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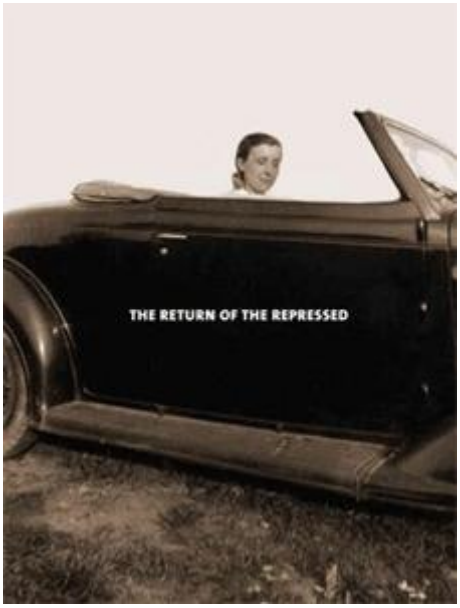
International Sculpture Center Book Reviews

Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed

– Review by Jan Garden Castro



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Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed
Edited by Philip Larratt-Smith
London: Violette Editions, 2012.
£ 49.95/ US$ 75.00. ISBN 987-1-900828-37-6

Reading Louise Bourgeois's journals is an intimate, visceral experience. Due to my eagerness to "read" Bourgeois, I skipped the texts by art historians and psychoanalysts and plunged into her writings, which is volume two. Philip Larratt-Smith's concise editor's note says that most original spellings, capitalizations, and spacings have been maintained and that the artist's most intensive period of psychoanalysis was 1952-66 with Dr. Henry Lowenfeld. These journals give us glimpses of those years and writings up to 2008. Larratt-Smith's six-page introduction informs us that Bourgeois' psychoanalytical writings were found by the artist's assistant Gerry Gorovoy only at the beginning of 2004 and in 2010 (the year Bourgeois died at age 98). The artist also kept letters, diaries, notebooks, and loose sheets of writings. This volume is an artful, chronological compilation from all of these sources, and footnotes identify topics, books, and people Bourgeois mentions. A wonderful feature is a clearly dated and labeled range of photographs of Bourgeois at almost every age – from her own childhood with her parents to the wedding photo upon her marriage to Robert Goldwater to Bourgeois alone and with her husband and three sons. The images, for the most part, show an outwardly composed,

fashionably dressed girl and young to older woman. Some images seem pensive; however, they all contrast to the writings, which have a haunted quality, even a Goyaesque nightmare quality. Bourgeois seems obsessed with ideas about suicide and death. Clearly, we all live with death, but Bourgeois – like fellow Parisian Christian Boltanski – seems to have made death a frame for life even more than her art suggests. Boltanski — due in part to his childhood when his Jewish father hid from the Nazis and the aftermath of WWII when his family's stories reinforced the trauma of the Holocaust — posited that death is something we all live with every minute.

In Bourgeois' case, her upbringing in Paris and Europe with a fastidious, sickly mother and a dominant father whose mistress was her tutor (only a few years older than Bourgeois) angered her as a child; she was jealous of the affection her father showed toward the tutor and she identified as well with her sickly mother. Louise repressed her conflicting feelings and immersed herself in a range of studies, including drawing, calculus, geometry, and philosophy at top schools, including the Sorbonne, where she wrote a dissertation on Blaise Pascal and Immanuel Kant. After her marriage to American art historian Robert Goldwater, Louise and Robert lived in New York. Their 1938 wedding photo shows a well-dressed, somewhat old-fashioned couple (Louise was around 27); she wears a suit, heels, white gloves, hat, and fur cape, and his suit has a handkerchief in the lapel pocket. As both smile into the camera, they do not hold hands or show any closeness.

During the next ten years, Louise was busy first adopting a son, then birthing and raising two more boys. She also found time to make art and to observe the New York art scene in which her husband played an important role. Her first note, c. 1947, is on the back of an invitation to an exhibition of her paintings at Norlyst Gallery, New York. In reply to her Chilean friend Nemesio Antúnez's essay on her work, she has written a text saying that her art communicates more than words:

> I know you do not
>
> see that I am talking to you …
>
> but I know you will under-
>
> stand my statue,
>
> because it does not make
>
> any noise… (excerpt from longer note on p. 23, V.2)

Some entries are dreams; some are lists, some are memories from childhood – sorry her mother did not take her to Switzerland the winters of 1926-27 and caring for her mother at the end of her life. Some are analyses of being sixteen: "Unable to blame a parent some children accept the guilt as their own…My father…was rewarded by both pleasure and standing" (p. 39, V.2, 1952). A 1955 2 a.m. dream ends "the gun is loaded and kills the mother" (p.45, V.2). On a loose sheet dated January 25, 1958, Bourgeois records what seems to be a dream about 1925,

"Papa takes me aside and announces sententiously that we are going to carry out a collective suicide; first the 2 women Maman and Henriette then Papa myself Georges & Pierre – everybody is in agreement, he tells me…" (p. 70, V.2). The dream ends with nothing bad happening. Rather than a death wish, the dream may be a subconscious wish to escape from ongoing analysis. On April 15, 1958, Bourgeois writes about a series of dreams — her fear and guilt toward her husband and his fear of her and "the mother who is castrating the daughter" (p. 78, V.2). Clearly, the past and her dreams affect her present relationships; she notes that the dream provokes an 8-day crisis. One 1958 list calls analysis a "jip," a trap, a job, a privilege, a bad dream, "makes me into a cop," "is more than I can manage" (excerpt from p.7, V.2).

By the1960s, Bourgeois seems more in control; a photo shows her making a large, looping plaster *Life Flower*, and a November, 1966 note asserts, "the shame comes from the super ego/ but the aggression comes from the preconscious/ these differences have to be clear" (p. 158, V.2). By 1990, Bourgeois seems more confident: "You learn for yourself not for others, not to show off, not to put the other one down/ learning is your secret, it is all you have, it is the only thing you can call your own. nobody can take it away…" (p. 177, V.2).

Volume I contains expert insider views of Bourgeois and an outstanding selection of art, including an art poem written on a pink ground: "ART is a guaranty of Sanity." Clearly, the artist used art to articulate varied interpersonal and inner conflicts and discoveries, from her 1947 *Femme Maison* drawings making women into dwellings and her untitled "family" constructions to the bulbous *The Destruction of the Father*, 1974, and the multi-breasted *Mamelles*, 1991. The body and the politics of bodies in family situations was a life-long theme.

In Volume 1, Larratt-Smith does not mince words when he describes Bourgeois' "descent into severe depression in the 1950s, agoraphobia [*Wikipedia* says this fear of public places develops as a complication of panic attacks.] being merely one of the most obvious symptoms (p. 8). Juliet Mitchell proposes that Bourgeois suffered from "sublime jealousy" of her English tutor Sadie and that her husband Robert infuriated her by "constantly 'disappearing into complete silence'"(p. 49). Paul Verhaeghe and Julie De Ganck posit that Bourgeois may have had a "textbook Oedipal complex" along with a "lifelong fear of abandonment" (p. 116), but that the best part of her art, especially that done between 1960 and 1980, was beyond interpretation and chthonic – pertaining to earth or subterranean (pp. 117-123).

These art critics and psychoanalysts do not delve much into gender issues – such as the fact that Louise was named after and took after her father Louis and was favored over her two siblings, nor into gender issues related to her severe depression following her father's death in 1951. The reasons why Louise found herself at odds with her husband and three sons are hinted more in the artist's writings but Louise veils this topic in general Freudian terms.

Readers are left with the most compelling messages of all: Bourgeois' art. Each of the 123 illustrations is worth studying. For example, the red ink drawings in *The Family*, 2008 (plate 86) show nine images of a man and woman having sex standing up. Some lines are blurred. The male's profile and penis are erect, entering the woman, and the woman facing forward looks like a round piece of fruit on two legs. The fetus inside her moves and turns in the womb; five breasts hang around her neck like clubs or petals. Her head is dark red, possibly

suggesting anger. This is my own interpretation. How amazing that, at around 96, the artist was still investigating primal mother + father + fetus relationships.

Anyone who knows Bourgeois' art can make great use of these 500 pages of writings, biographical photos, and art, and they are invaluable for any library art collection. The two volume *Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed* was part of an exhibition at the Freud Museum, London, in Spring 2012. These are based on Philip Larratt-Smith's years in New York as Bourgeois' literary archivist. Everything about this collection – the artist, the images, the editors, the contributors, and the publisher – including the range of voices of the contributors and the wild, even violent enigmas posed by Bourgeois is deep and personal. The artist's voice articulates for all women some hidden inner turmoils of interpersonal relations, and, in particular, moments of overarching anguish and recovery: a 1996 embroidery on what may have been one of her blue and white linen handkerchiefs reads: "I have been to hell and back, and let me tell you, it was wonderful." (p.88, V.1).

Violette Editions will publish a larger selection of 1000 sheets of the artist's private writings in a facsimile edition in a few years. #