

Louise Bourgeois' Sunday Salons: a talk by Julie Roberts at Modern Art One



September 2001, New York City. For most of us, the date brings to mind one thing: the attacks on the **World Trade Centre**. The day the world changed. For artist [Julie Roberts](#), however, life changed for a different reason. Julie was a guest at one of Louise Bourgeois' Sunday Salons; she found the experience so moving that she knows she will remember it even on her deathbed.

Julie is an internationally celebrated artist who will soon take part in the [Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art's](#) new exhibition, '[Generation: 25 years of Contemporary Art in Scotland.](#)' Last Monday at Modern Art One, Julie told the fascinating story of her afternoon at Bourgeois' house on West 22nd Street.

In 2001, Julie had been asked to participate in the [International Studio and Curatorial Program in New York](#).

Along with four other young artists from the Program, she was also invited to attend Bourgeois' Salon, which took a few days after 9/11. Bourgeois, who was French and who had also arrived in the US as a young artist, liked to meet young people, especially those from overseas; the other guests were various artists, musicians and dancers. Julie was told that she must bring along an original piece of her work and a gift for Bourgeois; she was making a series of graphite portraits of Jack the Ripper's victims at the time, but – having heard about Bourgeois' penchant for chocolate and fearing that her portraits would end up covered in it – Julie took some reproductions of other works. The guests were also told that

'careerist intentions are unwelcome' – Bourgeois aimed to recreate the Parisian salons of the 19th century; she wanted stimulating, honest discussion and did not like anyone to come looking for favours.

The Salon was hosted by [Paulo Herkenhoff](#), then of [MOMA](#). On arrival, the guests were led through the small house into a room overlooking the overgrown, romantic garden. The whole place was very shabby (in the days before that word went with 'chic') with peeling grey paint. Throughout her years of teaching Julie has noticed that the more affluent the students, the shabbier they look – people like to 'play at the opposite', and she wonders if this also applied to Bourgeois, whose child had been solidly middle-class.

Julie is interested in how people live in their own spaces. This house was very much a studio, it had an artist's 'look'; things were recycled, domestic and studio life intertwined, a table used for dinner would also act as an easel. Grey metal chairs – which Julie thinks may have come from the Brooklyn garment factory that Bourgeois had bought in 1980 – were arranged in a circle. Rum, vodka and whisky were set out on a coffee table; there were no other drinks. A film-maker sat at the back recording the session. Bourgeois was brought into the room and sat at the front. She was tiny, hadn't been outside for years and was wearing a white long-sleeved T-shirt and black nylon knickerbockers, which she kept yanking up to her armpits. Two red bricks propped up the cushions on her chair, and Julie noticed that at some point Bourgeois slid down so that she was sitting on hard brick. Despite her age – she died in 2010 at the age of 98 – she was lively and animated. Julie remembers the brightness of her eyes and her scary, inquisitive gaze.

The environment was intense, the room bare; for Julie it felt like an installation in which the guests were the performers, or a circus with Bourgeois as the lion-tamer. There was some light from the garden and also a small old-fashioned pink

lamp, which seemed very feminine and at odds with the rest of the decor; Bourgeois constantly fiddled with this lamp, clearly enjoying its homeliness and femininity. Downstairs was Bourgeois' old studio, which Julie (having seen it on her way to the loo) describes as something from a horror film. This had once been the sewing room; it was hard to imagine people creating Bourgeois' fabric sculptures in such a dark depressing place. On the top floor was Bourgeois' late husband [Robert Goldwater's](#) library, now Bourgeois' living space; the participants wondered if that was super chic, but they doubted it.

The artists gave Bourgeois their gifts but she was only interested in the chocolates, stuffing these into her mouth as fast as she could – she was by then on a restricted diet and her assistant swiftly confiscated the rest. Julie had been advised to bring jam but this was ignored, as were others' offerings of flowers.

The question posed by Bourgeois was 'Does anyone think art should be emotional?' Julie's own work is about emotions; fear, childhood trauma, abandonment. She is currently finishing a five year project on children's homes (having at one point been in one herself.) She bravely raised her hand, and was told to sit on a chair in the middle of the room; with the camera on her, she felt close to tears. She showed her paintings of wax anatomical models, and one of a woman's torso lying prone in the 19th century Paris morgue with a dead child. This prompted another girl to describe how she had come on the subway and had seen a couple with a baby in their arms – the baby seemed to die and turn blue as the family travelled to the hospital. Bourgeois commented that Julie's work was 'interesting.'

The discussion opened out, and a German Process Movement artist said that the question was rubbish, he did not want to talk about emotions. Bourgeois loved a fight and had a furious argument with him, then turned her attention to the other

people in the room. A girl who made sculptures from women's hair particularly attracted her attention; she wanted to know why only female hair was used, and pressed the artist (who was sitting next to the man she had just married) to admit that she was gay. Bourgeois then announced that she would give the girl some hair and chopped some of her own off with scissors.

Worse was to come, as she then ordered Julie to go round the room collecting a hank of hair from each guest. If people declined, she insisted; she was in total control. The German artist had a shaved head – Bourgeois told him to take his top off, and Julie was grateful to see that he had more than sufficient hair on his chest to satisfy requirements. All the hair was collected and put into a plastic bag for the hapless artist.

The girl from the subway had brought a 20 minute performance video as her original work; during the showing, Bourgeois nodded off, waking up at the end to announce 'that was interesting, let's see it again.' She promptly fell asleep through the second showing.

As the alcohol flowed, Julie noticed that everyone was moving closer together; Bourgeois had drawn them in. The German announced 'You are the spider...you have us all in your web..'

Spiders are an iconic image in Bourgeois' work, the sculptures often huge with legs like the needles from her parents' tapestry workshop. They are often seen as the mother figure; the most famous is entitled 'Maman.' Spiders are also very industrious: Bourgeois own mother was a weaver who 'never stopped working.'

In the middle of the afternoon, Bourgeois' son **Jean Louis** called her; Bourgeois had always said that she had a special relationship with him, and now they had an intense conversation whilst the guests sat and watched. Suddenly, the mood had shifted; Bourgeois was no longer the master of ceremonies. A window opened onto her personal life, a private moment in which her face showed intense love and joy. Julie

felt privileged to observe this revelation of Bourgeois' maternal side. **Anthony D'Offay** has talked about the conflicting demands of art and motherhood in Bourgeois' work, and Julie agrees that it is hard enough to be a female artist without being a mother as well; many women choose not to have children because they see this as the only way to have their work taken seriously. It is wrong however to say that Bourgeois only had success late in life; she was part of the [American Abstract Artists Group](#) in the 1950s and a friend of [Jackson Pollock](#) and [Mark Rothko](#). She had exhibitions at the [Tate](#) and MOMA . The unusual aspect of Bourgeois' career is that she kept going; she worked until her death, and her late works garnered a great deal of public acclaim.

Bourgeois was a feisty woman who subverted female stereotypes. She was honest and open; she benefited from the first wave of feminism in the 1970s, but she was still always pulled two ways between motherhood and art, and was sometimes criticised for being selfish in not giving her sons her full attention. She is famously said to have thrown a roast dinner out of the window so that she could concentrate on her work. Julie's view is that a certain amount of single-mindedness is essential to an artist's success, and that whilst women are called selfish, men are simply 'focused' or 'have an ego.' She points out that [Barbara Hepworth](#) farmed her children out so that she could sculpt, and that the idea of sending children away was much more familiar in those early post-war days. Bourgeois tried to grasp the contradictions in life and work and represent them in her art. All of her work was about memories.

At the end of that afternoon in West 22nd Street, Bourgeois returned the gifts that she did not like to the donors. Julie remembers seeing one of the assistants putting all the 'forbidden' food into the kitchen bin. In the street it was dark; the moon was huge. Although it had happened only a short while before, 9/11 had not been mentioned all day; the

fear it engendered had been taken away. Outside, the artists asked one another 'What happened?' Bourgeois did not go out, the world came to her.

Julie still feels moved and privileged to have been a guest at the Salon; she says that Bourgeois' tenacity and determination spurred her on and persuaded her to keep going even when interest in women's work was at its lowest. Now a new feminist movement is benefiting young artists, whilst Julie is coming to terms with her own childhood through her work on children's homes and separation. She uses her work as a cathartic exercise, just as Bourgeois' work finally allowed her to reach the state of 'hanging in there.'

The audience for this lunchtime talk very much appreciated Julie's entertaining and honest style, and the sharing of a story that brings a great deal to our understanding of Louise Bourgeois, artist, mother; woman without secrets.

[Artists Rooms: Louise Bourgeois, A Woman Without Secrets](#) closes at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art One on Saturday 18th May 2014.

[Generation: 25 years of Contemporary Art in Scotland](#), featuring over 30 artists including Julie Roberts, will open at Modern Art One and the Scottish National Gallery on 28th June 2014, admission free.

[Artists Rooms](#) is an important public collection of international contemporary art that the [Art Fund](#) is helping to share across the UK.

Louise Bourgeois

UNTITLED, 2010

Fabric, thread, rubber, stainless steel, wood and glass

199.4 x 221 x 110.5 cm.

ARTIST ROOMS Tate and National Galleries of Scotland. Lent by the Artist Rooms Foundation 2013

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