

# Louise Bourgeois

# Stitches in Time

**Exhibition** 6 March – 9 May 2004

**Louise Bourgeois is one of our greatest living artists. In a career spanning seven decades and several artistic movements (Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, all of which she has engaged with and none of which adequately contains or describes her), she has built up a complex and beguiling body of work. Her practice, while primarily concerned with sculpture carved, cast and constructed from an almost bewildering range of materials, extends to include drawing, painting, print-making and both sculptural and architectural installation. She was the first woman artist ever to be given a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and was the artist chosen to make the first installation for Tate Modern's vast turbine hall, which she filled with three astonishing towers – *I Do, I Undo, I Redo*. This present exhibition focuses on recent sculpture made in fabric, shown in the context of *He disappeared into complete silence*, a group of prints made in 1947 which set out the conceptual territory that much of the artist's work has since occupied.**

Born and brought up in France, Bourgeois moved to New York on her marriage to the American art historian Robert Goldwater in 1938. Trained as a painter, she began making sculpture only once established in New York, embarking on a series of approximately 80 carved and assembled wooden sculptures known as *personages*, which embody the essential themes and obsessions of all her subsequent work. Described by Bourgeois as her first truly mature artistic effort, these life-size, semi-abstract, vaguely anthropomorphic sculptures created between 1945 and 1955 functioned as surrogates for real people close to her. She has described them as '*people I missed. They were presences... they represented the people I had left behind – that is to say my father, my brother, and their family, my cousins, all the people I had left in France. I had come to this country alone. It was a kind of memorial*'.

Seventeen of these *personages* were featured in a solo exhibition at New York's Peridot Gallery in 1949. *The personages* had clear associations with avant-garde art of the late 1940s, particularly in their totem-like structures, which can be read as a three-dimensional response to

the totemic forms in the early work of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Mark Tobey. While most of her contemporaries were drawn toward pure abstraction, the work of Bourgeois entered the realm of the psychological and symbolic. At the time that Bourgeois created these sculptures, she was exhibiting regularly with members of the soon-to-be-christened New York School. And as a European émigré she was well versed in the Surrealists' fascination with the "primitive" in relation to the unconscious.

*The look of my figures is abstract, and to the spectator they may not appear to be figures at all. They are the expression, in abstract terms, of emotions and states of awareness.*

The small group of vertical, totemic figures in this present exhibition are reinterpretations in fabric of Bourgeois's *Personages*. Like them, each works as an individual, with strikingly different characteristics, yet they also function as a group, setting up a spatial dialogue between themselves and visitors to the exhibition.

As the curator of this exhibition, Frances Morris, points out in the book published to accompany it, fabric, being soft and essentially two-dimensional, is not an obvious choice of material with which to make sculpture. Yet now she has used it, it does seem obvious for Bourgeois, and the strange thing, perhaps, is that she has only so recently turned to it. Bourgeois's family ran a business restoring antique textiles, and from the age of twelve the artist was employed in the family workshop, drawing in the missing parts of the tapestries to be restored. Her childhood home was full of tapestries, hung from walls, spread over beds and tables, and used to upholster chairs. Tapestry speaks to her of her personal history, and in a peculiarly spatial way:

*I, myself, have very long associations with tapestries. As children, we used them to hide in. This is one reason I expect them to be so three-dimensional – why I feel they must be of such height and weight and size that you can wrap yourself in them... My personal association with tapestry is for this reason, highly sculptural in terms of the three-dimensionality.*

Alongside tapestry, the activity of sewing also connects Bourgeois back to her childhood. Repairing, remaking and reweaving were vital family skills, and ones which Bourgeois associates primarily with her mother, who in a recent interview the artist describes as *'a weaver, restoring tapestries in our family business, and my best friend. She was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, and as neat and useful as a spider. She loved to restore things. That idea of restoration and reparation is deep within me'*.

Indeed it is one of the principal impulses of Bourgeois's work, as she revisits themes and ideas again and again, weaving stories for the present out of memories of her past, and recycling potent objects and materials. Many of the fabric pieces in this exhibition seem to make reference to the artist's past, sometimes more or less directly, as in *Seven in Bed*, 2001 which seems to make use of the artist's memory of her and her siblings climbing into bed with her parents on weekend mornings, and at other times more allusively, as in the multi-part *Oedipus*, 2003 which mixes elements from the Greek myth of Oedipus with allusions to the changing stages of the artist's own life.

The Oedipus myth of the boy doomed by the oracle to grow up to kill his father and marry his mother is the basis of Freud's identification of the 'Oedipus complex', a stage in the development of an individual in which sexual jealousy and competition for attention dominates a child's relationship with its parents and its growing sense of self. Bourgeois's sculpture, moving as it does through various stages of life from birth to old age and death, is a testament to the complexities at work in the formation of individual identity. Some of these complexities may be intensely personal – this is after all an artist one of whose major works is a large installation exploring and extending a childhood fantasy of killing and devouring her father called *The Destruction of the Father*, and who in 1982 published a text, controversially entitled *Child Abuse*, which identified the long-standing affair between her father and her own governess as a betrayal casting a potent shadow on her life and work.

Throughout her career, Bourgeois has been preoccupied with themes of childhood, sexuality, trauma and alienation. In this exhibition, much of this is concentrated in representations of the female body, constructed, dehumanised and objectified – a head served up on a platter in *Cell XVI (Portrait)*, 2000, a housewife turned into a wife-house in *Femme Maison*, 2001. Depersonalising her figures by not allowing them the detail of a specific individual and by dismembering parts of the body, the artist's focus is on an examination of the construction and deconstruction of the body and the extent to which this is linked to the process of making sculpture. *To me, a sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.*

*Spiral Woman*, 2003 is, like the fabric totems, a reworking in fabric of an earlier motif, this one originally cast in bronze. The sculpture takes the form of a fabric body hanging from a meathook. Instead of a head, arms or a torso, there is only a shell-like spiral shape, from which dangles a pair of legs. The black fabric and visible seams conjure up images of female hosiery, while the spiral form, visible also in the hanging bronze element of nearby *Untitled 1996*, is a potent symbol for the artist. *The spiral is an attempt at controlling the chaos. It has two directions. Where do you place yourself, at the periphery or at the vortex? Beginning at the outside is the fear of losing control; the winding in is a tightening, a retreating, a compacting to the point of disappearance. Beginning at the centre is affirmation, the move outward is a representation of giving, and giving up control; of trust, positive energy, of life itself.*

Louise Bourgeois is known for the boldness and physicality of her sculpture, however in her graphic work she reveals her masterful ability to command emotions with the most modest means. In her own view, drawing is secondary to sculpture insofar as it *'lacks the power of exorcism.'* Bourgeois's drawings are often accompanied by written text, simple notations of passing ideas, poems, or commentaries on the image itself. This practice points toward Bourgeois's essentially diaristic conception of drawing.

The subject matter for the drawings varies from the landscape of Bourgeois' childhood and anthropomorphic houses to alienating machines and high-rise buildings. The series of prints, *He disappeared into complete silence*, 1947 inspired by New York's landscape of skyscrapers, reflects her experiences of moving from Europe to metropolitan America. It presents her own hermetic texts juxtaposed with enigmatic pictures. It was made immediately before her first exhibition of *Personages*, and in this exhibition hangs close to the totem works which look back to that exhibit, the formal and conceptual links moving backwards and forwards in time and space.

The richness of Bourgeois's drawings – in terms of material, technique, and theme – contribute another dimension to our understanding of this singular artist. While often revealing pain and trepidation, they also disclose characteristics less often associated with Bourgeois: humour, tenderness, and a yearning for the simple pleasures of beauty and well-being.

Louise Bourgeois: Stitches in Time is produced and organised by the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin. Co-curated by Frances Morris, Senior Curator, Tate Modern and Brenda McParland, Senior Curator, Irish Museum of Modern Art.



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# Talks and Events

Saturday 6 March, 2pm

**Talk by Frances Morris, Senior Curator, Tate Modern.**

An exclusive opportunity to hear the curator discuss the work selected for this exhibition.

Saturday 10 April 2–4pm

**Family Workshop aimed at 3 – 6 year olds and parents**

An opportunity for parents to work alongside their children to make artwork in response to the exhibition. Booking essential.

(Please note date change)

Thursday 22 April 6.30pm

**Talk by Fiona Bradley, Director, The Fruitmarket Gallery**

A discussion on the work of Louise Bourgeois.

Bookings for talks and events can be made at the Bookshop 0131 225 2383 or e-mail [bookshop@fruitmarket.co.uk](mailto:bookshop@fruitmarket.co.uk)

## Reading Room

A range of artists resource material and an interpretation film presentation of curator

Frances Morris discussing the exhibition is available in the gallery reading room.

For further information on any of these items please ask at The Fruitmarket Gallery Bookshop

Gallery Information Assistants will be on hand for impromptu tours for small groups and individuals and to answer any questions about the gallery and the exhibition.

We particularly welcome group bookings from universities, schools, community groups, disabled people and minority ethnic communities.

Group bookings must be made two weeks in advance of your visit by contacting:

Tracy Morgan, Education Manager, 0131 226 8183  
[education@fruitmarket.co.uk](mailto:education@fruitmarket.co.uk)

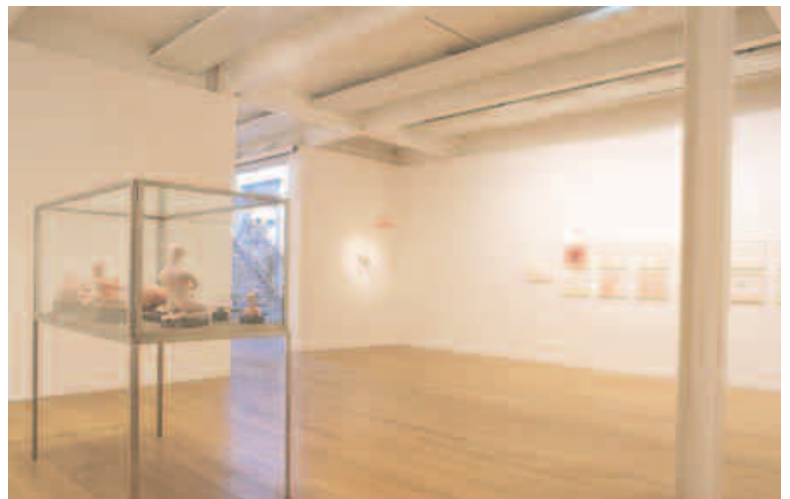
## Exhibition Publication

A book, published by IMMA and August Projects, with an essay by curator Frances Morris, accompanies the exhibition.

Available from The Fruitmarket Gallery Bookshop

## Access

The Fruitmarket Gallery has level access to the lower gallery and access via a lift to the upper gallery. An infra red induction loop is available in the upper gallery.



Louise Bourgeois, Stitches in Time, installation view  
Photos: Alan Dimmick