

Louise Bourgeois

French-American, 1911-2010

*All art comes from terrific failures and terrific needs that we have. It is about the difficulty of being a self because one is neglected. Everywhere in the modern world there is neglect, the need to be recognized, which is not satisfied. Art is a way of recognizing oneself, which is why it will always be modern.*¹

With a career lasting more than eighty years, Louise Bourgeois drew from cubism, surrealism, and expressionism, debuting as a sculptor with a solo exhibition of her painted wood posts of abstract personages. Her contributions to both modern and contemporary art were in creating her own vocabulary of forms, rich in psychological and symbolic meaning. In the late 1960s, Bourgeois' work became explicitly sexual and then architectural in a series of installations. Always personal, idiosyncratic, and suggestive, Bourgeois created unique works, which helped define modern, conceptual, and feminist art by focusing explicitly on relationships (familial plus sexual) and on motherhood.

Working in a variety of materials, Bourgeois conceived and created art informed by her childhood as well as her experiences as a wife, mother of three boys, and an artist in a male-dominated society. The daughter of an industrious, loving mother, and a powerful yet adulterous father, Bourgeois did not shy from her past; rather, her work explores the fear, vulnerability, and sexuality that were central to her life.

In the '90s, Bourgeois began making work dealing with love (amorous, parental, sibling, and adulterous), along with the betrayals and the anxieties that stem from the acceptance and rejection of love. The explicit dualism in the artist's mind is reflected in works on paper such as *I, Love You, Do You Love Me?*, 1987 and in sculptural pieces such as *The Found Child*, 2001, which feature bodies on top of one another in pairs or groups. As her career progressed, she became more profound and influential. A peer to many, Bourgeois was described as the "oldest of young artists, and the youngest of old artists."²

In *Love*, 2000 [Work 6], the artist revisits her past works—along with the rich history of totems. The sculptor's famous wooden *Personages* from the 1950s, carved in memory of friends and family, inform both this piece and *The Cold of Anxiety*, 2001, its visual pendant.

Love not only derived from the artist's psyche, it reinterprets a classic gendered tale from a feminist perspective. The mountain of mini mattresses that characterize both works of art evoke the juvenile longings of young girls nurtured on the hope of finding prince charming, as in *The Princess and the Pea*. In Bourgeois' totems, the blood-red fabric and seeming corporeal instability of the piece suggest the reality of menstruation, the anxiety of intercourse, and the roller-coaster nature of relationships. The stacking of pillows or mattresses is a hallmark of experience, a succession of relationships over time during which the intensity of love can fade only to be replaced by apprehension, rejection, or frustration. *Love* is a metaphor for the beds one has laid in. Each pillow can be seen as a person, one on top of the other, and, if placed on its side, Bourgeois' totem becomes a timeline, referencing a series of relationships or one that has endured.

Many artists expose the personal as a strategy for dealing with universal themes, but Bourgeois' work exemplifies a balance between the mysterious and the deeply autobiographical. Perhaps this is why her work continues to exert an influence on contemporary artists including Kiki Smith, Tracey Emin, and Janine Antoni.

AS

1. Louise Bourgeois, from an interview with Donald Kuspit (1988), excerpted from *Louise Bourgeois*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1982).
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.



Work 6
Louise Bourgeois
Love, 2000
red fabric and stainless steel
75 x 12 x 10 in.