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Louise Bourgeois: Conscious and Unconscious April 25, 2012 by [intsculpturectr](#) Review by Jan Garden Castro



Louise Bourgeois: Conscious and Unconscious
by Philip Larratt-Smith
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The exhibition “Louise Bourgeois: Conscious and Unconscious,” organized by the Qatar Museums Authority (QMA) and shown at its gallery from January 20–June 1, 2012, features 30 works created between 1947 and 2009, including three monumental towers, *I DO*, *I UNDO*, *I REDO* plus the giant spider *Maman (Mother)* —all first shown at the Tate Modern’s giant Turbine Hall in 2000. I discussed these in *Sculpture* at that time. In many ways, the current exhibition’s curator, Philip Larratt-Smith, gives these works new poignancy by discussing them explicitly in the catalogue in the context of Bourgeois’s other works and of the artist’s Freudian self-questionings of her life as a child and as a mother. Larratt-Smith links *I Do* to the good mother, *I UNDO* to the bad mother letting her milk drip as the baby goes hungry, and *I REDO* to the mother’s self-examination and redress of her state.

These towers each have different kinds of spiraling, precipitous stairs and various kinds of mirrors that reflect the viewer’s persona through different, distorted lenses; they are ingenious, well-crafted art works that demonstrate how subtly Bourgeois’s team has been able to realize her most ambitious constructions. I recall them as being 3–4 stories tall; they are listed as 6,000, 4,500, and 9,000 cm. tall respectively. Larratt-Smith calls *Maman* the fourth tower, stating that the artist was summoning her own mother, unconsciously

linking her fear of abandonment with her fear of death, and creating, as in the towers, a mother who is both good and bad (the spider eats her young). Finally, for Larrat-Smith, Bourgeois herself becomes the master spider, creator, and tale-spinner. Larrat-Smith's concise yet powerful essay contains fresh psychoanalytical insights into the artist's work: "Entrenched psychic conflicts condemned the artist to a life of repetition... Thus art was at once an indication of her underlying psychic disorder and a means of making herself whole. It was both symptom and cure. In the place of Freud's talking cure, which she rejected as inadequate, Bourgeois found another 'royal road to the unconscious' in the making of art, which she called her 'form of psychoanalysis.'"

The catalog introduction by QMA Chairperson Her Excellency Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani states that *Maman's* new (in 2011) home at the National Convention Center Qatar Foundation "has already inspired writers, artists and members of the public here." Her Excellency sees Bourgeois's spiders as linked to her memories of her mother; she adds that the spider in the Holy Qur'an wove a web that protected the Prophet from his enemies.

The exhibition title "Conscious and Unconscious," is related to a slender sculpture with two sorts of towers. A stack of sponge-like white fabric shapes that recall the spinal column stands for order and the conscious mind. Nearby, on a pole, a blue rubber pear shape is pierced with five needles, each holding a small spool of thread. "The thread represents the unspooling of time, the sewing of the mother-weaver, the spider's web, the fragility of human relationships, and the tenuous linkage to memory..." according to Larrat-Smith.

The QMA catalog, in English and Arabic, is richly illustrated, and the cover image, a closeup of one pair of pink marble hands holding a second pair of hands, suggests closeness, warmth, and friendship between people and cultures. In the full untitled work, 33 x 91.4 x 38 cm., the four limbs stop below the elbow, forming an X. The hands are a symbol or sign of human interconnections.

Other works in the exhibition range from red gouache "flowers" created in 2009 to a womblike, bronze hanging piece *Fée Couturière*, 1963 to fabric webs and a fabric head, and metal and marble sculpture, including *Cell XV (for JMW Turner)* (2000), a work in which water spirals together from two sources.

This exhibition catalogue seems important both for the intimacy of its theme and for its range of work focusing on layered psychoanalytical readings about relationships between children and their mothers. This universal subject deserves more attention worldwide; it's refreshing to think that the exhibition has opened some minds to these women's (and human rights) issues as well as to finely-crafted art that requires some thought.

In addition, Philip Larratt-Smith has edited a two-volume catalog in London, *Louise Bourgeois Psychoanalytical Writings* and *The Return of the Repressed*, and I plan to review these in the future.