ideas for discussion**

- Do you think that all Bourgeois's art is autobiographical? What memories could you make art about?
- What emotions do you feel when you look at Bourgeois's work? How do artists evoke emotion?
- Colour is important to Bourgeois's work. What colours are important to you? Do you associate these colours with any meanings or memories?
- Bourgeois used line to make very emotive drawings. How can you put emotion into your drawing? How can marks or shapes suggest different feelings?

## **Supplementary research**

**Hauser & Wirth: Louise Bourgeois**

<https://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/2777-louise-bourgeois/>

**The Easton Foundation: Louise Bourgeois**

<http://www.theeastonfoundation.org/>

**Ursula: How To Peel an Orange**

<https://www.hauserwirth.com/ursula/31163-how-to-peel-an-orange-louise-bourgeois/>

**Tate: The Art of Louise Bourgeois**

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/louise-bourgeois-2351/art-louise-bourgeois>

**MoMA: The Complete Prints & Books**

[https://www.moma.org/s/lb/curated\\_lb/](https://www.moma.org/s/lb/curated_lb/)