



Installation view of Louise Bourgeois: Recent
Sculpture, Stable Gallery, New York, 1964
(artworks © Louise Bourgeois; photograph by
Rudolph Burkhardt)

Over the last sixty years, the persistence of two themes—the body and the home—within the oeuvre of Louise Bourgeois is remarkable.¹ The intertwining of the two, moreover, has occurred repeatedly and extends back to her earliest major series in two dimensions, the *Femme Maison* paintings of the late 1940s. But it is not until the 1960s that a more abstract, elliptical treatment of the conflation of body and home begins to take hold. In particular, the subject of this paper

Elyse Speaks

“We bring our *lares* with us”: Bodies and Domiciles in the Sculpture of Louise Bourgeois

This essay is dedicated to the late Kermit Champa, to whom I would like to express my deep gratitude for all of his assistance and discussion as this essay took shape. I would also like to thank Mary Ann Doane, Dian Kriz, and Hervé Vanel, as well as *Art Journal*’s anonymous readers, for their very helpful criticisms and comments on previous drafts of this essay.

1. The themes were noted in both the catalogue of the 2008 retrospective *Louise Bourgeois* (organized by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, in association with Tate Modern, London, and Centre Pompidou, Paris) and in reviews of the exhibition. See, for instance, Neville Weston, “Louise Bourgeois,” *Crafts Arts International* 72 (2008), 95–97.

2. Daniel Robbins, “The Sculpture of Louise Bourgeois,” *Art International* 8 (October 1964): 29.

3. On this point, see Anne Wagner, “Bourgeois Prehistory or The Ransom of Fantasies,” *Oxford Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (1999): 3–23.

4. Mignon Nixon examines subsequent references to the base qualities of the latex works in Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and the Story of Modern Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 188–208. Wagner also refers to the works as “low.”

5. See, for instance, Stuart Preston, “This Week around the Galleries,” *New York Times*, January 19, 1964, 23.

6. V. R., “Exhibition Review,” *Arts Magazine* 38 (March 1964), 63.

is the connection of these themes, as forged through a key series of plaster and latex works executed between 1960 and 1963, in which Bourgeois sets up an interrelated exploration of the stakes of the body and home treated as one.

Bourgeois began executing works in these materials in the very early 1960s and exhibited a handful of them in an exhibition at the Stable Gallery in 1964, her only solo sculpture show of the 1960s. Unlike her early three-dimensional works, wood sculptures produced on a figural scale and

placed directly on the floor in a proto-environmental fashion, most of these conformed to the traditional precepts of indoor sculpture: they were of an appropriate table-top size and were placed on plinths. The sharp contrast in scale, as well as in form and material, was not lost on critics, who viewed the change with perplexity and some dismay. Daniel Robbins wrote: “It was as if an old acquaintance once darkly lean, elegant and aloof, had come back from a long journey transformed: fleshy, chalky, round and organic . . . [with] the capacity to quiver and ooze. . . . The effect of this exhibition was not ingratiating for the work was powerful but rather repellent.”² Robbins’s analysis of the simultaneous sense of attraction and repulsion conveyed in the show characterized the main tension that these works seemed to embody. In part this was due to the dramatic visual changes to which he referred. The decisions to adopt a reduced scale and create sculptures seemingly able to “quiver and ooze” were unusual ones to make, given the previous success that Bourgeois had won from the exhibition of the wood personages the decade before.³ In addition, what appeared as a move away from the environmental format that Bourgeois had adopted in her early work was oddly timed; it had taken until the early 1960s for environments to catch on.

Instead of mimicking the scale of the spectator, this body of work was almost uniformly small, lumpy, and rather *informe*. Most were formally “low,” primitive, and without clear reference to either the human body or any other form, figural, geometric, or otherwise.⁴ At best, critics were disturbed by the works; at worst, they were indifferent. That the works received any attention in the 1960s was itself a mark of Bourgeois’s stature; they were reviewed by every major American art publication when exhibited. Yet despite her reputation, critics who were most dismissive of the work attributed the problem to Bourgeois in pointed and uncommon ways; her execution, talent, and momentum were all called into question.⁵ The *Arts Magazine* critic, for instance, claimed that the works’ “melancholy” appearance gave the impression that “the sculptor hadn’t felt like working.”⁶ But there was something disingenuous in the claims, which ultimately seemed to say more about the works’ posture than the artist.

A notable review by Michael Fried confirmed Bourgeois’s status while making explicit the terms of the exhibition’s inefficiency. It provided a significant catalogue of metaphors for the low states in which the work rested—entrails,

Louise Bourgeois, Lair or Winter Refuge, 1963, latex, 9½ x 16¾ x 14⅓ in. (24.1 x 42.5 x 36.5 cm) (artwork © Louise Bourgeois; photograph by Christopher Burke, provided by Cheim & Read, Hauser & Wirth, and Galerie Karsten Greve)



excrement, tentacles; the sum amounts to a list of amorphous organic things, which exhibit all manner of primitive states of existence. To these Fried collectively ascribed a vocabulary that implied the inevitability of the sculptures' failure.⁷ The forms, he claimed, appeared empty and heavy, inert and moving at the same time, attempting resolution without achieving it. Their abstraction compounded the problem, especially since Bourgeois's work lacked the predominant formal attributes of contemporary abstract sculpture. The absence of comparison to other contemporary sculpture in this and other reviews is indicative of what 1960s critics stopped short of considering, but what commentators since have acknowledged and even lauded, namely, the possibility that the works' failure was intentional.⁸ The formal instabilities, combined with the dominant choice to work in plaster, merely afforded the impression that these works were preliminary rather than finished.

Problems in reading the works may have been increased in the Stable exhibition in particular by the strong division in the small space between two dominant structural types, spiral and shell. Those works that engaged with the spiral form initiated a rhetoric that Bourgeois has since used repeatedly in her work, as in, for instance, two works titled *Spiral Woman* (1951; 1984). The shells or pods, however, have received less attention. Their source materials appear to have been animal shelters—nests, dens, lairs, and so on—though only a few works, such as *Winter Refuge*, now known as *Lair*, made direct reference to such natural architectures. *Lair*, an early work in latex, is most nearly like an unshaped mound; its absence of strong shape compelled one critic to describe it as “a mound that looks semi-liquid” of “disagreeable brown rubber.”⁹ The only natural form to which it was connected was excrement.¹⁰ The brown, rubbery quality of *Lair* was particularly striking in the context of the Stable exhibition, where it contrasted with the white plaster of the other pieces; its combination of color, texture, and form must have resulted in the sculpture's near-invisibility. But most of all, *Lair*

7. Michael Fried, “New York Letter,” *Art International* 8 (April 1964): 58.

8. As in Wagner, 8–9.

9. V. R., “Exhibition Review.”

10. Fried, 58. Fried's review is the only place in which the title *Winter Refuge* appears.

Louise Bourgeois, Fée Couturière, ca. 1963,
plaster, 39½ x 22½ x 22½ in. (100.3 x 57.2 x 57.2
cm) (artwork © Louise Bourgeois; photograph by
Christopher Burke, provided by Cheim & Read,
Hauser & Wirth, and Galerie Karsten Greve)



must have seemed to be cast off for its impenetrability; it had little to recommend an inner life, making it hard to believe that it was in any state of unfinished process beyond decay.

The title *Lair* also explicitly connects it to the other “lair” in the exhibition, *Fée Couturière*. At just under forty inches, it was the only piece that remained near the scale of the sculptures that Bourgeois had been doing in the late 1940s and 1950s, making it significantly larger than its companions. Unlike the other works in the Stable show, it hung from the ceiling on a metal hook, and so provided multiple views of both an exterior shell and interior spiral. *Fée Couturière*, one of two French titles that Bourgeois gave to works in the show, has been translated by commentators variously as “Fairy Dressmaker” and “Tailor Bird,” but both imply the two essential features of one who sews and flies.¹¹ While sewing is generally associated with Bourgeois’s own mother and childhood, flight is not often discussed in relation to her works. *Fée Couturière*’s orientation—hanging from the ceiling rather than sitting on a plinth—relates it visually to flight, but there is seemingly little else that clarifies the title.

11. Marie-Laure Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois* (Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1996), 70. “Fée couturière” and “tailor bird” are the common names in French and English for an actual species of bird, *Orthotomus sutorius*. While I was working on this essay, Bourgeois’s studio told me that she always meant the translation to be “Tailor Bird” and that the title has been mistakenly translated in the past.

Louise Bourgeois, Untitled, 1950, ink on paper, 11 x 7½ in. (27.9 x 19.1 cm). Private collection (artwork © Louise Bourgeois; photograph by Eeva Inkeri)



Its positioning off the ground was crucial for Bourgeois; bases, orientation, and position had been themes since her early drawings, sculptures, and paintings. With regard to a 1950 untitled drawing, Bourgeois explained:

These are sheaves hanging from the ceiling and they trail together. They do not need to be grounded anymore. They don't have to; they hang. When they hang, it is because they can't find an equilibrium on the floor, so they find another point of reference on the ceiling. The ceiling suggests you have a different kind of permanence. It is a search for equilibrium, and you have it if the things hang, whereas the floor has revealed itself to be a difficult situation because people can push you over. Since you come down to a point you're very vulnerable.¹²

Though Bourgeois spoke of the sheaves as having human qualities and concerns, particularly a resistance to the vulnerability of potentially destabilizing outside forces that are faced when grounded, the shapes do not resemble figures. Nor does she directly refer to the sheaves as figures; instead her description emphasized their locations in space—and off the ground—as protective points of stability. At the same time she slipped into an anthropomorphic language that conflates sheaves with the figure or figures they may protect. This conflation of person and structure is typical; in a theme that has persisted for over sixty years, almost all representations of one are both—space and inhabitant. Beginning with the *Femme Maison* series of paintings, Bourgeois represents the woman as both contained or trapped by and at one with the home. Nor did the theme

12. Louise Bourgeois with Lawrence Rinder, *Louise Bourgeois, Drawings and Observations*, exh. cat. (Berkeley: University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, University of California, Berkeley; Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1995), 92. In the same passage, Bourgeois relates the drawing to a childhood memory of her parents drying sheaves of vegetables in the attic.

vanish as she entered into the most public phase of her career; the “fairy dress-maker” reappears in one of her *Cells* (2001), this time quite literally presented as one of her own house dresses suspended from the top of the cell.

Bourgeois’s works repeatedly draw on a special connection to the concept of home as well, and there is reason to believe that the works asserted their identities as objects so forcefully as to prevent the apprehension of precisely this theme. The works triggered a critical response characteristic of Freud’s uncanny, suggesting the resistance exhibited when a confrontation with an object breeds discomfort and fear. More interesting than such general discomfort, though, is the connection in Bourgeois’s work between discomfort and the home. Like Freud’s uncanny, or “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar,” Bourgeois’s objects seem to draw on a special connection to the concept of home and the particular tendency for the uncanny “to destroy the *heimlichkeit* of the home.”¹³ Despite their near-absence in the criticism, Bourgeois’s lairs resonated with cultural analyses of the union of house and body written in the 1950s and 1960s. Gaston Bachelard, for example, in his 1958 *Poetics of Space*, wrote on the ways in which the domestic space of the house and the interior of the person were intertwined, and in so doing he examined various literary and psychological sources in order to attempt a “topoanalysis,” an exploration of psychological states through phenomenological experiences of space.

The introduction and first two chapters of *The Poetics of Space* were devoted to the relationship between the mind and the home, and the ways in which one could see at once the organization of the mind as both analogical to the organization of the home and organized by the home: “There is ground for taking the house as a tool for analysis of the human soul. . . . Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are ‘housed.’ Our soul is an abode. And by remembering ‘houses’ and ‘rooms,’ we learn to ‘abide’ within ourselves. Now everything becomes clear, the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them . . . ”¹⁴ Bachelard relied on the idea that the analogy between home and mind is the result of a causal influence of the home on the mind. He proposed that literary images of houses and domestic spaces in particular were manifestations of the ways in which interior space organized thoughts, day-dreams, emotions, and experience. By looking at represented images of spaces, one could determine how emotions like fear and safety were produced by certain spaces as much as they were felt through their inhabitation.

Bachelard’s analysis of spaces suggests how Bourgeois’s 1960s plaster works were exploring domestic space by re-creating it in ways that manifest its conjunction with the body of the maker or builder. What the lairs reveal is the intensity of the structure that results when the body and the home are enacted as one, the ways in which it is able both to protect and to frighten. Critics often cite the psychological charge that Bourgeois’s works hold, and in the lairs, sympathetic critics saw this as a mysterious presence emanating from the core of the works.¹⁵ The aerial orientation of *Fée Couturière* made it particularly loaded, as the Art News critic Natalie Edgar noted. Bourgeois, she said, “explores the form of [a] state of feeling. . . . In one sculpture this is seen as a giant white plaster tear drop hanging from a hook, with apertures in its skin. These are entrances to a labyrinth within and the tunnels and passages composing the labyrinth seem to protect a secret

13. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 27, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 219–52; 220, 222.

14. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), xxiii, italics in orig. Bourgeois quoted Bachelard’s views from memory by 1986 and dated her first introduction to him to about ten years earlier, though she is not necessarily to be trusted when it comes to discussing her history.

15. See, for example, Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 361–70.



Louise Bourgeois, Cell XXV (The View of the World of the Jealous Wife), 2001, steel, wood, marble, glass, and fabric, 8 ft. 4 in. x 10 ft. x 10 ft. (254 x 304.8 x 304.8 cm). Collection of Ellipse Foundation (artwork © Louise Bourgeois; photograph by Christopher Burke)

center. The plaster skin seems a casual camouflage, but the presence of an inner life is felt in the same way that personality leaves an imprint on the face.”¹⁶ It is as if the work’s nature were produced by its interior structure, an idea that sheds light on the forms of the other works made during the period. The sculpture’s complex, labyrinthine spatiality was a manifestation of the explorations at stake.

Relative to the detached, authorless feel of contemporary minimalist and Pop works, Bourgeois’s work has the deskilled look associated with the handmade.¹⁷ It was a baser, less lofty quality that resonated through the whole structure and seemed to confirm the works’ lack of authority. Descriptions that questioned the works’ finish were applied to nearly all of the works at the Stable show. Even today viewers find that the smaller works look arrested rather than finished. But Bourgeois was content to leave the sculptures in a perpetual state of potential; for her there was no conflict between that and a “finished” state: “Since the ‘lairs’ grow from within (contrary to the poured forms) each stage is the necessary pre-condition for what follows. In principle each ‘lair’ could be arrested at every level, but in practice each seems to have an internal life which causes it to grow to a certain size.”¹⁸ Yet despite Bourgeois’s claim that a state of internal equilibrium had been reached, the critics were left with the feeling that among the Stable sculptures, more growth (and more work) was needed. The result of such a contrast in conclusions—between what size the sculptures demanded to be at the time and what looks to the viewer like a decision to stop working before the works reached a state of resolution—is a set of sculptures that could need to be remade, reawakened, and reshaped.

Remaking works in different scales, materials, and even in slightly different forms became standard procedure for Bourgeois in the 1980s, and the theme and look of the lair in particular has persisted in new materials, scales, and forms throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Is it possible, then, that these sculptures, potentially but not necessarily completed, embody the nostalgia associated with the working, nurturing body—be it as part or whole, womb or mother—its physical necessity as a space for growth?¹⁹

I have already introduced Fé Fé Couturière as an exploration of the domestic interior and of one’s place within that space, but what kind of domestic space is it? In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard suggested that through the work of imagination the space of the home pervaded any space into which one enters:

All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home. . . . He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams. It is no longer in its positive aspects that the house is really “lived,” nor is it only in the passing hour that we recognize its benefits. An entire past comes to dwell with us in a new house. The old saying: “We bring our *lares* with us” has many variations. . . . Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days.²⁰

Perhaps “treasures” is a less accurate description of what is brought from one house into another than “fears.” Domestic spaces, in their familiarity and unmistakable personality, can become all too present when one no longer thinks that they are, and yet this is an image of the home or “lair” as able to “co-penetrate” any other inhabited space. When taken as a virtual presentation of the inhabited

16. Natalie Edgar, “Reviews and Previews,” *Art News* 62 (January 1964): 10.

17. This quality was implied in part by the awareness on the part of critics of the “hollowness” of works like Donald Judd’s and Robert Morris’s cubes, an important point of contrast to the complex interior life of Bourgeois’s lairs.

18. “William Rubin—Louise Bourgeois: Questions and Answers,” in *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father*, ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 82.

19. If biography played a part in the timing of the sculptures, then nostalgia makes sense. Bourgeois’s children were no longer young by the beginning of the 1960s, and in this sense her primary tasks as a mother were complete.

20. Bachelard, 5, italics in orig.

body of the home, *Fée Couturière* appears less a symbol than an enactment: an instance in which the “symbol takes over the full function of the thing it symbolizes.”²¹

The tensions that result from bringing the past into the present often form the central conflicts and dynamics of Bourgeois’s oeuvre. In the plaster and latex works, Bourgeois initiates the explicit connections that drive much of her future production. The subjects are the maternal body, the domestic space, the past, and, most significantly, their interpenetration with the present. While a reenactment of past dynamics seems to be the theme that motivates the works, that reenactment is meant to be felt, experienced, redramatized for the viewer.²² This dynamic is thereby played out in the gallery amid the sculptures, with the viewer stepping in as an unknown and variable term.²³

If past models of how to negotiate domesticity—those one “brought with them” from one space into another—are troubled and troubling, is the present inevitably fated to invite collapse and failure?²⁴ The 1960s works embody the tensions between anger toward the past and the need to protect and sustain in the present. Taken together, these works pressed the question of what kind of domestic space one can produce, endure, and create of oneself.

One answer that Bourgeois offered was *Lair*. Even setting aside the much-cited biographical nuances of the narrative that Bourgeois spun beginning in 1982, relating to her father’s infidelity, it is clear that pain and anger have often informed her work. In a diary entry from 1953 Bourgeois wrote, “Depression is connected with my father in the analytical situation—the rage is connected with my mother—sugar got me out of depression into a rage—a heavy boat, charged with emotions, even conflicting emotions, is difficult to steer right. Danger of crashing ahead.”²⁵ If the notion of home has been destroyed, any future conception of domestic space would be in some respect “unhomely.” Perhaps then the accurate representation of this kind of domesticity is a primitive domestic space, one that exposes the inherent tensions in domesticity in its attempts to be protective and impenetrable without being destructive, safe and yet repellent in its aspect—like *Lair*.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard drew connections between the need for retreat and the animal refuge, be it lair, nest, or den, writing, “Physically, the creature endowed with a sense of refuge huddles up to itself, takes to cover, hides away, lies snug, concealed.”²⁶ But, as a space of retreat, a lair is the kind of space one builds for the self—either to protect or to hide—and in either case to withdraw from external circumstance. It would mean retreat, perhaps even failure in domestic terms, since maternal space is by definition a shared space rather than an individualized one.

Yet even in *Fée Couturière* Bourgeois retained something of the clinging, sheltering quality of *Lair*. In an analysis of the theme of the home in literature, Bachelard examines the question of scale as one that derives directly from the issue of tensions. In embattled houses, “There is a community of forces, the concentrated courage and resistance of both house and man. And what an image of concentrated being we are given with this house that ‘clings’ to its inhabitant and becomes the cell of a body with its walls close together. The refuge shrinks in size. And with its protective qualities increased, it grows outwardly stronger.”²⁷ Domestic battles, he claimed, were met with images of the conjoining of

21. On this operation, see Freud, 244.

22. See, for instance, Mieke Bal, “Narrative inside out: Louise Bourgeois’ Spider as Theoretical Object,” *Oxford Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (1999): 103–26.

23. For biographical support, see *Destruction of the Father*, 72, 125, and 156.

24. The diary entries support this conclusion, should a biographical reading be more compelling. Louise Bourgeois, “Selected Diary Notes 1960–1979,” in *Destruction of the Father*, 70–71.

25. Diary entry from March 12, 1953, in *Destruction of the Father*, 61.

26. Bachelard, 91.

27. Ibid., 45–46.

Louise Bourgeois, Maison, 1961, plaster, 16 x 14 x 9½ in. (40.6 x 35.5 x 23.4 cm) (art-work © Louise Bourgeois; photograph by Rafael Lobato, provided by Cheim & Read, Hauser & Wirth, and Galerie Karsten Greve)



body and home. Like Bourgeois's Lair, these embattled houses regress in scale to become "redoubts," fortresses, at the cost of size (vast expansiveness) and aspect (attractive appearances). In becoming so, a moral strength was gained: "Faced with the bestial hostility of the storm and the hurricane, the house's virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues. The house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body."²⁸

Lair is only one of countless shrunken fortresses made during Bourgeois's career. Perhaps the first in three dimensions was *Maison* (1961). Measuring approximately sixteen inches tall, a generic, almost featureless house, it had already decreased drastically in size from previous works. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, Bourgeois repeatedly constructed scaled-down representations of houses, lairs, nests, and interior spaces. But in the 1960s Bourgeois created fewer houses than natural, "primitive" domestic spaces like lairs, or shells and nests. In part this was an iconography that resonated with her generation of artists, and it shared something with her early totemistic sculptures.²⁹ The distance between the upright totems and the 1960s works was, despite appearances, less than had been supposed. Though the iconography of primitive art was omitted in the 1960s works, Bourgeois retained its operational principles, and instead applied them to an iconography of organic primitive subjects—or, perhaps, explorations of primitive processes or states. In 1960 she wrote of her work in such a way as to imply that there was a difference:

As time goes by people will see new things in the work . . . e.g., the oozing out of milk (mother) water (spring in mother earth)—saliva in snails—lava in volcano—creates an ambivalence of feelings that goes from pleasure to fear . . .

Content is a concern with the human body, its aspects, its changes, transformations, what it needs, wants and feels—its functions.

28. Ibid., 46. Bachelard is analyzing Henri Bosco's 1948 novel *Malicroix*.

29. See, for instance, M.G., "Review: Bourgeois at Peridot," *Art News* 48 (October 1949): 46.

What it perceives and undergoes passively, what it performs.
What it feels and what protects it—its habitat.

All these states of being, perceiving, and doing are expressed by processes that are familiar to us and that have to do with the treatment of materials, pouring, flowing, dripping, oozing out, setting, hardening, coagulating, thawing, expanding, contracting, and the voluntary aspects such as slipping away, advancing, collecting, letting go—³⁰

Bourgeois alternates between internal, bodily processes and external, natural processes, and barely distinguishes between the two in her descriptions. The “oozing of milk” shares the properties of the volcano and the spring; likewise the body shares the properties of the habitat or “what protects it.”

Bourgeois’s ready equation of internal and external biological and geographical processes relates directly to the connections that Bachelard drew between natural processes, natural forms, and domesticity in the most primitive of domestic spaces, like the lair, nest, and shell. For instance, in a chapter on nests Bachelard quoted Jules Michelet’s chapter on bird architecture from his 1856 naturalist text, *L’Oiseau*, in order to suggest how the building of the home can be a product of the body. According to Michelet, a bird is “a worker without tools”:

“In reality,” [Michelet] writes, “a bird’s tool is its own body, that is, its breast, with which it presses and tightens its materials until they have become absolutely pliant, well-blended and adapted to the general plan.” And Michelet suggests a house built by and for the body, taking form from the inside, like a shell, in an intimacy that works physically. The form of the nest is commanded by the inside . . .

Michelet goes on: “The house is a bird’s very person; it is its form and its most immediate effort, I shall even say, its suffering. The result is only obtained by constantly repeated pressure of the breast.”³¹

Michelet, a nineteenth-century French historian, philosopher, and naturalist, was standard fare for students in France, especially philosophy students like Bourgeois. She probably encountered him at some point, especially given her interest in birds, which was avid enough that she had an aviary built in her backyard. Based on her title, Bourgeois must have had the process of nest-building in mind when constructing *Fée Couturière*, a thought that likely inspired her to exhibit it in a tree at the Musée Rodin in Paris in 1965.³²

The union that Michelet described between the tool, or the nest-maker’s body, and the product, or the domestic space, which results from a labor of pain, is built directly into the tensions and emotions that the spiraling forms of *Fée Couturière* call up. When read in light of Michelet, the organic, unfinished look of the plaster and latex of the lairs begins to take on the appearance of vegetation and organic debris. Furthermore, Michelet went on to describe the process of felting by which certain birds camouflage their nests:

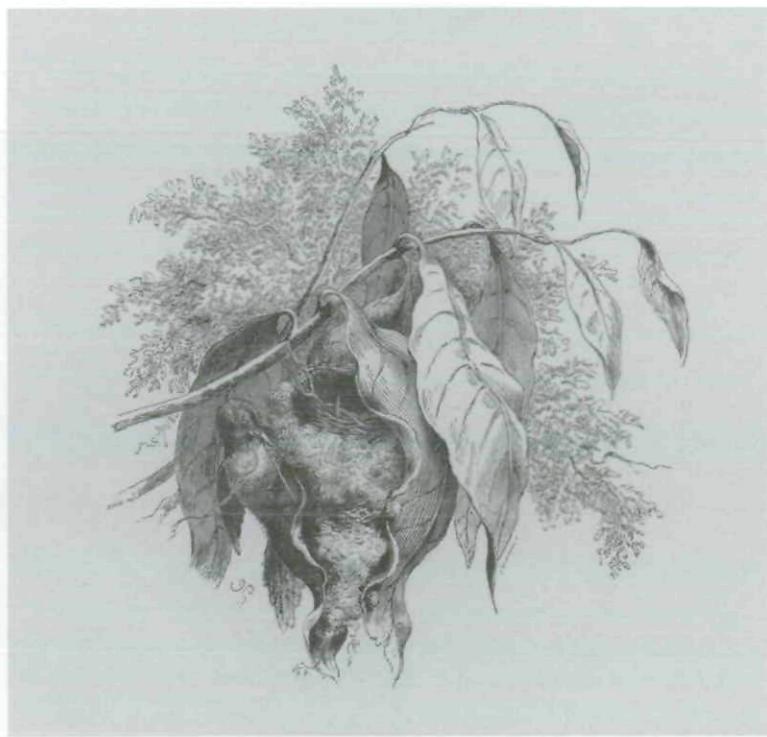
The [felters], restless and suspicious, [attach] to the finished nest, with much skill and address, a quantity of white lichens, so that the spotted appearance of the whole completely misleads the seeker, and induces him to take this charming and cunningly disguised nest for an accident of vegetation, a fortuitous and natural object.

30. Louise Bourgeois, “Form” (1960), in *Destruction of the Father*, 75–76.

31. Jules Michelet, *L’Oiseau* (1856), quoted in Bachelard, 101.

32. See Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois*, 100 and 176. Bourgeois has also confirmed this element of her title in the 2008 retrospective catalogue. See Ann Coxon, “Fée Couturière,” in *Louise Bourgeois*, exh. cat. (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 128.

H. Giacomelli, L'Oiseau [Bird], 1856, ink on paper, for Jules Michelet's book *L'Oiseau*, 1856, approx. 3½ x 3¼ in. (8.9 x 8.3 cm) (artwork in the public domain)



Glueing and felting play an important part in the work of the weavers. . . . Most birds employ saliva. Some—a strange thing, and a subtle invention of love!—resort to difficult processes for which their organs are ill adapted. An American starling contrives to sew the leaves with its bill, and does so very adroitly.³³

Hector Giacomelli's accompanying illustration demonstrated the process; he pictured the tailor bird sewing its camouflage around the nest with its beak.

It has long been apparent that part of Bourgeois's work in the 1960s was the creation of virtual, hidden refuges.³⁴ But what was never asked was what kind of refuge and for whom; the literature on Bourgeois often assumes that the refuge was for Bourgeois alone, as a space of escape from her past fears and rage. Yet here, in Michelet's description, is a kind of camouflaging that is for the present, not simply for the past, and not for the individual alone, performed, moreover, through an act of bodily weaving. Adopting Michelet's account of bird architecture offered a model that involved re-creating the house as a domestic space in the guise and form of the mother, who for Bourgeois is the original sewer or weaver.³⁵ In other words, the 1960s sculptures were at once an attempt to reconcile the need to retreat with the need to perform, to take on the labor of domesticity and engage with those fears, and the protective and destructive dynamics, that the concept of home entails.

In Bachelard's analysis of bird architecture, he cast doubt on the authenticity of Michelet's description; he rightly suggested that Michelet does not give an account of how birds build their nests, but an account in "human images" that exploits and explores the imagination and the dream more than it describes the habits of the bird.³⁶ Bourgeois, likewise, was not interested in re-creating

33. Jules Michelet, *The Bird*, trans. W. H. Davenport (London, Edinburgh, and New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1883), 253.

34. See Deborah Wye, *Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 24.

35. Bourgeois's mother worked in the family's tapestry repair shop.

36. Bachelard, 102.



Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1983,
marble, 25 x 19½ x 23 in. (63.5 x 49.5 x 58.4 cm).
Collection of Jean-Louis Bourgeois (artwork ©
Louise Bourgeois; photograph by Allan Finkelman)

cocoons, lairs, dens, or any other animal habitat, but in creating the experience of those places as felt, produced, and sheltered through and from a human body. The plaster works exist as records of a binding of the body that nurtures and the space in which that body performs.³⁷

Michelet's description of the nest-builders continued by introducing the theme of maternity into the issue of domesticity, giving an account that suggested nest-building to be the particular occupation of the mother bird; in so doing, he set up a point of contrast between the quadruped and the bird. After a detailed description of nest-building as a labor of pain, he wrote,

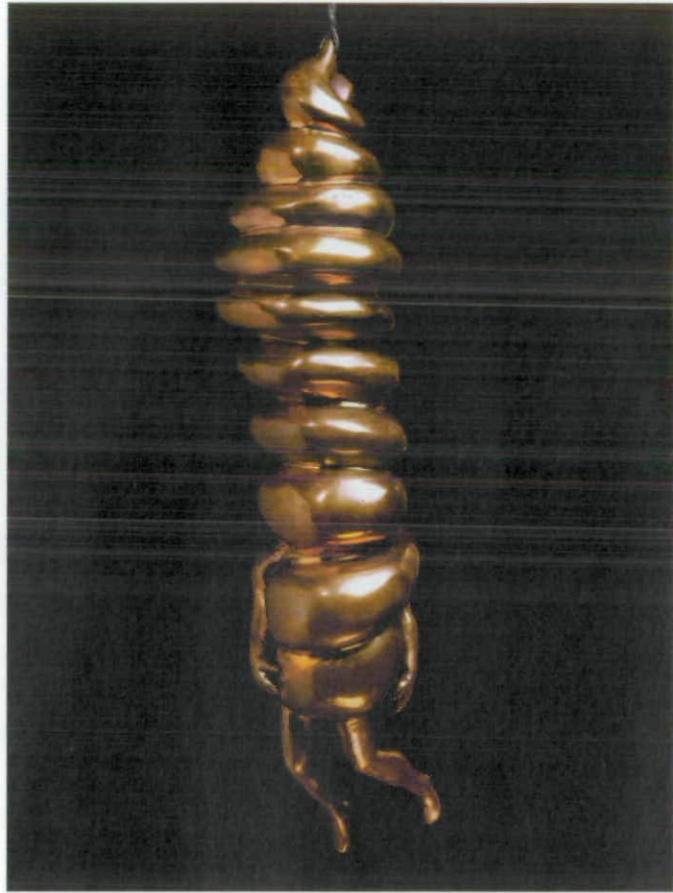
It is quite otherwise with the habitat of the quadruped. He comes into the world clothed; what need has he of a nest? . . . The bird builds for her family. Carelessly did she live in her bright leafy bower, exposed to every enemy; but the moment she was no longer alone, the hoped for and anticipated maternity made her an artist. The nest is a creation of love.

37. In all of this imagery there is an obvious connection to pregnancy as well. The connection between nest and womb is not lost on Bourgeois.



Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, ca. 1945–47, oil and ink on linen, 36 x 14 in. (91.4 x 35.5 cm). Private collection (artwork © Louise Bourgeois; photograph by Eeva Inkeri)

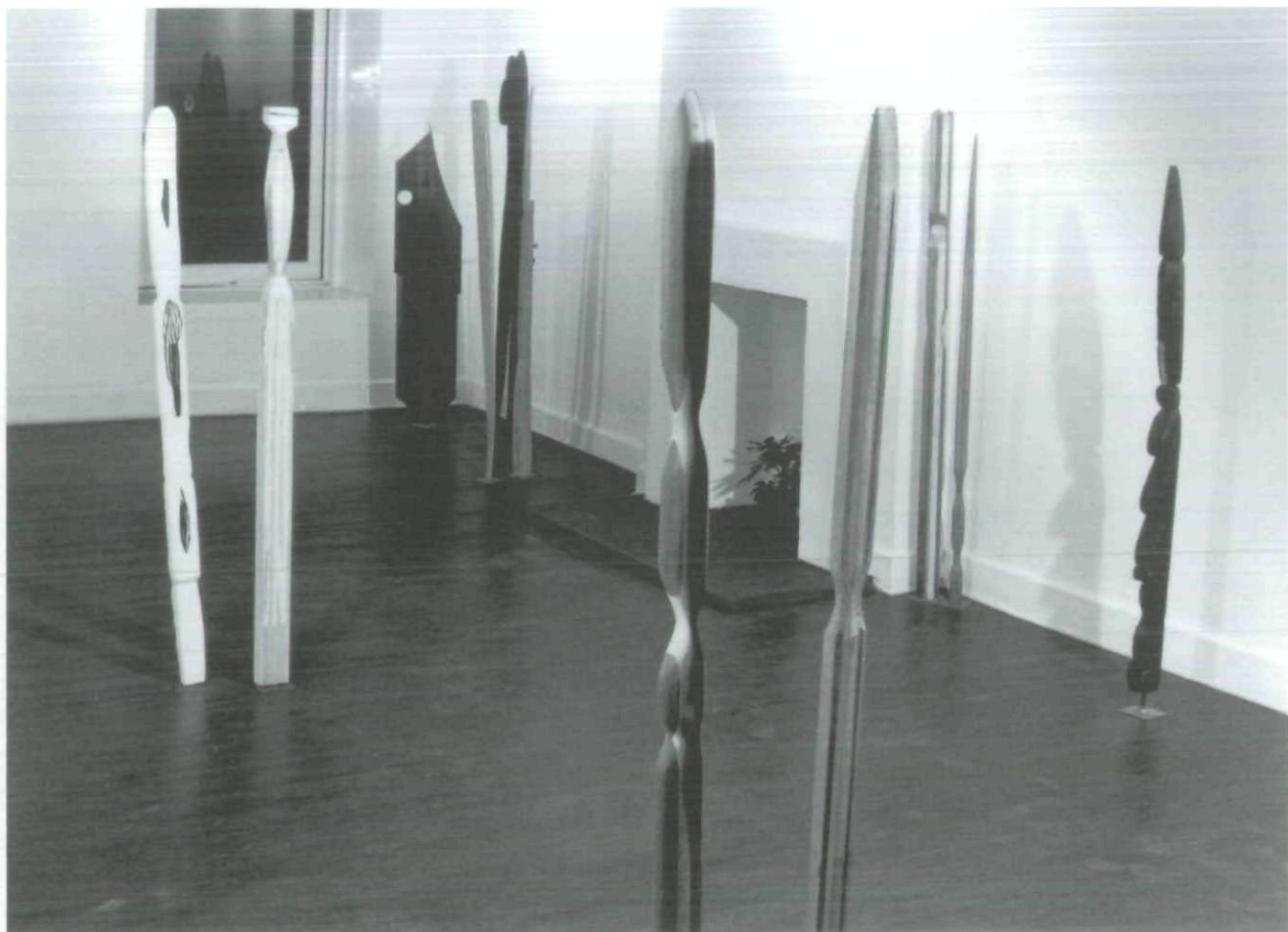
Louise Bourgeois, *Spiral Woman* (detail), 1984, bronze, hanging piece, with slate disc, 19 x 4 x 5½ in. (48.2 x 10.1 x 13.9 cm). (artwork © Louise Bourgeois; photograph by Christopher Burke, provided by Cheim & Read, Hauser & Wirth, and Galerie Karsten Greve)



Thus, the work is imprinted with a force of extraordinary will, of a passion singularly persevering. You see in it especially this fact, that it is not, like our works, prepared from a model, which settles the plan, conducts and regulates the labour. Here the conception is so thoroughly in the artist, the idea so clearly defined, that, without frame or carcase, without preliminary support, the aerial ship is built up piece by piece, and not a hitch disturbs the ensemble. All adjusts itself exactly, symmetrically, in perfect harmony; a thing infinitely difficult in such a deficiency of tools, and in this rude effort of concentration and kneading by the mere pressure of the breast. The mother does not trust to the male bird for all this . . .³⁸

Maternal impulses, Michelet determined, were responsible for the artistic creation, built with few tools but the body and assembled for the good of the family. But Michelet conceived of a perfect nest, one that was symmetrical and entirely camouflaged, and Bourgeois did not carry out his instructions too

38. Michelet, 249–50, italics in orig.



**Installation view of Louise Bourgeois:
Sculptures, Peridot Gallery, New York, 1950**
(artworks © Louise Bourgeois; photograph by
Aaron Siskind)

completely. Her creations, especially *Fée Couturière*, are neither symmetrical nor impervious; they are repulsive, not simply invisible. There are openings to allow a viewer stolen looks into the interior, and they are indiscreet enough to allow one to wonder how secure the nest is and whether or not it will be successful in its task.

Such a question was exaggerated in the exhibition format for the Stable show, when the sculpture's presence seemed to dominate, or possibly protect, the other works in the room. Indeed *Fée Couturière* stood poised against what Mignon Nixon, in discussing another unshapely 1960s sculpture by Bourgeois, refers to as the other unformed, "primitive egos" in the room. Drawing on Melanie Klein, Nixon notes the need for the "infant's primitive ego [to] . . . 'build up' a relation to the outside world, beginning with the mother's body."³⁹ The description is apt and can be used to propose the relationship at stake in the Stable show—*Fée Couturière* was related to the other sculptures in the exhibition in the way that a maternal body is to its offspring, as potentially able to succeed or fail in sustaining the life of the other works in the room.

What produced the atmosphere of the Stable exhibition was this: the ambiguity yielded by the apparent absence of subjectivity combined with a latent sense that beneath the surface was something more. Visually obscured, yet

39. My reading is a compatible extension of Nixon's views. See Nixon, esp. 188–208.

present, were the themes of maternity, domestic spaces, and their conjunction with art.⁴⁰ Indeed, the frightening, primitive, crude domesticity that the works exploited would put off any potentially prolonged looking, which could lead to an ascription of feminine content or authorship. Their technical construction apparently destroyed any virtual representation of home that they might have embodied, by making it a strange and inhospitable place.

To see something that presented such a problematic, troubled, and unstable image of the home would have required a different frame of reference than the one set up by the art values of 1964. Such narrative themes of becoming and nurturing, and all of the tensions, fears, hidden anxieties, and mysteries that go with the internal and external spaces of domesticity, were anomalies within the sphere of art in which Bourgeois then operated.

In the 1960s the plaster and latex sculptures held little stature. The allure of mystery, which was attractive and engaging in other sculptures of the 1960s, was in this case ultimately trumped by repulsion; the contradictions in Bourgeois's works did not hold enough promise to engage the critics because ultimately the sculptures appeared unavailable and impenetrable.⁴¹ But the works were also primarily addressed not to the established art audience of the 1960s, which would have looked for formal correspondences among the appearance, material constitution, support, and scale of the works. What critics took to be apathy or a lack of talent obscured the internal dynamics that the works enacted among themselves. And while many accounts of Bourgeois hold her oeuvre to narrate the biographical details of her (imagined or remembered) childhood, her works are often embodiments of the present and the real: the dynamic, conflicting positions of the artist, mother, and wife.

Elyse Speaks is a visiting assistant professor of modern and contemporary art at the University of Notre Dame. She has published in such places as *American Art* and *Art History*, and her current book project examines the themes of gender, utility, and sculptural convention in the 1950s and 1960s.

40. Griselda Pollock discusses these themes from another point of view and with regard to Bourgeois's recent work in "Old Bones and Cocktail Dresses: Louise Bourgeois and the Question of Age," *Oxford Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (1999): 71–100.

41. The criticism of 1960s sculptures by Louise Nevelson and Lee Bontecou, for instance, is filled with positive references to the mysterious qualities of their works.

Copyright of Art Journal is the property of College Art Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.