

LOUISE BOURGEOIS
The Woven Child (in context)



WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

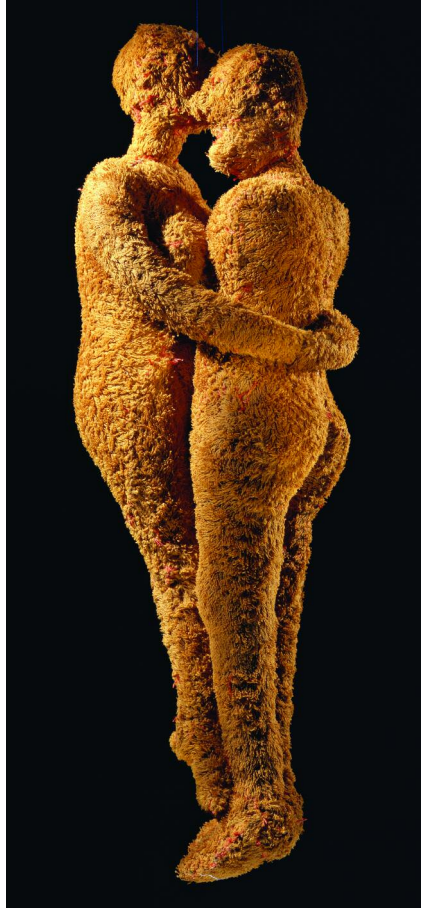
LOUISE BOURGEOIS: *The Woven Child (in context)*

October 21, 2006 – February 25, 2007

“All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood. My childhood has never lost its magic, it has never lost its mystery, and it has never lost its drama.”¹

Louise Bourgeois, who at 95 was described recently as “the oldest of young artists,”² has been making art since the 1940s yet continues to be one of the most inventive and influential artists of our time. Indeed, her career has spanned Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Post-minimalist and feminist-inspired art, and installation art, but her work always has remained fiercely independent from any singular style or movement. Trained as a painter, printmaker, and draftsman, Bourgeois has experimented with a range of materials for sculptures over the years (including marble, plaster, bronze, wood, and latex) and in the late 1990s, she embarked on what has become an extraordinary body of sculptural and two-dimensional works in fabric. The Worcester exhibition focuses on a selection of Bourgeois’ fabric works from 1996-2006, and includes the U.S. premiere of *The Woven Child (2002)*, a sculpture recently acquired by the Museum.

This late-in-life chapter of her career is especially significant because it brings Bourgeois back to her “original aesthetic impulse”—working with textiles.³ At the age of 12 she began to work at her mother’s side in the family business of restoring Medieval and Renaissance tapestries in Antony, France. She assumed the role of ‘dessinateur,’ redrawing the sections of the missing parts of the antique tapestries, which would then be rewoven.⁴



Couple, 2001, fabric, 20 x 6.5 x 3 inches. Collection of Jerry Gorovoy, New York. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo: Christopher Burke

Seven decades later, Bourgeois’ lifelong relation to textiles and preoccupation with the past has resulted in her unconventional use of garments and linens (often scavenged from her closets)—domestic, fragile materials not typically used for sculpture but laden with human associations such as warmth, intimacy, and vulnerability. The fabric work frequently takes the form of freestanding, stacked columns and stuffed figures either suspended in open air or isolated in glass and steel vitrines. These objects born of cutting and sewing—actions Bourgeois especially associates with memories of her mother repairing tapestries—have become an ideal medium for recovering and exorcising aspects of her childhood and family life.⁵

Cover: *The Woven Child*, 2002, fabric, stainless steel, glass, and wood, 70 x 35 x 21 inches, Stoddard Acquisition Fund, 2005.284. Photo: Christopher Burke

“I have always had the fear of being separated and abandoned. The sewing is my attempt to keep things together and make things whole.”⁶

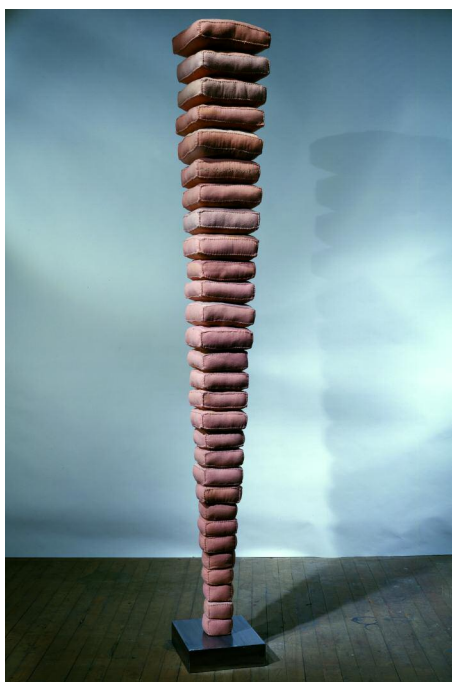
Although rooted in her lived (and gendered) experiences as daughter, wife, and mother, the content of Bourgeois’ art is primarily “archetypal”⁷ and explores the psychological and emotional effects of human relations, forsaking neither the intimacies nor the anxieties. The weights and pressures of close interaction (both physical and emotional) are at the heart of several important recurring thematic in the fabric works—the fusion of architecture and the body, images of coupling, the garment as a site of female experience, and the maternal subject.

In a recent series of fabric towers, Bourgeois revisits formal and thematic terrain first explored in the 1940s with the *Personages*, a group of anthropomorphic, wooden sculptures, which she conceived of as surrogates for the human figure and deliberately installed directly on the floor with some in groups and others solitary but always emphasizing the relation to each other and the space around them. In a related series created in the 1950s, columns were formed from wood scraps and plaster fragments stacked vertebrae-like on a fixed axis. Clearly erect, their postures appeared nonetheless unstable.

When Bourgeois returned to this format using various stuffed fabrics (from solid and striped to image-laden tapestry), the effect was an emotive identification of the architectural with the body. For example, the human scale, flesh-pink palette, and pillow-like units of *The Cold of Anxiety* (2001) invoke intimate sensations. Viewing invites an awareness of the relations between the individual sections, hand sewn and stuffed, softly resting upon one another and progressively growing as the column gains height. Yet amidst this physical embodiment of connecting and touching, Bourgeois counters with an emotional confession—the phrase “the cold of anxiety” subtly embroidered onto the sculpture’s surface.

Much of Bourgeois’ recent fabric work has taken the form of small stuffed figures—individuals, couples, or groups—suspended in open air or sheltered in vitrines. Despite being crudely stitched and patched together and endowed with only minimal anatomical detail, they exude a powerful range of attitudes and emotions, from the amorous and playful to the anguished and rejected. Bourgeois’s cloth rag-dolls, whether male or female, young or old, are exposed in their raw emotions and nakedness. In one *Couple* (2000), a female hovers slightly above her partner, her feet resting atop his and her arms wrapped tightly around him. In a role reversal, here it is the male whom Bourgeois renders armless—an incomplete, helpless adult. As they dangle in the air, meaning drifts between tender embrace and a desperate attempt to hold onto the other.

The glass and steel vitrine protecting this couple is also an integral element of *Seven in a Bed* (2001). It is closely related to the partially open chambers or cages of Bourgeois’ *Cells* (begun in the mid-1980s), large installations whose theatrical spaces, filled with arrangements of mostly familiar



The Cold of Anxiety, 2001, fabric and steel, 82 x 12 x 10 inches
Collection of Jerry Gorovoy, New York. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo: Christopher Burke



Untitled, 1996, cloth, bronze, and steel, 115.5 x 43 x 35 inches
Collection of Jerry Gorovoy, New York. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo: Christopher Burke

found objects, suggest narratives of isolation and solitude, exposure and imprisonment. Furniture-like yet clinical, closed yet transparent, the vitrine, while isolating the fragile figures from us, has like the *Cells* the capacity “to enclose its own world of associations.”⁸ Here, the entangled arrangement of pink bodies (some with more than one head) sprawled across a bed suggests domestic narratives that may have been inspired by innocent childhood play, adult knowledge, or a memory confusing both. What is certain is Bourgeois’ absorption with the human need for security and desire to connect. Her mute, fragile figures communicate intimacy as a tangle of pleasure and pain, aggression and submission.

Over the years, Bourgeois has created a number of versions of a limbless (and faceless) woman, which anticipate the adult body in *The Woven Child*—a figure reduced to “belly, breasts and neck,” symbolic of “female fecundity” but also

helplessness.⁹ In an *Untitled* 1996 cloth and bronze sculpture, we see a tragicomic interpretation of an incapacitated, limbless female defined entirely by a suspended and stuffed, reconstructed dress that appears more like a straightjacket. Her only appendage—long, limp, and tail-like—dangles down to the floor providing a visual and emotional counterweight to the tightly wrapped bronze coil hanging opposite her. While not altogether empty, this “bodiless” garment unmistakably references “the female experience, located in the body, sensed from within...”¹⁰ Although it has left the closet and life of the younger Bourgeois who wore it, the dress retains a memory of her past, which in its resurgence in the present has the powerful effect of “the return of the repressed.”¹¹

“Fear of abandonment has stayed with me my whole life. It began when my father left for the war. It continued when my mother died in 1932. People ask me to ‘be their mother.’ I can’t because I’m looking for a mother myself.”¹²

In numerous sculptures since the mid-1980s, Bourgeois has wrestled with and paid homage to the archetypal image of the Mother in various expressions of tenderness, ferocity, and inadequacy.¹³ At their source is the idealized memory of her own mother, Joséphine, who died in 1932 from a chronic lung ailment while in her daughter’s care (and, of course, Bourgeois’ experience of being the mother of three sons). Even at the age of 70, Bourgeois expressed a deep connection between the iconography of her art and this relation: “I felt that when I represented the two naked bodies of the child and the mother, I can still feel her body and her love.”¹⁴

In *The Woven Child* (2002), Bourgeois’ dramatic reinterpretation of a subject found throughout the history of art—the mother and child—she engages in dialectics of self and other, estrangement and intimacy, awkwardness and tenderness, inadequacy and promise. Bourgeois, the artist



Seven in a Bed, 2001, fabric, stainless steel, glass, and wood, 68 x 33.5 x 34.5 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo: Christopher Burke

and mother, imagines the maternal-infant relation in radically unconventional terms, which challenge the patriarchal mother who was traditionally idealized in religious and secular images in Western art—from Raphael’s madonnas to Mary Cassatt’s mothers.

In a departure from convention, Bourgeois returned to her motif of the headless and limbless female for the mother, who is now a patchwork torso of crudely stitched scraps that neither embraces nor gazes upon the perfect little infant curled upon her belly. In contrast to the pristine muslin of the child, the rag-tag mother who is pieced together with varying white remnants of garments and linens from Bourgeois’ past (complete with the occasional stain and defect) bares the marks of age and experience, as if admitting to us, “Here is what it is like to have and be a body, to be holed up in a fleshy self.”¹⁵

Against the image of wholeness projected by the infant, the fragmented female is a confession to maternal feelings of inadequacy yet also an acknowledgment of the status of our incompleteness as adults, whether female or male. Because there is no implicit subject position from which to experience Bourgeois’ work, adult viewers may find that they identify with parent and/or child. What is fundamental, however, is how the mother-child relation in *The Woven Child* compels us to wonder, what is it like to be at the beginning of life?

This beginning, this “dynamic of the maternal-infantile relation,” translates visually in *The Woven Child* as an attempt to “combine the mother’s viewpoint and the child’s” as subjects who live “in and through” their bodies and in relation to the other.¹⁶ A glass and steel vitrine both protects and imprisons this vulnerable pair. With its womb-like, finely woven blue netting that provides a more amorphous enclosure as well as an added layer of separation around the child, *The Woven Child* constitutes a melding of sexualized space and sanctum. Another touch of blue exposed at the mother’s neck alerts us to a fragile yet lasting link between these individual bodies. For Bourgeois, the usual physical distinctions between inside and outside, body and environment are instead decidedly mutable.



Ode à l'oubli, 2004, fabric and color lithograph book, 36 pages, 10.75 x 13.25 x 2 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo: Christopher Burke

An important parallel activity to the fabric sculptures is a body of drawings, prints, and books executed in textiles. *Ode à l'oubli* (*Ode to Forgetfulness*), a 2004 fabric and color lithograph book stitched from remnants Bourgeois has saved throughout her life (many from her clothing and linens), reads like an index of the abstract, symbolic terrain her art has explored over the past six decades. The palette, like much of her work, favors blues, pinks, and reds and recurrent motifs include egg, eye, breast, and pod shapes, spirals, arrows, stacked rectangles, and spider-web and kaleidoscopic patterns. On its 36 pages (which unbutton from the binding to be displayed separately), “hundreds of swatches of fabric are cut and pieced, appliquéed, embroidered, tufted, rolled, woven,



I had a flashback of something that never existed

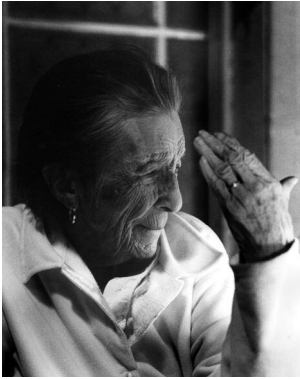
Ode à l'oubli, detail

quilted, layered.”¹⁷ In addition to silks, knits, tulle, organza, and netting found throughout, Bourgeois’ monogrammed linen napkins provided the ground for many of the pages of the original book on which the limited edition is based. Here embroidered lines and stitched seams, even the organic tracery of a lace pattern, act like a kind of three-dimensional drawing on the fabric page. Stripes and checks of dresses and tablecloths infuse the modernist grid with the intimacy of life’s moments. Artfully interwoven with the lived histories of the fabrics, which mark specific relationships, places, and times, is a page of text (one of two) with Bourgeois’ enigmatic remark, “I had a flashback of something that never existed.”

For a recent homage to mother and child, Bourgeois has composed a visual *Lullaby* (2006). In this suite of 25 silkscreens on fabric, red silhouettes sit atop fabric pages patterned with

the staves of music paper. She frequently has turned to this “found” pattern for drawings and sketchbooks (such as *Memory Traces*, 2002, and *Fugue*, 2003), sometimes as an organizing structure and at other times as a foil of regularity to react against. Here, the swollen and curved shapes, so organic and individual in character, contrast sharply with the strict linearity and repetition of the staff. Yet in their translation onto fabric, the staves, too, have an element of softness, a bit like the blue stripes on the ticking of a mattress or pillow.¹⁸ This exquisite coupling of emotional intimacy and formal bravura calls to mind Arthur Miller’s observation about Bourgeois’ work: “...It is an art, first of the eye of course, but finally of the interior life into which vision leads. In effect, she is as though talking profoundly to herself, just loudly enough to be overheard.”¹⁹

Susan L. Stoops
Curator of Contemporary Art



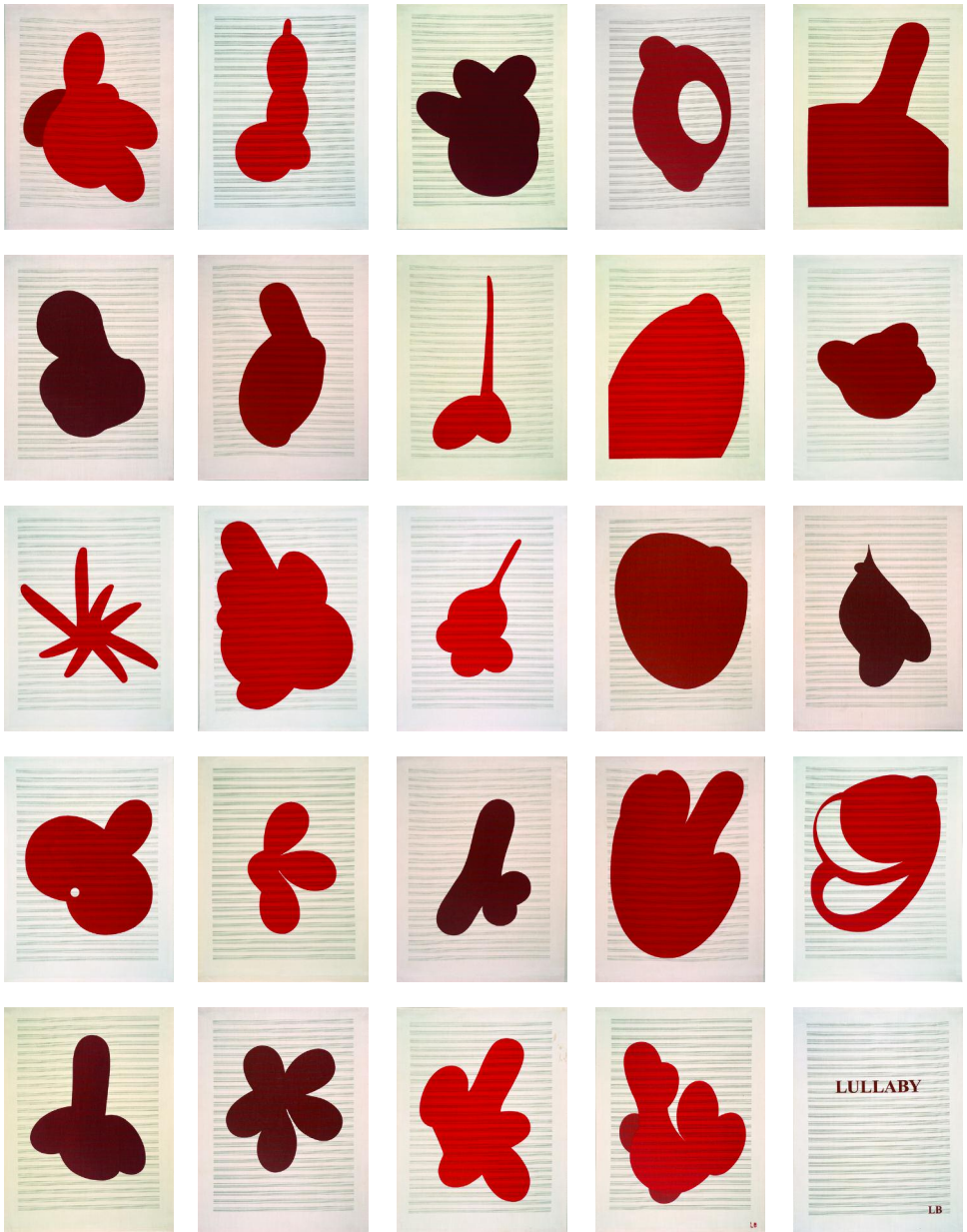
ABOUT THE ARTIST

Louise Bourgeois was born in Paris in 1911 and moved to New York City in 1938 where she has since lived and worked. She is the first woman to be given a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1982), and will be the subject of an internationally touring retrospective in 2007 being organized by Tate Modern in London. She is represented in New York by Cheim & Read.

Louise Bourgeois, 2003
Photo: Nanda Lanfranco

NOTES

1. Louise Bourgeois, "Louise Bourgeois: Album" (1994), in Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father/Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997*, ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (London: Violette Editions, 1998), 277.
2. Frances Morris, *Louise Bourgeois: Stitches in Time* (London: August Projects in collaboration with the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Miami, 2005), 10.
3. Morris, 32
4. *Ibid.*, 20.
5. At the time of her first retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, Bourgeois created a photo essay titled "Child Abuse," for *Artforum* (vol. 20, 1983, 40-47) in which she made public the details of her conflicted and sexually traumatic family upbringing. At its center was the confession that her father's English mistress was brought into the house as the children's tutor, where she lived for ten years. She describes that having to ignore this infidelity and tolerate her mother's acquiescence during her formative years, put her in the role of a pawn and effectively living a lie. Since then, this episode figures prominently in most of the written material about the artist—too much so according to some noted feminist critics such as Mieke Bal and Anne Wagner. But her biographer, Robert Storr, concludes "Bourgeois suffered terrible damage as a result of the stress she experienced in the sexually immature years of her childhood and early adolescence. The obsessional return to those traumatic times, and the hope-against-hope that that damage can be undone or patched has been the driving force behind everything she has made." Robert Storr, "A Sketch for a Portrait: Louise Bourgeois," in *Louise Bourgeois* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 40.
6. Bourgeois, "Gerald Matt in Conversation with Louise Bourgeois," in *Louise Bourgeois. Aller-Retour*, ed. Gerald Matt and Peter Weiermair (Verlag für moderne Kunst Nürnberg and Kunsthalle Wien, 2005), 201.
7. Storr, 33.
8. Rosalind Krauss, "Magician's Game: Decades of Transformation," *200 Years of American Sculpture* (New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1976). Excerpt in Jerry Gorovoy and Pandora Tabatabai Asbaghi, *Louise Bourgeois: Blue Days and Pink Days* (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 1977), 100.
9. Storr, 74. *Harmless Woman* (1969) and *Torso (Self-Portrait)* (1963-4) are but two such sculptures. The faceless female recurs as a motif in the artist's *Femme Maison* (Woman House) images in which a house variously sits atop naked legs and torso. These appeared initially in the 1940s as paintings, drawings, and prints, and most recently in 2001 as a fabric sculpture.
10. Robert Hughes, "Ashambles in Venice," *Time*, June 28, 1993. Excerpt in Gorovoy and Asbaghi, 166.
11. This phrase by Bourgeois is one of two pages of text in her fabric book, *Ode à l'oubli*, 2004.
12. Bourgeois' reflection on *The Woven Child* forwarded to the author on June 14, 2006 via e-mail by studio director, Wendy Williams.
13. Storr, 43. The multi-breasted *She-Fox* (1985) is a notable example, as well as the ongoing series of *Spiders* (begun in the 1990s). Symbolically, the spider—both protector and predator—connects to the family's business activities of spinning, weaving, and sewing, which took place (as the young Louise knew firsthand) under the skilled and watchful eye of her mother.
14. Bourgeois in conversation with Deborah Wye (1981) in Bernadac and Obrist, 128.
15. Ann M. Wagner, "Bourgeois Prehistory, or the Ransom of Fantasies," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1999), 23.
16. Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (London, MIT Press, 2005), 9, 67. Nixon's book considers Bourgeois within the context of the psychoanalytic theories of Melanie Klein, which reject the Oedipal narratives of Freud to instead center on the role of the mother in child analysis. In her reading of Klein's account of the formation of subjectivity, Nixon describes "the infant's primitive ego as attempting to 'build up' a relation to the outside world, beginning with the mother's body." (183)
17. Amy Newman, "Louise Bourgeois Builds a Book From the Fabric of Life," *The New York Times*, October 17, 2004.
18. In written comments from the Bourgeois Studio forwarded to the author by Cheim & Read in July 2006, the red forms are derived from the outline of tracings done by the artist of objects she owns. She began to see these shapes as an equivalent to musical notes and she placed them in sequence like a musical score. The curving quality of the forms refers to the rocking that the mother does to put the child to sleep, hence the title.
19. Arthur Miller, *Louise Bourgeois: The Locus of Memory, 1982-1993*. Excerpt in Gorovoy and Asbaghi, 216.



Lullaby, 2006, silkscreen on fabric, suite of 25, 15.25 x 11.375 inches each. Collection of the artist, courtesy Cheim & Read, New York. Photo: Christopher Burke

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