

Louise Bourgeois: a talk at Modern Art One



A Woman Without Secrets, the Scottish Gallery of Modern Art's Louise Bourgeois exhibition, will end next month. It's a show that inspires strong feelings; I've seen it three times and I'm still discovering new things about this fascinating artist. On Monday in Modern Art One's Studio, Elizabeth Manchester, PhD Researcher at Chelsea School of Art and Lipman Writer in Residence at Newcastle University, gave an enlightening talk, 'Spiraling Anxiety; hysteria transformed in the work of Louise Bourgeois.'

Bourgeois, says Manchester, was an anxious woman who feared many things; silence, the dark, falling down, insomnia.

Bourgeois once said that life consisted of two opposing emotions, love and fear; the fear of not being loved and the fear of abandonment. She saw art as a 'guarantee of sanity; it gave her a way to cope with her sometimes terrifying feelings.

While Bourgeois was studying at the Sorbonne, her mother died.

This had a profound effect on her, and many of her later works focus on the mother as a protector – the huge spider sculptures on display at the gallery are representative of maternal bounty and maternal terror; they guard against evil, but they also consume. Bourgeois had three sons, but felt that she could never match up to her mother in maternal ability. One of her spider sculptures is called Maman, another Ode a ma Mere; Bourgeois once referred to spiders as 'helpful and protective, just like my mother.'

In 1938, the International Surrealist Exhibition was staged in Paris. It was curated by Marcel Du Champ; Salvador Dali and

Maz Ernst were its technical advisers, Man Ray its lighting technician. On the opening night, Helene Vanel performed a dance, 'L'acte manqué' – the Unconsummated Act, in a room called 'the hysterical bedroom.' It was described as a realistic portrayal of an 'hysterical attack', something that greatly interested the Surrealists. At that time, hysteria was a blanket term used to define any woman who showed signs of nervous disorder; doctors subjected them to all manner of horrendous physical 'cures', ignoring the social and political causes of their suffering. It is likely that Bourgeois attended this exhibition, and although she later claimed to loathe Surrealism her work was deeply influenced by it, perhaps especially by Marcel Duchamp.

It took Freud and Breuer to see that 'hysterical' women were neither stupid nor physically ill; rather, they were highly intelligent people frustrated by the social rules of their day. Feminism and hysteria began to collide, but even Freud was not prepared to allow women to subvert the social order, famously asking 'What does woman want?' and failing to provide an answer.

Bourgeois's father's bullying, his serial philandering and most especially his affair with her governess (which her mother knew about but preferred to ignore) were central issues in her life. On his death she entered psychoanalysis, something she continued to explore for the rest of her life although her attitude to it and to hysteria was ambivalent.

Many of her works are representations of body parts – she distrusted words, feeling that their purpose was often to hide things; 'The body does not lie.' Her rage against her own powerlessness could only be overcome by taking control. At the Sorbonne, she first studied mathematics and geometry because 'I got peace of mind only through the study of rules nobody could change'; in later life she frequently drew rows and rows of spirals and other patterns (the Insomnia Drawings, shown recently at the Fruitmarket Gallery, are examples),

again finding structure in a sea of free-floating ideas. She once said 'I have to control space because I cannot stand emptiness.'

Bourgeois made many hanging sculptures; these have several interpretations in her work. 'Spiral Woman', one of the best known, swings and turns; she is hanging, waiting, not knowing what she is for, both protected and vulnerable; Bourgeois explained that 'She is Louise.' The spiral is a protection against chaos, but also an expression of trust, a reaching out.

The power and affirmation that Bourgeois gained from psychoanalysis allowed her to express her fears. The only powerlessness for her was terror of her own feelings, and she harnessed these in her greatest works of art. In her own words, her work began as the fear of falling, grew into the art of falling, and finally evolved into the art of hanging in there. Bourgeois died in 2010, aged 98.

A Woman Without Secrets is on at the [Scottish Gallery of Modern Art \(One\)](#) until 18th May, admission free.

A richly illustrated book '**Artists Rooms: Louise Bourgeois, A Woman Without Secrets**' accompanies the exhibition. It is published by the National Galleries of Scotland and is available from the gallery shop at £12.99.