

Louise Bourgeois

(1911–2010)

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CLAD IN A LUXURIOUS MONKEY-FUR COAT, a sculpture tucked firmly under her arm, Louise Bourgeois boldly confronts the camera with a mischievous grin. Shot in 1982, Robert Mapplethorpe's image has become iconic. Perhaps lesser known is its checkered history. The portrait, commissioned by Robert Miller (whose gallery represented both artists), would become the frontispiece to the catalogue for Bourgeois's first retrospective, scheduled to open at New York's Museum of Modern Art in November of that year. Feeling anxious about the photo shoot, Bourgeois decided to wear one of her favorite pieces of clothing and to bring with her *Fillette*, 1968, the enormous latex phallus she referred to familiarly as her "doll." The image chosen for the publication, revealing the artist as confident, provocative, and alluring in equal parts, betrayed a dazzling performance—not least because it came at a moment when so much was at stake for her professionally: Bourgeois was seventy-two years old at the time of her first exposure before a wide public, and this debut was to take place within the portals of the most esteemed of museums of modern and contemporary art, an institution that had only once before accorded a living female artist a retrospective.

The exhibition, organized by Deborah Wye (who recently retired as MOMA's chief curator of prints and illustrated books), launched what was to become an extraordinary career over the next three decades. Initially, Mapplethorpe's photograph fared less well. Cropped into a decorous head shot in the catalogue, it offered an uncharacteristic—and ultimately misleading—image of the artist. In its truncated form, Bourgeois's demeanor reads, paradoxically, as quite conventional: She seems to conform to the stereotype of the female subject who, when being photographed, automatically adopts a seductive smile.

Mapplethorpe's original version came vividly to mind one summer morning a decade or so ago after an unexpected encounter with Bourgeois herself. Walking down the Chelsea block on which the artist lived, I saw her standing in front of her stoop, watering the tree on the sidewalk. When I greeted her, she ignored me and kept on watering. Thinking that she must not have recognized me, I started to speak again, only to be interrupted. Shielding her face with her free hand, she muttered something and then abruptly turned away. Though I only half-caught the words, the message was clear: Since she was not made-up, she was

not ready to receive me (or, presumably, anyone else).

This encounter has remained among the strongest of my memories of Louise (who died on May 31, at the age of ninety-eight), partly because it suggests how keen was her sense that participating in the world, whether personally or professionally—as an individual or as an artist—involved a degree of self-construction. The expression "putting a good face on it" doesn't serve here: What was at stake was a more fundamental act of self-presentation, something that lay at the heart of Bourgeois's aesthetic and practice across the span of some seven decades.

The 1982 retrospective proved a turning point: Long revered by insiders and fellow artists (mostly of a younger generation), this potent conjuror of disturbing, unabashedly sexual totems was now widely hailed as a leading exponent of a feminist position. Ever the contrarian, Bourgeois nonetheless remained ambivalent about her relationship to the movement under whose aegis much of her most provocative work would be appropriated. Once her psychologically fraught art—which typically took the form of biomorphic excrescences bearing freighted titles such as *The Quartered One*, 1964–65, and *The Destruction of the Father*, 1974—became part of the international circuit, it attracted more diverse audiences, many of whom had first gained access to it via her extensive writings. Bourgeois's skilled construction of confessional narratives, evidenced in the brief extracts quoted in the 1982 catalogue and in a photo essay, with the telling title "Child Abuse," that she published in these pages [*Artforum*, December 1982] to coincide with the exhibition, affected readings of the motivations behind her work as well as of its content. Vivid, immediate, and authoritative, her compelling accounts threaten to dominate the extensive literature devoted to her art, framing it in narrowly autobiographical terms or even transforming it into a kind of therapy. In addition, they mask her sophisticated knowledge of the history of art. Never a fervent enthusiast of the discipline (her husband's profession), Bourgeois was nonetheless deeply informed about the objects of its study, and throughout her career she drew extensively on visual



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Louise Bourgeois*, 1982, black-and-white photograph, 20 x 16".
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cultures ancient and modern, tribal and traditional, as well as on architecture and literature.

In the wake of her landmark 1982 retrospective, she did not shift her focus so much as expand it. Interwoven though her early work are dual threads—one involved with the psychic and corporeal structures of the body, the other with the charged spaces it constructs for mental and physical shelter. Though these remained abiding preoccupations, the scale, forms, materials, metaphors, and allegories with which she would now pursue them proliferated. Among her most renowned bodies of work are a significant number made in recent years: *Cells*, *Spiders*, figurative fabric sculptures, assemblages in which she recycled her clothing, and several suites of visionary insomniac drawings. No more than their predecessors can they be subsumed into a cohesive idiom. Through the writings of such scholars as Rosalind Krauss, Mignon Nixon, and Beatriz Colomina, we are beginning to take the measure of key aspects of Bourgeois's art. More vexing is the problem of contextualizing her protean vision. As we grapple with a practice that, in its breadth, scale, and ambition, has few parallels, Mapplethorpe's haunting image irresistibly returns to mind. □

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