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Louise Bourgeois, Structures of existence

by Judith Souriau | Jun 7, 2016 | Exhibitions, Home - highlight, News |



The Bilbao Guggenheim is exhibiting a collection of never-before-seen works that will most likely only ever be on public display once, that is, Louise Bourgeois' *Cells*, the three-dimensional installations created by the artist between 1986 and 2003. Co-produced with the Huser der Kunst museum in Munich, the exhibition, which runs till 4 September, is a *tour de force*, because its voluminous structures are on loan from the permanent collections of major museums and private collections worldwide.

“The *Cells* occupied Louise Bourgeois during her last 20 years. It was her last big project; she completed it just two years before she passed away”, explains the curator. Louise Bourgeois was 75 years old when she started working on her impenetrable sculptures. They are the culmination of a life's work, reflecting the artist's fascination with volume, intimacy, memory and the body. Having previously worked at home, it was when she acquired a huge studio in Brooklyn in 1986 that Louise Bourgeois began working on the largescale project. Her first installation, entitled *Articulated Lair* (1986) was not a “cell”, but rather it referred to an animal's lair, reflecting her thematic ambiguity between the organic and the object in a metaphor for refuge. She did not use the word “cell” – a dual reference to organic matter and prisons – until 1991. The theme of the woman-house, which was omnipresent in her drawings from the late-1940s, already reflected the notion of the house as an extension of the body and as a “metaphor for its physical structure” (cf. Marie-Laure Bernadac in *Louise Bourgeois, La Création Contemporaine*, 1995).

The artist would even go so far as to say, “Space does not exist. It is merely a metaphor for how our existences are structured.” These environments, which were modelled in penetrable openwork metal and that were half opened and half closed, are the ultimate projection of the self – a metaphor for the intimate and the feminine, and a receptacle for fear as much as memory. Bourgeois furnishes them with cloth bodies (*Portrait cells*, 2000-2001), beds, recycled childhood objects (*Chambre rouge (Parents)* and *Chambre rouge (Enfant)*, 1994), phials (*Precious Liquids*, 1992), mirrors (*In and Out*, 1995), and more. The works are complex, carefully composed and each one encapsulates an array of meanings. The Bilbao exhibition has the merit of exhibiting the series as a whole, but it also addresses each work in its own right, thereby documenting her creation process.

There have been growing number of exhibitions of the works of Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) in American and European institutions since the mid-1990s, with a noticeable peak since 2008 (Tate Modern, Centre Pompidou, Guggenheim New York, etc.). Her rating has been growing proportionally since the early-2000s, with auction records being set in 2015 (\$28 million for *Spider* at Christie's), 2008 (\$16.8 million) and 2012, making her the world's most expensive female post-war and contemporary artist. The *Cells* are particularly hard to find as there are limited numbers of them and they are mostly owned by museums.



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