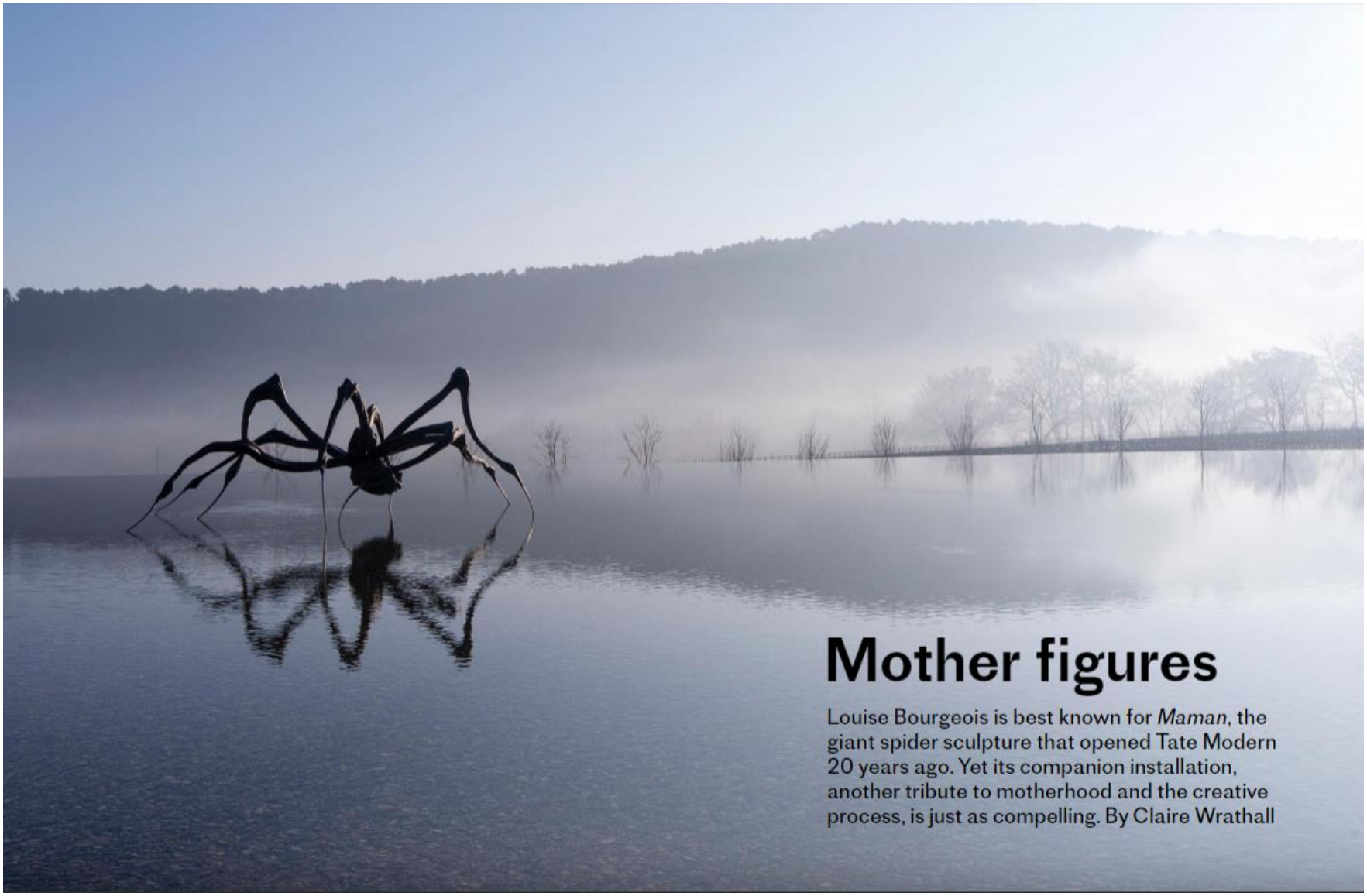
Mother figures

July, 2020 I By Claire Wrathall



Twenty years ago this summer, when Tate Modern opened in London, two spectacular and appropriately gigantic works in its immense Turbine Hall caught the world's attention. Both were by Louise Bourgeois. One, the monumental steel spider sculpture *Maman*, became the piece for which she is arguably most celebrated. (There followed an edition of bronze casts, hence those at the Guggenheim in Bilbao and the Crystal Bridges in Arkansas, the National Convention Centre in Doha, the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul, the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo and the National Gallery of Canada.) Spiders, which Bourgeois had begun to draw in 1947 when she was 35, became, she said, her 'most successful subject'.

Yet more astonishing and affecting, the other work was even larger. It consisted of three Corten-steel towers entitled *I Do, I Undo, I Redo*, which viewers were encouraged to climb via external, and one internal, spiral staircases. Two of the towers had platforms at the top where one sat surrounded by gigantic angled concave and convex mirrors (the reflections were unnervingly oppressive). And all three contained inset sculptures of mothers and infants: a doll-like fabric figure clutching her baby to her breast, stifled under a bell jar; a nursing mother leaking milk, her child clutching her leg; a seated woman, still attached to her floating baby by its umbilical cord. There was also a Janus-faced female figure. Here was motherhood in all its maddening complexity, an unforgiving cycle of sacrifice and nurture, love and rejection. *Artforum* described it as 'mixing Spielberg-scale spectacle with the psychological symbolism of the surreal. Installation art gear[ed] up to theme-park showmanship' that left viewers 'weak-kneed and vulnerable'. Queues stretched the full length of the 155-metre hall. Yet that work has not been seen, or at least not fully installed, since it was disassembled in November 2000 and shipped – all 43 tons of it – back to the USA.

Bourgeois herself never saw *I Do, I Undo, I Redo* in situ. Aged 88 and resident in New York (where she had moved from Paris in 1938), she was disinclined to travel. So it was her long-time assistant and close companion Jerry Gorovoy who took the original meeting at Tate. 'We put on hard hats,' he tells me, 'and Frances Morris [then a curator, now director of Tate Modern] walked me through the Turbine Hall and said: "What do you think about Louise doing something for this space?" And I was like: wow! I was a touch frightened by the challenge of that enormous space [given] the intimacy of Louise's body of work. But Louise remained undaunted.'

Indeed, such was her enthusiasm that within a few weeks of seeing the plans she had made the first maquettes. And »

This page, details from Louise Bourgeois, *I Do, I Undo, I Redo*, 1999–2000; opposite, an installation view of the work. Previous pages, *Crouching Spider*, 2003, in its Tadao Ando-designed pool at Château La Coste

18 months after the initial conversation, just six weeks ahead of the May opening, Gorovoy returned to London, along with the contents of seven 40ft shipping containers, to oversee the installation.

Now president of Bourgeois's foundation, Gorovoy started working for her in 1980. They had met in March of that year when she was 68 and he was 26 and installing a group show, his curatorial debut at the Max Hutchinson Gallery in SoHo, New York. Along with works by nine other artists, among them Alexander Calder, Eduardo Chillida and Joan Miró, it included a wooden sculpture that Bourgeois had made in the 1940s named *C.O.Y.O.T.E.* She disliked the way he had placed it, he wrote in a memoir published after her death, and 'started screaming' that she wanted it removed. 'We went for a cup of coffee to try and work things out.' ('Startled by her ferocity', he conceded that what she'd said 'was not totally wrong'. In the end the work stayed in the show and the National Gallery of Australia bought it.) A few weeks later she invited him to her Chelsea home, and in time he began to work for her. 'I didn't know what I was getting into: I started off working for her one afternoon a week, which became a day, and then two days; and here we are.'

Maman was another challenge to install. Almost nine metres tall, more than 10 metres wide and weighing in excess of 3.5 tons, the spider it depicts is at once monstrous and maternal (with 10 marble eggs in the cage suspended from its abdomen), a figure linked to memories of the artist's own mother, a weaver who headed the restoration atelier of her family's tapestry gallery on the Boulevard Saint-Germain in Paris. In *Ode à Ma Mère*, a text published in 1995, Bourgeois describes her mother as her 'best friend, »

Below, Louise Bourgeois, *C.O.Y.O.T.E.* (previously known as *The Blind Leading the Blind*), 1941–49. Right, Bourgeois in her home studio, 1974

Above, photo Mark Setterquist. Left, Louise Bourgeois, *C.O.Y.O.T.E.* (previously known as *The Blind Leading the Blind*), 1941–49. Painted wood, 172.7 x 71.1 x 68.6 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. © 2020 Louise Bourgeois Trust / DACS, London. Following pages, photo Jean-Francois Jaonnard. All artworks © The Easton Foundation / VAGA at ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020

When, in the 1990s, she began to make her spider sculptures, she insisted that they be huge: 'I wanted them all to be big because my mother was a monument to me'

Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*, no. 5 of 14, from *A l'Infini* (set 1), 2008 (detail). Previous pages, *Maman* being built in the studio. Following pages, the artist with a spider sculpture, 1995

deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat and as useful as a spider'.

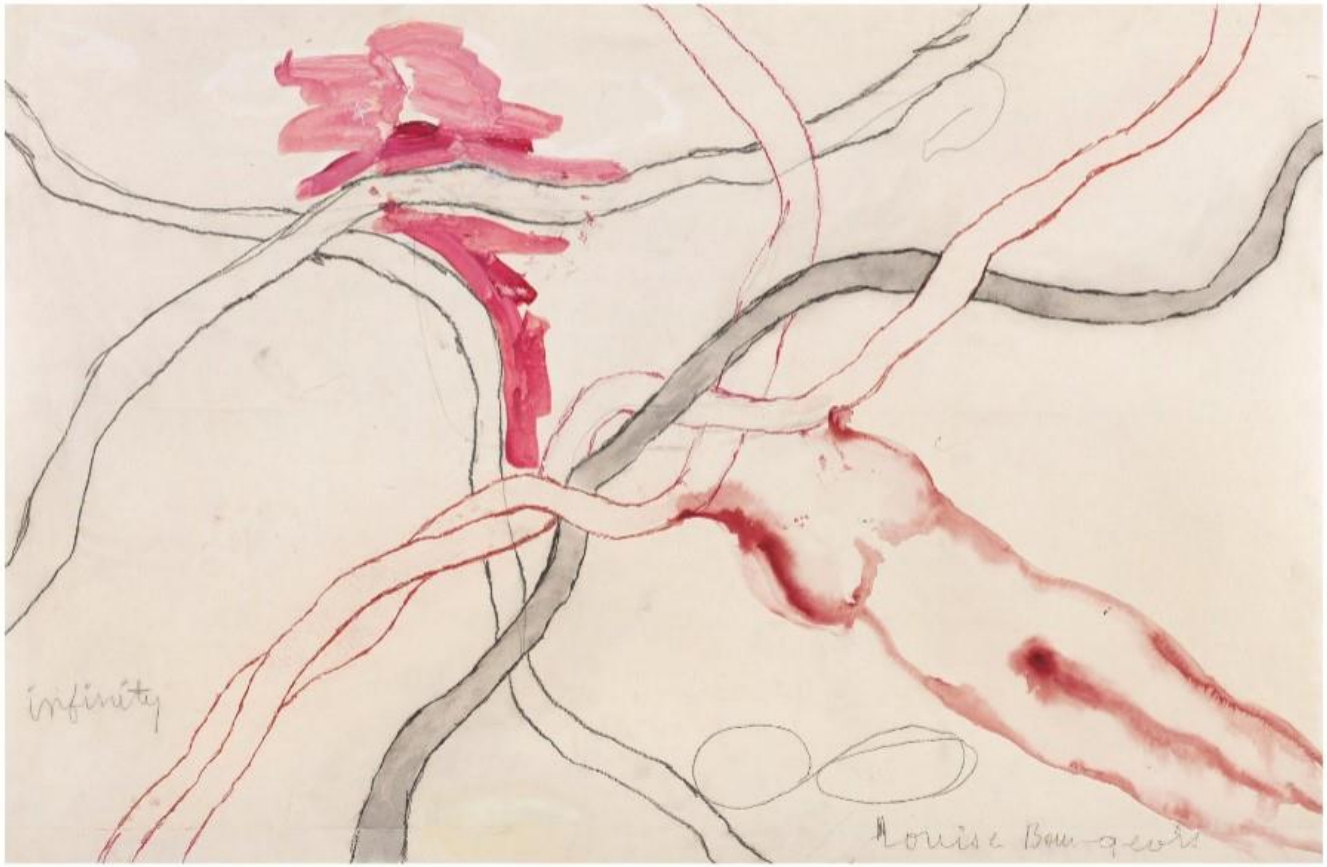
In the sculpture, the spider's limbs resemble needles. 'But those dainty little legs are also a sign of fragility,' says Gorovoy. 'They are actually bent or twisted, somewhat injured.' This was a reference to Bourgeois's mother's precarious state of health, a result of the Spanish flu she contracted when Louise was about seven, and from which she never fully recovered.

Bourgeois became her nurse – though not to the exclusion of her education. Two months after her mother's death in 1932, she received her baccalaureate in philosophy and then enrolled at the Sorbonne to study mathematics. Her art training came soon after, including a period in the studio of Fernand Léger. But her mother had become an all-pervading presence in her life, so that when, in the mid-1990s, she began to make her spider sculptures, she insisted that they be huge. 'She said: "I wanted them all to be big because my mother was a monument to me." She had such a big influence on her,' recalls Gorovoy. The spiders became a metaphor for something essentially protective, too, because 'they eat mosquitoes, so there's a benevolent aspect to them in a way', while at the same time they are delicate and easily harmed.

But if spiders can spare us from disease, they can also kill us. They may be patient in the way they spin their silk and weave their webs, but their intent is essentially predatory. 'They're very good at capturing their prey,' says Gorovoy. 'We know that spiders are quite intelligent, so for her they had very positive connotations. The spider builds its web out of its own body, and she said she built her sculpture out of her own body. And then if you take a spider's web and you tear it, the spider will calmly and diligently rebuild it. Louise said she was doing that with her own work, that she constantly had traumas and had to rebuild her world through sculptures.' A cycle of doing, undoing and redoing. 'So the sculpture is not only an ode to her mother, but also connected to her own self and her own creative process and what she's doing. She believed that sculpture has to come out of the body, that sculpture is an expression of the body.'

In addition to much smaller spiders and even spider brooches, Bourgeois made four further important arachnid sculptures, not on the scale of *Maman*, but substantial nevertheless. One of these, *Crouching Spider* (2003), belongs to the Irish collector and property developer Paddy McKillen, owner of the exceptional art park and wine estate Château La Coste near Aix-en-Provence in the south of France. Here, it stands in an expansive, pebble-floored reflecting pool designed for it by Tadao Ando, a detail that delighted Bourgeois.

McKillen went on to acquire several more of her works, from embroideries to the polished aluminium sculpture »



'She said she built her sculpture out of her own body. And that she constantly had traumas and had to rebuild her world through sculptures'

The Couple (2007–09), a pair of figures inextricably locked in a tangled embrace. As Gorovoy puts it, 'He became a big fan of Louise.' In 2010, McKillen went to visit Gorovoy in New York and happened to ask what had become of *I Do, I Undo, I Redo*. The work had been in storage for a decade by then. After the exhibition, it had had to be cut up in order to get it out of the Turbine Hall. But, says Gorovoy, 'We were confident the piece could go up one more time without too much difficulty.' As long as a home could be found for it. Bourgeois wanted it in a museum, and at first it looked as though it might go to the Dia Art Foundation in Beacon, 70 miles north of New York City. The Swiss architect Peter Zumthor was approached to design a gallery for it, 'but it never worked out'. Would she ever allow it to go to La Coste, McKillen asked. Gorovoy was sceptical. What, McKillen suggested, if Jean Nouvel were to design a home for it? The architect had already designed the estate's winery, and, as Gorovoy puts it, 'Paddy loves building; he loves projects. I think he liked the challenge.' So McKillen called Nouvel, who leapt at the chance, produced some drawings and flew to New York to meet Bourgeois. She in turn loved his idea, which was to house the work within what will look like a hillside, planted with trees and greenery, and approached via a long, dark tunnel so that 'people will be surprised' when they reach the main chamber, with no internal columns.

By then Bourgeois was 98, and she did not live to see the deal sealed. But her surviving sons honoured it. As Gorovoy notes pragmatically, 'There aren't millions of people who want to build a building to house it.' Especially not of the originality and ambition of Nouvel's design.

Ten years on, it is still a year or two from completion. The build was complicated by everything from local zoning laws to seismic activity, Provence having suffered a 5.1-magnitude earthquake as recently as 2014. Last winter, the towers were still visible – although the mirrors and sculpture have obviously yet to be installed – under a huge carapace of blue-grey steels. 'It looks like the base of the Eiffel Tower,' says Gorovoy, 'but you're not going to see any of that at all when it's finished. The only metal you'll see are the towers.'

A fitting setting, then, for a great and important work that unites several of the abiding themes and forms in Bourgeois's practice: mothers and children; mirrors, which she had made use of since the 1940s; and spirals. 'She always said her work evolves like a spiral,' says Gorovoy, 'in the way that certain themes disappear and then come back again but are formally reinvented. Also, Louise loved geometry and calculus, and she liked the spiral because it has this sense of direction. She said a spiral can twist out to infinity, but it can also tighten in and constrict. Every formal device she used is a psychological or emotional metaphor.'

And for her, the spiral was an especially troubling one. 'As a child, after washing tapestries in the river, I would turn and twist and wring them,' she once said. 'Later I would dream of my father's mistress,' an English woman her parents engaged as a governess in 1922, who stayed with the family for a decade. 'I would do it in my dreams by wringing her neck. The spiral represents control and freedom.' ●

chateau-la-coste.com

URL: https://issuu.com/christiesmagazine/docs/christie_s_magazine___july_2020?fr=sZDNmNDE1ODM4NTI