Empty House (Large) and Empty House (Small), 1978



Louise Bourgeois, a Frenchborn artist, settled in the United States in 1938. Early on, her work included painting, but by the late 1940's she had turned her attention fully to sculpture. For over 30 years she has produced a body of work remarkable in its embodiment of a unique and personal vision within highly original forms.

Bourgeois' work has never been easily understood within the main currents of art. In modern sculpture, for instance, she would fall outside such traditions as that represented by David Smith and Anthony Caro in welded steel, or more recently, by Donald Judd and Sol LeWitt in a minimalist mode. Surrealism would be her closest alliance, but even a loose definition of this tradition fails to incorporate her intensely personal vision.

While the formal qualities of Bourgeois' works are always gripping, one is particularly aware of a heightened sense of content within these forms. And such a consciousness is especially significant at the present time. For the last two decades, artists and critics alike have focused on the formal elements of art, while a pre-occupation with content has been unusual. Recently, however, there has been a change in this formalist orientation, and instead of shapes, colors and composition, artists and critics have begun to concern themselves more consciously with the personal and symbolic levels of works of art. This trend can be seen in such areas as the narcissistic involvements of video, the fetish orientation in many environmental works, or the new idiosyncratic architectural sculpture. It is not surprising, then, that in

the present atmosphere,
Bourgeois' personal and
sometimes eccentric work
would be appreciated in an
especially vivid way.

The four works which comprise this MATRIX unit are from 1978, but reflect artistic concerns and personal preoccupations that have been Bourgeois' themes for many years. In the two metal structures, Empty House (Large) and Empty House (Small), anthropomorphic dimensions are reflected in the life-like vulnerability of the forms. Appearing to almost tremble and shiver, the structures are, if seen together, like two figures leaning toward each other in communication and need. Their designation as "houses" gives additional associative content. These issues of house and home, and one's relationship to them (especially a woman's relationship to them), have concerned Bourgeois since the 1940's and occur in a long series of works she began then, and added to recently, which she refers to as the "Femme-Maison" ("Woman-House"). In conversation, Bourgeois has referred to the two structures in this exhibition by another name: "Fragile Houses." (All quotations are from discussions with the artist, November - December, 1978.) The artist often interchanges titles for particular works, giving us additional meanings and greater subtlety for their interpretation. In this case, Bourgeois describes the "Fragile Houses" as a "revelation of the inner woman." For her, "empty" means "fragile" when it is applied to women. By using precise welding techniques, Bourgeois has created metal structures which demonstrate fragile characteristics, but which, in actuality, are

very strong. In her words, it is "in their nature to be trembling and frightened, but they are used to it, and will not fall down or fall apart." The work "confronts and resolves woman's fate, with no embellishments or flourish."

Radar reflects another aspect of the artistic involvements Bourgeois has had throughout her career. By crowding units together on a single base, she evokes the sense of vulnerable individuals gathered together as if by fate, and again, in need. This formal device of repeating and crowding elements occurs in many of Bourgeois' past works, each with comparable thematic intentions. In this example, all the units lean in one direction, as if the individual parts are, in effect, "taking a stand" together. (This aspect has been explored by Bourgeois in earlier pieces which relate specifically to marchers and protest.) In this particular work, the units can be seen as facing the sun, since this wooden piece relates directly to a large metal outdoor sculpture that Bourgeois did this past year on Federal commission for an energy-related building in Manchester, New Hampshire. There, the flat frontal surfaces are burnished and reflect the changing position of the sun. For the wooden piece in this exhibition, Bourgeois describes a "human kind of radar," in which individual units relate as people do, "aware of each other, perceiving each other, and constantly adjusting to each other, as if by radar." In the larger New Hampshire piece, Bourgeois is concerned with the sun and energy, and "radar" takes on a broader meaning.

Laire of Five deals with similar themes of protectiveness and, more specifically, nurturing. Here, each unit protects its inner units, again in a relationship evoking mutual needs and dependencies, and functions much as a lair does in the animal world. The use of metal units, and their arrangement in a straight line, lend strength to the task at hand, while variation in the shapes, one from another, reflect idiosyncracies and provide each with a separate personality. Bourgeois' oeuvre includes many such "lair" pieces, in countless sizes and in materials as varied as plaster, bronze and latex. Each time, however, she has expressed similar human and specifically female concerns. In Laire of Five, the independence of each inner element is underlined by the fact that each could literally be removed from its immediate shell. She relates this independence/ dependence to family life, wherein "everyone exists on his own, as well as within each other." In this particularized instance, she shows her concern with the general human questions of "being with" and "being alone."

Louise Bourgeois' ideas
result in an intensely humanistic art. Bourgeois
herself has called her purpose in making art a means
she has of "exorcising certain
feelings" she has about herself. The sculptures presented
here demonstrate that her
concerns reach much further
than herself, and have the
power to touch on important
issues for the viewer as well.

Louise Bourgeois was born in Paris in 1911. She studied extensively in France at the Lycee Fenelon, the Sorbonne, the Ecole du Louvre, the

being committed and and and the

Ecole des Beaux Arts, the Academie Ranson (Atelier Bissiere), the Academie de la Grand Chaumiere (Atelier Wierick), the Academie Julian and with Fernand Leger. She has exhibited widely in New York since the 1940's at leading museums and galleries, and has taught at many universities and art schools. In 1977, she received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from Yale University. Her most recent exhibitions were held this fall at Xavier Fourcade, Inc., and the Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art, both in New York.

Deborah Wye Assistant Curator, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University

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Works in MATRIX:

Empty House (Large), 1978, flexible steel, 7' x 14½" x 27½". Lent by Xavier Fourcade, Inc.

Empty House (Small), 1978, flexible steel, 6' x 14½" x 27½". Lent by Xavier Fourcade, Inc.

Laire of Five, 1978, steel, 8 3/4" x 53 1/2" x 17 1/4".
Lent by Xavier Fourcade, Inc.

Radar, 1978, maple, 16½" x 45½" x 43½". Lent by Xavier Fourcade, Inc.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Bertha Schaefer Gallery, NYC '45; Norlyst Gallery, NYC '47; Peridot Gallery, NYC '49 & '50 & '53; Allan Frumkin Gallery, Chicago '53; Cornell University, NY '59; Stable Gallery, NYC '64; Rose Fried

Gallery, NYC '64; 112 Greene Street Gallery, NYC '74; Stable Gallery, NYC '75; Hamilton Gallery of Contemporary Art, NYC '78; Xavier Fourcade Gallery, Inc., NYC '78.

Selected group exhibitions: Museum of Modern Art. NYC '43 & '49, '51, '62, '69; Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC '43; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art '44; Los Angeles County Museum of Art '45; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC '45 & '46, '53, '55, '57, '60, '62; Brooklyn Museum, NY '45; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN '54; Dallas Museum of Fine Art, TX '60; Salon de la Jeune Sculpture, Paris '65; Whitney Museum of American Art, 200 Years of American Sculpture 76.

Selected bibliography about Bourgeois:

Robbins, Daniel. "Sculpture by Louise Bourgeois," Art International, vol. VIII, no. 8 (Oct. 20 '64) pp. 29-31.

Rubin, William. "Some Reflections Prompted by the Recent Work of Louise Bourgeois," Art International, vol. XIII, no. 4 (April '69) pp. 17-20.

Baldwin, Carl. "Louise Bourgeois: An Iconography of Abstraction," Art in America, vol. 63, no. 2 (March-April '75) pp. 82-83.

Lippard, Lucy. "Louise Bourgeois: From the Inside Out," Artforum, vol. XIII, no. 7 (March '75) pp. 26-33.

Wye, Deborah. "Louise Bourgeois," From Women's Eyes (Massachusetts, Brandeis University, Rose Art Museum '77).

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