

# LOUISE BOURGEOIS



MASS MoCA



"My subject is the rawness of the emotions, the devastating effect of the emotions you go through. The materials are my medium."<sup>1</sup>

One of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010) is known for incorporating psychological and biographical elements into her highly evocative, richly layered works. Transforming her emotional life into physical form, the artist took as her subjects the intimacies and traumas of childhood, marriage, motherhood, and artistic struggle. The range of those thoughts and emotions are reflected in the variety of materials that she utilized in her art. Her expansive practice included drawings and paintings, as well as sculptures in plaster, wood, fabric, latex, glass, bronze, and the marble featured at MASS MoCA. Bourgeois's use of both soft and hard, warm and cold materials—what the artist might have described as female and male, passive and active—adeptly articulate the polarities that Bourgeois navigated through her art. She was intrigued by the subconscious, and her work is often understood as an expression of repressed feelings—from anger, to fear, love, and desire. Bourgeois was in psychoanalysis for 30 years and described her artistic practice as an attempt to work through whatever tumult plagued her—likening her process to an exorcism of pain and the past.

Bourgeois chose whichever medium best expressed what she needed to say. She began working with marble in the late 1960s, first visiting Carrara in 1967 to work with the region's famous stone. Later, in the 1980s, she began shipping stones to New York. Bourgeois was attracted to marble for its ability to transform from an inert block into something else through the force of her unconscious.



*PASS*, 1988–1989  
Marble; 50½ × 48 × 37 inches  
Collection Louise Bourgeois Trust  
Photo: Peter Bellamy, © The Easton Foundation  
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The difficulty of working in marble also appealed to her. She said of hard materials:

"...the resistance of the material is part of the process...I can express myself only in a desperate fighting position."<sup>2</sup>

Yet her mastery over the stone is evident, and the material is uniquely suited to Bourgeois's interest in formal ambiguity, able to seem as soft and supple as skin, or retain the heavy, coarse look of raw stone.

The centerpiece of the current exhibition is an immense untitled work dated 1991–2000. Standing over six feet tall, it is composed of two elements which together weigh over 15 tons. The sculpture has the rusticated texture of punched marble, and in its size and totemic presence it takes on the feel of an ancient monument. Two large, smooth orbs, each with a circular hollow in its center, sit atop each section like a pair of eyes or breasts, testicles, or heads, each referent



encouraging another, possibly conflicting interpretation of the work. Large spirals are carved into the sculpture's side, and smaller spirals seem to grow out of bulbous protrusions along its top edge. The artist has emphasized the importance of the spiral in her work on numerous occasions, describing it as a twist that reminds her of wringing out wet fabric as a child, dreaming of wringing the neck of her father's mistress.<sup>3</sup> She has also compared it to "controlling chaos." There are two directions to a spiral, she noted. "Beginning at the outside," Bourgeois explained, "is the fear of losing control; the winding in is a tightening...Beginning at the center is...a representation of giving, and giving up control; of trust, positive energy, of life itself."<sup>4</sup> In *Untitled*, the artist has doubled the spiral, creating the symbol of eternity. Pairs and

mirrored imagery recur throughout Bourgeois's practice, and suggest various relationships and couplings—from the self/other to husband/wife, parent/child, mother/father. Together but separate, the two elements in *Untitled* might seem to suggest the fear of separation and abandonment that Bourgeois indicated is within all her work. *Untitled* makes its United States debut at MASS MoCA, along with a dramatic history. The sculpture was created from the remains of an earlier related work which was badly battered and damaged beyond repair when it was caught in a terrible storm at sea upon its return to New York from Europe. Bourgeois salvaged the marble and carved the current version of the work. Rather fittingly, the artist once again transformed loss into new sculpture.

*UNTITLED*, 1991 – 2000

White marble, two elements; 1st: 73 × 74 × 115 inches; 2nd: 80¼ × 43½ × 100 inches

Collection Louise Bourgeois Trust

Photo: Christopher Burke, © The Easton Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, NY





*Nature Study (Velvet Eyes)*, 1984  
Marble and steel; 26 x 33 x 27 inches  
Collection of Michael and Joan Salke / Salke Family Trust  
Photo: Allan Finkelman, © The Easton Foundation  
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While Bourgeois grappled with weighty subjects, her work can also be full of humor. In *Nature Study (Velvet Eyes)*, for example, a smooth pair of eyes peers out at us from deep holes cut in a rough slab of marble. Hovering between sentience and objecthood, the work is slightly unsettling, yet unequivocally whimsical. The eyes are almost cartoonish—reminiscent of the plastic adhesive “googly eyes” that can humanize nearly any object.

Across the gallery, *PASS* (1988–89) is similarly ambiguous. It seems to oscillate between a skull-like face and genitalia. The vertical slit at the center resembles both a nose cavity, phallus, or vulva and clitoris—the circular caverns near the top, eyes, or testicles. The two sculptures, both made in Bourgeois’s Brooklyn studio, are in part about seduction, referencing the act of making a pass at someone and the inherent tension implied in this exchange. Offering viewers appealingly suggestive forms and references, Bourgeois’s marble sculptures ultimately refuse any single interpretation, dwelling instead in provocative uncertainty.

Outside the main gallery, a fourth work made from polished aluminum functions as both counterweight and complement to the trio of marble sculptures. In contrast to the heavy stone works firmly planted on the ground, the delicate, reflective sculpture *The Couple* is suspended from the ceiling from a single cable. Bourgeois made many hanging works, which she felt articulated a fragile, ambivalent state. Two figures are entwined in a twist of metal, their feet and legs peeking out from the bottom of what might resemble an unruly skein of yarn or surreal jumble of extended appendages. Bourgeois said of this work:

“The figures in the hanging *The Couple* hold onto each other. Nothing will separate them. It is a precarious and fragile state... Despite all our handicaps, we hold onto each other. It is really the Other that interests me. It is an optimistic view. Locked together, they spin for eternity.”<sup>5</sup>

Together, the intimate selection of works illustrates the power of Bourgeois’s unique work to articulate the ineffable fervencies of anguish and passion that define the human condition, and to picture the yawning desire for connection that keeps our ultimate solitude at bay.

— Susan Cross

1 “Louise Bourgeois in Conversation with Christiane Meyer-Thoss,” in Christiane Meyer-Thoss, *Louise Bourgeois: Designing for Free Fall*, Zurich: Ammann Verlag, 1992, p. 123.

2 Quoted in “Taking Cover: Interview with Stuart Morgan,” first published in *Artscribe*, January 1988, reprinted in Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans Ulrich Obrist, eds. *Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father, Writings and Interviews 1923 – 1997*, London: Violette Editions, 2007 (1st ed: 1998), p. 155.

3 See Paul Gardner, *Louise Bourgeois*, New York: Universe, 1994, p. 68.

4 Louise Bourgeois, “Self-Expression is Sacred and Fatal,” in Christiane Meyer-Thoss, *Louise Bourgeois: Designing for Free Fall*, p. 179.

5 Louise Bourgeois, March 8, 2002, statement in response to sculpture (LBQ-0010); © The Easton Foundation.

**Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010)** was born in Paris to parents who ran a tapestry restoration workshop. In her youth she helped with the family business, making drawings of areas that needed to be repaired. She studied art in several locations, including the École du Louvre, École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Académie Julian, and in the studio of Fernand Léger. In 1938 she married the art historian, Robert Goldwater, and moved to New York City, where she continued her studies at the Art Students League and exhibited with the American Abstract Artists Group as early as 1949, befriending artists including Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Franz Kline. She also met many of the European expats who fled to New York during World War II. In 1957 Bourgeois became an American citizen. Although she exhibited throughout her career, Bourgeois's work did not fit neatly within the dominant movements and was not widely known early in her life. She was 70 years old at the opening of her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1982. Her radical engagement with the body and psychology has had an immense impact on ensuing generations of artists. She was awarded the National Medal of the Arts in 1997, and today her work is in the permanent collections of major museums including the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York and Bilbao; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; MoMA, New York, NY; the Tate, London; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.

***Louise Bourgeois***

**On view beginning May 28, 2017**

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cover:

Louise Bourgeois in her studio with *Pass* in 1988.

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inside flap:

*The Couple*, 2007–2009

Cast and polished aluminum, hanging piece; 61 × 30 × 26 inches

Collection Louise Bourgeois Trust

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