

Turning
Louise Bourgeois **Myths**
InsideOut

by Jan Garden Castro

“Turner was obsessed by nature and I am obsessed by human nature,” Louise Bourgeois declares, referring to *Cell XV* as her response to J.M.W. Turner’s *Sun Rising through Vapour* (1807). “In my work, it’s the relationship to the other person that motivates me. The human condition is what I sculpt and my forms emanate from within my body.”¹



Cell X (Portrait), 2000.

Steel, glass, wood, and red fabric, 76.75 x 48.25 x 48.25 in.

Cell XV, part of the “Encounters” exhibition at the National Gallery in London, is an upscale cage, more finished and less minimal than prior cells in this series, starting with a prim door rounded on top. Inside, the lighting slowly shifts from turquoise to red, a color code for changing moods that also winks at Turner’s skies. Water spurts from two facing spouts atop a double-breasted white mountain and then winds along a bumpy spiral road. Two walls hold rows of glass jars half-filled with blue liquid. Two round mirrors give close-up views of its twin peaks and sides. The viewer, kept at a distance, may see herself reflected in glass panes stacked in one corner of the cell and in a large, round, outward-facing mirror. Handblown glass objects of varied sizes, hues, and degrees of finish show transparent signs of creation.

Cell XV and the four new gargantuan works at Tate Modern contribute to the spectrum of inner psychological states

Bourgeois has explored throughout her career. *Maman*, a “pregnant” brown recluse spider, along with the towers *I Do*, *I Undo*, and *I Redo*, are problem-solving exercises that may inform one’s point of view about relationships, change, and seeing oneself among others. From her coded or abstractly analytical drawings to constructions made of found objects, from marble masterworks to room-sized cells and towers, her work is distinguished by a restless curiosity. She explores the all-consuming physical and psychoanalytical paradoxes seen in acts of love and betrayal, alienation and inclusion (in the family), and the exploration of the self through bodily fragments and their metamorphoses. Few sculptors have created work whose interiority is as intensely physical as Bourgeois’s. Her oeuvre in

diverse media is as much about searching for solutions to universal themes, private as well as public, as those solutions themselves.

Born in 1911 in Choisy, a Paris suburb, the artist was raised with a consciousness of French and world culture. Her father secured and sold tapestries that her mother restored. Her memory of being recruited to draw the tapestry cartoons and to reweave the lowest parts—the feet and legs—has taken on mythic proportions. Was she literally too small to reach any higher than the feet or is she somehow juxtaposing her memory of mending real art with her memory of being with her brother under the table as a child and watching her parents' feet? The dependence of children on each other—an army of legs that cannot stand independently—is one of several readings of *The Blind Leading the Blind* (1947–49). The artist's fascination with body parts and her consciousness of the ways that needles and thread symbolize mending, marriage, and tradition began in childhood.

After her mother contracted influenza, her father began to have affairs with other women, including her British tutor Sadie, under the watchful eye of little Louise. The artist's awareness of the double standard for men and women is a strong theme in many works. Her father would say "I love you" repeatedly to her mother despite his perpetual infidelity. He was the wolf, and she was the rational hare, forgiving and accepting him as he was. *Red Room—Parents* (1994) with its white "I love you" pillow, *Red Room, the Child* (1994), and *The Destruction of the Father* address marital hypocrisy and betrayal. *Cell (Hands and Mirror)* (1995) is a more celebratory image of the art of using one's own hands to clarify what one sees in the mirror. *Untitled* (1998) cleverly constructs an image that seems to poke fun at the "red" state of guilt, betrayal, and lust. "The villain" has become a guignol, a Punch and Judy puppet showing us (the children) many red forms that we won't recognize until we're older. Moreover, the puppet is smaller than we are and won't harm us.



Cell XV (For Turner), 2000.
Steel, painted aluminum, mirrors, glass, water, and electrical light, 108 x 120 x 68 in.



Cell XV (For Turner), 2000.
Steel, painted aluminum,
mirrors, glass, water, and
electrical light, 108 x 120 x 68
in.

As a student in Paris, Bourgeois wore fashions by Chanel, Poiret, and Sonia Delaunay; her parents used to quarrel about who had selected the best clothes. The artist implicitly understood the European correspondence between adorning the female body *à la mode* and adorning the home with needlework *à la mode*. Her visits to the Surrealist gallery Gradiva “every day after lunch” were another part of her education, but she did not join their movement. *Pink Days and Blue Days* (1997) shows these and other influences. The title re-views the tradition of dressing boys in blue and girls in pink by suggesting the sexual onset of puberty and the psychological states from pink to blue that teenage girls experience. This echoes the red and/or blue hues in other works, including *Cell XV*.

Maman, the immense and popular spider at Tate Modern, began with drawings. The artist notes on one of her drawings that she associates spiders with her mother: “Because my best friend was my mother and she was also intelligent, patient, clean and useful, reasonable, subtle and as indispensable as a spider. She was able to look after herself.”²

In her mature work, Bourgeois associates spiders with her own self. The web permits her to trap her “poisonous anguishes” and to control them. A web is a universal metaphor for life: a silken thread spun out from one’s own body and connected from a central core to form a network that is both large and fragile, permeable and transparent yet capable of holding oneself and other, usually smaller creatures. The spider wants to be in control yet is also vulnerable to attack and dislodgment. For Bourgeois, the spider develops into a strong feminine presence, showing us how to conquer fear.

A twisting dome forms the spider’s body, below which hangs a web-like sac containing marble eggs. *Maman* is so huge, her maternal presence so intense, that viewers at Tate Modern become her youngsters; little children lean against her curving legs and feel safe. But we need to be wary, for this is a brown recluse; its venom creates deep wounds. The spider’s ability to weave its own environment, to simultaneously reproduce and destroy, is a compelling allegory for real human behavior.



The Blind Leading the Blind,
1947–49. Painted bronze, 69.25 x
64.75 x 25 in.



Cell (Hands and Mirror), 1995.
Marble, painted metal, and mirror,
62 x 48 x 45 in.

Maman is an astounding architectural form. Its eight long legs, made from welded tubular steel treated with a brown patina, twist into Gothic arches that rest on tiny points bolted into the floor. The idea of balancing on small points, begun in *The Blind Leading the Blind*, is here literally carried to new heights—10.23 meters. Its body has its own architecture; the colossal form both “houses” our gaze and creates a space we may enter. This contributes to the sensation that we are inside the work. Some viewers establish a personal, physical relationship with it in a manner that parallels the experience of great architectural space. This is a relatively rare achievement in sculpture.

Bourgeois built her “Tate Towers,” also called “The Unilever Series,” for Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall, a gray and brown concrete, steel, and brick vault 155 meters long and about five stories high.³ The towers’ names, *I Do*, *I*

Undo, and *I Redo*, are odd yet immediately understandable. “I do” implies wedlock, commitment, love, and faith. “Undo” implies that the union is not working. “Redo” implies finding a new solution. Yet the union that Bourgeois explores is not that of husband and wife, but of mother and child. Curiously, the husband is not in the picture.

Bourgeois began thinking through life’s ironies during her formative years in France. In 1937, her marriage at age 26 to the highly respected art historian Robert Goldwater brought her to New York, where she was exposed to the city’s disparate art influences, including studies in printmaking. At the same time, she was a wife and a mother to three sons, one adopted and two born in ’40 and ’41. Her works from this period, such as *Femme Maison* and *Quarantania* (1947–53), draw connections between women and houses—Bourgeois’s way of addressing difficult issues about being a woman.

The towers literally carry the artist’s association of architecture with emotional and psychological states to new heights. Climbing *I Do* was a terrifying experience for me. Looking through a door into a Cor-Ten steel cylinder, I observed a bell jar containing a pink fabric patchwork mother doll sitting on a tiny wooden French school chair, holding her pink baby against her chest. Atop this cylinder were two others, forming a steel tower circled by an openwork staircase, wrought from the kind of industrial metal used on the steep stairs of London tube stations. Only one person is permitted to ascend at a time. Halfway up, I became terrified. I was suspended in air and trapped. I had to go up. At the top observation deck, I sat in a wooden school chair like the mother in the bell jar. Perpendicular mechanical arms holding five round mirrors presented variously distorted self-portraits. From observation cubes, visitors looked down on me. Surprised by my unexpected fear, I hurried down.



Quarantania, 1947–49.
Bronze with white and blue
patina and stainless steel
base, 80.5 x 27 x 27 in.



I Do, 1999–2000. Steel, stainless steel, marble, fabric, glass, and wood, 658 x 96 x 96 in.

I Undo shows a dysfunctional situation. Two people are allowed at a time, so I felt safer walking up. After ascending one narrow spiral stair, we went down another, inside a steel funnel that widened at the top. There were small dark figures—a crying baby and a mother whose breast released a stream of milk onto the floor. I sat in a chair at the bottom of the funnel; a two-sided mirror showed enlarged or dark and distorted reflections. Looking up, the red lights inside a red tube seemed to signify anger, angst, or danger.

I ascended *I Redo*, the highest tower, with a friend. We could choose whether to ascend or descend the outer spiral or a stair within a windowed cylinder. Here, the spiral stairway and observation deck were larger, with two chairs and three mirrors very close to the people staring across from the observation cube. The inner tower had inset sculptures, one of a mother with two faces and several marble sculptures with adult and baby hands. Each work showed the same hand in two positions, such as palm up or palm down, open or closed. The marble seemed close enough to touch.

These works are beautifully crafted using curious geometric and material construction; observing their process and craft is another valuable learning experience. Bourgeois uses spirals, her favorite form for solving problems, to enter, leave, ascend, and descend from square, rectangular, and round platforms, to enter tubes, observation towers, and funnels. She uses perpendicular angles to frame, balance, and contrast with the round forms. The construction of every facet is fascinating, starting with the open stairs—their slim railings on parallel rods are soldered into rectangular steel stock bar fittings riveted to the bottom of the stair. Bourgeois’s “Tower Series” is rousing art that combines material, physical, and psychological processes.



I Redo, 1999–2000. Steel, stainless steel, marble, fabric, glass, and wood, 624 x 228 x 204 in.

Contemporary artists often use Baroque elements to indicate an emotionally charged secular epiphany rather than the period’s exuberant religious or sexual hyper-fantasies. Bourgeois, no exception, has said, “In general, my work portrays and encompasses the whole tradition of art. It is baroque, for example. I have even called one work Baroque, a work made about 1970. My art involves other styles as well. I privilege no one style or material.”⁴



Number Seventy-Two (The No March), 1972. Marble, .75 x 17 x 10 ft..

For her, “Baroque” describes a kind of supercharged art that, unlike the Baroque of old, happily and deliberately refuses to join or to be a part of any cult, religion, or social class. The work contains its own declaration of independence and at the same time plays with the notion of engaging its audience on both a credible and a psychosexual level. If this is not quite Baroque, her approach is not quite Postmodernist either, in that some components or references are too obscure or personal to

classify. Additionally, she often reverses the original meaning. Part of Bourgeois’s charm—and challenge—is that she’s beyond the present categories.

One exception that proves this point is the “Nature Study” series, which includes *Nature Study* (1984), a headless and armless crouching body with a human spine, wolfish haunches and feet, and a chest with many lumpish protuberances. I found this Nature Study’s progenitor by chance, in the Louvre: *Trône d’une prêtresse (Throne of a Priestess)*, a marble concoction by the 18th-century sculptor Franzoni. On each side of the throne, a female figure with a human head and a lion’s torso with bare human breasts transitions into grand flowing wings. Her long underbelly has feline breasts. The elegant sphinx synthesizes animal and human beauty and strength.



Nature Study #4, 1985. Bronze with black and polished patina, 9 x 18 x 22 in.

However, Bourgeois has transformed this figure into a beast whose appeal is due to its anomalies of form. Gone are the head, the wings, and the clear allusion to a lion. We observe what appears to be a severely deformed, crouching animal with two large feet. Multiple, oversized teats jut out of “her” chest. On one level, the 1984 *Nature Study* is an anthropomorphic joke about the abilities of females to nurture and devour.



Maman, 1999. Steel and marble, 927 x 892 x 1024 cm.

On another level, it portrays both genders and projects many moods simultaneously. Bourgeois has modeled wearable versions of this work—a kind of tunic with mounds bulging from its front. In a fashion show in 1978, some of the models were men.⁵ The bulges could be anything: breasts, body armor, tumors. The ambiguity gives the metaphor its potency. The multi-level image shatters the myth that breasts or lumps are nurturing, or even healthy, for the bearer or beholder. The lack of arms and a head seems to address many things, from our collective ignorance of the past to her own father’s failure to use his head and hands constructively.

The “Nature Study” series may draw on art historical sources, but it also debunks these myths, including various incarnations of the nurturing goddess, such as the she-wolf that suckled Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, and Artemis of

Ephesus. The protectress of women in childbirth, Artemis was also associated with the hunt and protective rituals involving animals. It is unclear whether the cult figure is multi-breasted or wears armor with convex designs. A 15th-century fountain, now at the Villa d'Este, formed by an Artemis-type figure with water gushing from her many breasts, may have inspired *Cell XV*. Just as Bourgeois reverses Turner's "obsession with nature," her work often underscores the falsity of myths. Instead of showing benign images, the "Nature Study" series combines associations to demonstrate that the goddess and the wild beast, protector and killer, are often the same. "Man is a wolf to man, you know," the artist has said.⁶

Many works explore the duality and ambiguities of sexual states. *Fillette*, her bronze phallic fantasy featured in a famous photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe, has many faces—from a towering, roofed dwelling to the ultimate erection to a sort of "enfant terrible." In the photo, Bourgeois holds *Fillette* under her arm in a motherly and encouraging way, with an attitude of utmost familiarity, creating a masculine-feminine symbiosis. She is both comrade and creator, one and other with this curious object.



The Runaway, 1998–99. Pink marble, glass, and metal, 84 x 78 x 54 in.

The "Cell" series explores the relations between microcosm and macrocosm. Cells have many definitions, from a small biological component of our body's system to the cages, pens, convents, and rooms used to confine prisoners, animals, nuns, and artists. Cells have the connotation of being prolific units, like families, that belong to a larger system.



Cell (Three White Marble Spheres), 1993. Glass, marble, iron, and mirror, 81.75 x 85.5 x 84.5 in.

Bourgeois's cells serve in these and other capacities. Some are framed by wooden doors and some by metal cages. Most of the structures have openings or mirrors suspended from the ceiling that invite the viewer to observe, perhaps to spy upon, the inhabitants. These works have many layers of activity; others, such as *Cell* (1993), are minimal containers. The metal is rusted, the windows broken and dusty. Unlike some, this dwelling isn't fully inhabited. The grouping of a small, less finished sphere between two larger polished marble spheres could represent a family. These forms also recall the round marble eyes that stare out from Bourgeois's other works. The cage door opens just enough to let the baby, if it could move, squeeze through. Observation mirrors, positioned over the "family" and the viewer, are the artist's "eyes"; if we look into them, we enter the cage.

Like all French school children, Bourgeois probably memorized La Fontaine's aphoristic poetry. Using his personification, one may say that the artist's work has entered souls from hare to wolf. Or one may cite Voltaire, another staple of French education known for his rationalism couched in satiric hyperbole, to picture Bourgeois as the innocent Candide

encountering self-important artists and manipulators until she found self-love and learned, after many adventures, how to cultivate her own garden, seen in *Cell XV. Cell X* (2000) reminds us that we live in our own cages of blood and bone, history, fiber, and steel. To her credit, Bourgeois, in her steel age, has created allegories that laugh, growl, and mirror our stares, eye to eye. We needed that—her skeptical humanism, her wry smile.

Jan Garden Castro is the author of The Art & Life of Georgia O’Keeffe and a frequent contributor to Sculpture.

Notes

- 1 This text is from the audiotape accompanying the “Encounters” exhibition at London’s National Gallery.
- 2 See Sandrine Malinaud, “Sainte Sébastienne et rose épineuse,” *Cimaise Art Contemporain* (January/February 1996: 7–16), p. 8.
- 3 Unilever, an international British-Dutch consumer conglomerate, sponsored Bourgeois’s work and will sponsor four more annual commissions for Turbine Hall. Its headquarters is across the Thames from Tate Modern.
- 4 See Donald Kuspit’s interview with the artist in *Bourgeois* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 53. |
- 5 “A Banquet: A Fashion Show of Body Parts,” at Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art, NY.
- 6 Kuspit, *op. cit.*, p. 70.