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La Madame Magnifique

Louise Bourgeois at the Fine Arts Work Center

By Gerry Desautels

BANNER CORRESPONDENT



Sculptor Louise Bourgeois

Quietly, one of the most revered and influential abstract sculptors of the past century is now showing recent works at a special exhibit in the Fine Arts Work Center's Hudson D. Walker Gallery. The show, titled "Louise Bourgeois," is billed as a "sculptural exorcism" by the French-born New York grande dame of the same name, and runs through July 1 in celebration of a newly endowed fellowship bequeathed by Bourgeois. The intimate and first-ever Cape Cod exhibit is curated by Paul Bowen, a Provincetown sculptor, teacher, and former FAWC fellow. Bowen met Bourgeois this spring with FAWC visual arts fellows at one of her infamous Sunday afternoon salons in which she presides in four-hour stints in her longtime Chelsea townhouse.

While FAWC does not show one of Bourgeois's world-recognized 30-foot bronze spider sculptures displayed at London's Tate Modern, Rockefeller Center, and St. Petersburg's Hermitage, there are shades of the menacing spider and other symbolic abstractions in the Provincetown exhibit

which includes six red ink paper drawings and two sewn figurative abstract pieces, highly contemporary in both form and style.

"My themes deal with emotions and memories. I try to give them form," explains Bourgeois in an e-mailed response to questions sent to her by the Banner — her assistant says she no longer does interviews in person. "My work is about today, the very present moment. It's about the difficulties that I have today, [which] can be solved if I can trace the beginning of the thread back in time."

At age 90, Bourgeois is not your typical grandmother. In fact, she regularly meets with young artists to critique, nurture, and converse with emerging personas, continuing to influence and create some of the freshest and most cerebral work in the art world today with unparalleled wit and panache. A ferocious com-



PHOTOS VINCENT GUADAZNO

The dresses, underwear and soft sculpture made from nylons are part of an untitled installation of work by Louise Bourgeois.

petitor, and the late wife of art historian Robert Goldwater, Bourgeois has been known to reduce sassy and hip artists to tears in her often videotaped salons, in a no-nonsense, shall we say, "French" manner.

"She's the most famous artist I know who emerged at the age of 72, and now in her stride at 90," says Berta Walker, owner of Provincetown's Berta Walker Gallery. "I was in the gallery and art museum business in New York when I first encountered her work. As most people who meet her, I fell in love with Louise. She is very courageous and absolutely

her own being—a one of a kind."

Speaking optimistically in support of younger artists, Bourgeois believes that "art will always continue. There will always be a need to express one's self, and artists will continue to invent new ways to achieve this."

The daughter of Parisian antique tapestry restorers, Bourgeois joined the family business at age 10 to redraw disintegrated tapestry designs. She never intended to be an artist, and chose instead to study mathematics and philosophy at the Sorbonne where she most loved solid geometry because, as she says, "rela-

tions can be anticipated and are eternal." Later disillusioned by the discovery that mathematics could not offer definitive certainties and order, Bourgeois turned to art simply to cope with personal challenges — caused in part by her father's infidelity and her manipulative, controlling mother.

Admittedly, Bourgeois continues to use art as a means to get through the day. "I do my work, and that is all I have to do." Surrounded by a dedicated staff of assistants, Bourgeois lives by the creed that "art is a guarantee of

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sanity." Still plagued with what she calls "problems," Bourgeois maintains an optimistic view of the world—"that things will get better,"—and counts herself "lucky" to have the financial and professional resources to help fellow artists develop.

"We looked through books and books of photographs of Louise's work in her Chelsea studio," says show curator Bowen, "The two sculptures chosen leapt out at us for numerous reasons: they relate to quite a lot of work going on in Provincetown and especially work by the young fellows at the Work Center, with her use of fabric, clothing, body casting, and autobiography, most with strong sexual connotations."

Unable to travel to Provincetown, and unwilling to give personal interviews, Bourgeois is described by many as an eccentric recluse, having witnessed most of the art movements of the 20th century. Yet it was precisely when Bourgeois's husband died in 1973 that the feisty widow emerged on the world stage. Nine years later she would become the first woman to be granted a large retrospective show at New York's Museum of Modern Art.

At the same time, Bourgeois

rocked the art world with her disclosure that much of her work was motivated by a deep, visceral anger toward Sadie, her debonair father's young English mistress and Bourgeois's childhood governess. Philosophically, Bourgeois told reporters, "Every day you have to abandon your past or accept it, and then if you cannot accept it, you become a sculptor."

Pain, grief, psychological dependency, love, psychosexual fetishes, abandonment and fear are all common interpretive expressions of the artist's contradicting and sometimes sinister, bold, and cunningly fearless work. Now "beyond" her autobiographic oeuvre of the past two decades, Bourgeois became obsessed with the concept of repair, perhaps because her mother was a professional sewer, and she herself is ready to mend and heal through the cathartic and subconscious act of stitching. Bourgeois also stays focused "on the theme of the Couple," expressed in some of her FAWC show drawings.

The FAWC exhibit also features two prominently stitched-fabric sculptures. The first is a single eight-foot headless, black rag doll suspended from the ceiling by its belly button, penis exposed and legs dangling above the floor. Titled "Single II" and created in 1996, the fabric sculpture is a strange meet-

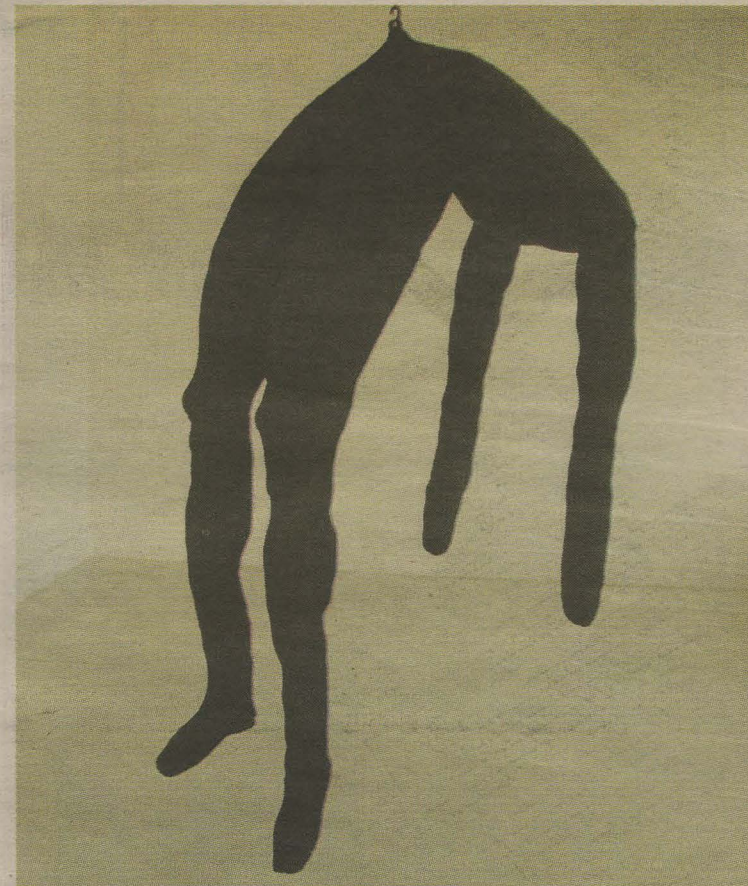
ing of toy land and sadism. According to Bourgeois, the work "comes from a series on the theme of the Arch of Hysteria, and it deals with how the psychological affects the physical. It has a feminine twist because hysteria is usually related to woman which is ridiculous."

The second sculpture installation on loan from Bourgeois's Cheim and Reid Gallery is an intriguing atelier steel retail-like display of hung women's clothing, French linen dresses, delicate undergarments, pelvic bones and phallic rubber forms. The object colors are summery and soft—pinks, orange and light cream dressings—elegantly hanging in a starkly minimalist representation.

"The 1996 untitled clothes sculpture piece is made up of my own clothes," Bourgeois tells the Banner. "They form a diary. I remember where I got them, who gave them to me, where I wore them. They are my documents."

To the uninformed or untrained eye, Bourgeois's work can easily translate as simple and direct, and lacking depth. But given the artist's record and personal struggles, the work is about more—much, much more. The uniform unification of lingerie and young-looking dresses—a polka dot sun jupe and a classic French "hoop" dress (splayed out by an interior bicycle wheel) are a stark but powerful marriage with the sexual images of phallic-shaped stuffed hosiery.

Reported to associate femi-



This untitled hanging figure by Bourgeois is suspended, helplessly, by his belly button, his penis uncovered and unprotected and his head, missing.

nism with victimization, the aging Bourgeois remains a ferocious force. All of her FAWC show drawings on paper prominently feature red, the artist's favorite color—"it is violent. It is the color of blood," Bourgeois qualifies. The FAWC drawings portray powerful images: reproductive female organs; totem-like figures titled "They Cry Because They are Hungry;" siren mermaids with semi-raised pencil writing in the background faintly spelling "Provincetown, Truro,

Cape Cod, Nantucket, Hudson Walker," perhaps from a notepad kept by her office phone. Two drawings are rendered on music paper, incorporating the abstract imagery of notes and musical scales into the pieces.

Born on Christmas day in 1911, Bourgeois has lived in the U.S. since 1938 when her husband-to-be lured her from France. The couple had three sons — two are still living. □

Louise Bourgeois is a member and second vice-president of FAWC's Board of Trustees and was a 1997 recipient of the FAWC Medal for Distinguished Service in the Arts. The FAWC show is open to the public 9 a.m. – 5 p.m., Monday – Friday and noon– 4 p.m. weekends through July 1 at 24 Pearl Street.