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Simone Rocha and Louise

Bourgeois: The Irish designer in Conversation with Bourgeois's long term assistant Jerry Gorovoy

Words by Isabella Burley, Editor, **Dazed & Confused**



Louise Bourgeois in 1975 wearing her latex sculpture 'Avenza' (1968 – 1969) which became part of 'Confrontation' (1978)
Photo: Mark Setteducati

On the wall of Simone Rocha's East London studio hangs Robert Mapplethorpe's seminal black and white portrait of Louise Bourgeois. Wearing a Helmut Lang monkey-fur coat with 'Fillette' (her 1968 phallic sculpture work) tucked under her right arm, the photograph embodies the fearless spirit of the late artist. For over a decade (after encountering her work at the 'Stitches in Time' exhibition at the Irish Museum of Contemporary Art) Louise Bourgeois has served as a source of inspiration for the designer. Drawn to the subversive feminine spirit that manifested itself in her oversized arachnids, contorted female figures and mutant penises, Rocha has taken the unique sensibilities of Bourgeois and transformed them into her own poetic language.

This season, it permeated through Rocha's AW15 collection, where layers upon layers of Bourgeois made their way into spidery jet black beading, deconstructed tapestry dresses and almost-primitive fur details. It was a collection laden with subtle symbolism and a powerful love letter to the late artist. 'Her work is so sensitive, even when it's crude, grotesque or strong', says the designer. Both Rocha and Bourgeois deal with themes that demand an emotional reaction and go far beyond the surface level – though they never met, that is where their bond begins. Here we revisit a conversation between the designer and Bourgeois's long-time right-hand Jerry Gorovoy.

Isabella Burley: With Louise Bourgeois's textile works there seemed to be a constant thread of wanting to repair something – memories, in particular.

Jerry Gorovoy: Well, her fabric works consisted mostly of things that belonged to her: shirts, skirts, towels, sheets and stockings. She once told me to empty out everything in her closet, and she started to arrange them into colours. She had this phobia of throwing things out. That opened up a dialogue of memories, and it was fascinating for me to see it open up this relationship with memory. I didn't know what she was going to do at that point, or what made her want to incorporate these things, but I think one aspect was that she was getting older

and wondered what would happen to all these things she'd saved. Even though they would be cut up and deconstructed (in her work), they would still survive. I felt the psychological impetus behind using this as raw material for sculpture was fascinating.

Simone Rocha: You can really see how it makes the work personal and emotional; when it's the clothes off her back, it makes it such a reality.

JG: It's funny, at a certain point in the 90s she basically started wearing the same outfit. It was always black: a uniform. When I look back at these photographs, she dressed in a very different way to when I first met her in 1980, when she had certain colours she liked: blue, white, pink. You could see her father was dapper and stylish, so her relationship with clothes and society was very important to her growing up.

I always found the way she styled herself fascinating. She was the wife of a historian – she circulated in one group which dressed in that way – but she was also an artist. You see these polarities in her wardrobe reflecting the really different identities she had. The most profound thing she ever said was, 'clothes are about what you want to hide'.

SR: I totally relate to that. When I'm doing a show, it's really exposing and emotional, so I tend to wear the same thing every day. I feel if I meet anyone on that day, I want them to see the same person. When you're in a creative time, you want people to know you're in the thick of working, and you want to represent yourself in a specific way. For women and their relationship with dress, it isn't so much about the day-to-day, but how it makes you want to feel, how you feel about your work, how people perceive you. It's all connected.

JG: It's the one art form everyone can participate in. It is wrapped up in the psychological aspect of what you choose to wear. I'm always amazed when I see people in clothes that look so inappropriate for them and their body, but you realise it's a projection of how they want to feel. Simone, how do you feel when you see people in your clothes not wearing it how you intended? Do you have a body type in mind when you're designing?

SR: It's upsetting when someone wears it with an ugly lady shoe, and I'm like, 'you need a nice practical shoe'. What I do can be quite feminine, so it's about mixing it with something that has a harder edge. People ask me, 'who's your woman?' But there is no woman; it's a femininity that all women can relate to. The way Louise dressed was amazing; you could see her personality in it. Didn't she work with Helmut Lang?

JG: She was friendly with him and they were close. Louise's fashion sense was very particular. She had an incredible profile; when someone has a natural beauty, it's a gift, and to have a certain sense of style on top of that... it's definitely psychological, the relationship with the clothes, for the creator and the wearer.

IB: When Simone met you for the first time in New York she said that you were 'setting up', was it the studio or the house?

SR: It was the house, wasn't it? You were going to restore her home for scholars.

JG: Louise had left her house to a foundation, and before she passed away she had bought the adjacent house. It will be a scholarly centre for researchers; they can stay in the house and have all the archival material, the photographs, diary, writings, interviews and films. We're trying to keep it the way Louise occupied her house, because it is like a sculpture in itself. There was no decoration, she never wanted to be a slave to decoration and the house had to be very utilitarian, so she wrote on the walls when she wanted to and we're keeping that intact. You feel like you're in the space of someone who is very particular.

SR: It's really special; you feel that you can relate to all her work. Didn't she design the metal doors?

JG: She did: art deco-looking metal structures for the doors and the window gates. It was like a lair or a den, with all these exits and entrances. In the end, there was no separation between her art and her life; it was one cohesive thing and you can see that right away.

IB: Simone, can you talk about the influence Louise Bourgeois has had on your work?

SR: The first time I saw Louise Bourgeois's beautiful textile work was in Ireland. My mother had taken me to see 'Stitches in Time' at the IMMA Irish Museum of Modern Art. I think that's what started my relationship with her work. I had just started art college in Dublin, so I started to research her whole body of work; her sculptures and drawings. I found I could really relate to it.

IB: The retrospective at the Tate Modern (in 2007) had a massive impact on a lot of people.

SR: Yes, that was such an amazing distribution of her work.

JG: That was the show that Frances Morris did. It was really good. It's interesting even for me, because you see how the work has evolved. You're getting a whole story of a person's life: for a lot of people, because the

work is so different, when you see a lot of it together it starts to fit together quite well.

SR: It tells a story when you see it all together, you pick up the different emotions and stages of life. I thought it was really special in the Tate, with the spiders inside and outside; it was amazing for people to really be a part of it and to be able to be so close to the work.

JG: I think that's the gift she had: to do something so personal, so idiosyncratic, yet by going so deep within herself she almost comes out the other side. There is universality to the emotional (aspect) of the work. It's a very rare gift. There is also a complexity to her work; it has multiple readings. The more you get into it, the more complex and rich it gets, depending on your engagement. Louise wrote a lot – really beautiful passages, some poetic and others that are a stream of consciousness. You get this complexity that jumps into every form and gives it multiple readings...

I've always wondered, people say, 'fashion is fashion because it's locked into a certain time'. How do you feel about that? Do you see fashion dealing with an ephemeral moment in time, or do you see it as transcending time?

SR: I hope it does transcend time because fashion is something I don't feel should be disposable. It's about having a relationship to it, whether it's how it makes people feel or how they feel when they're in it with somebody else. Things should be made in a beautiful way even if it is taken from a dark place. Even if you're designing a t-shirt, it should have a soul. If you treat it with sensitivity it should have longevity.

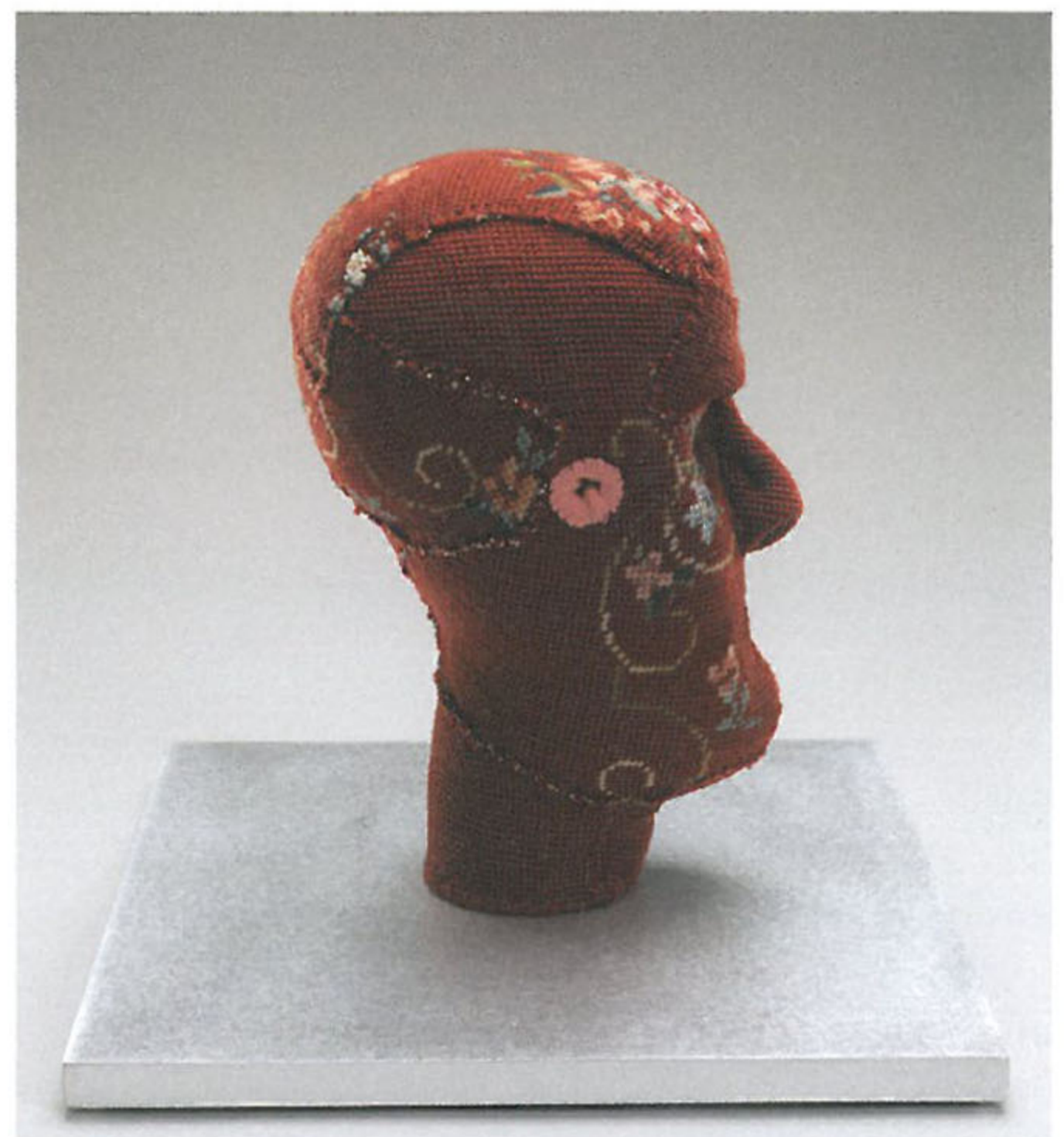
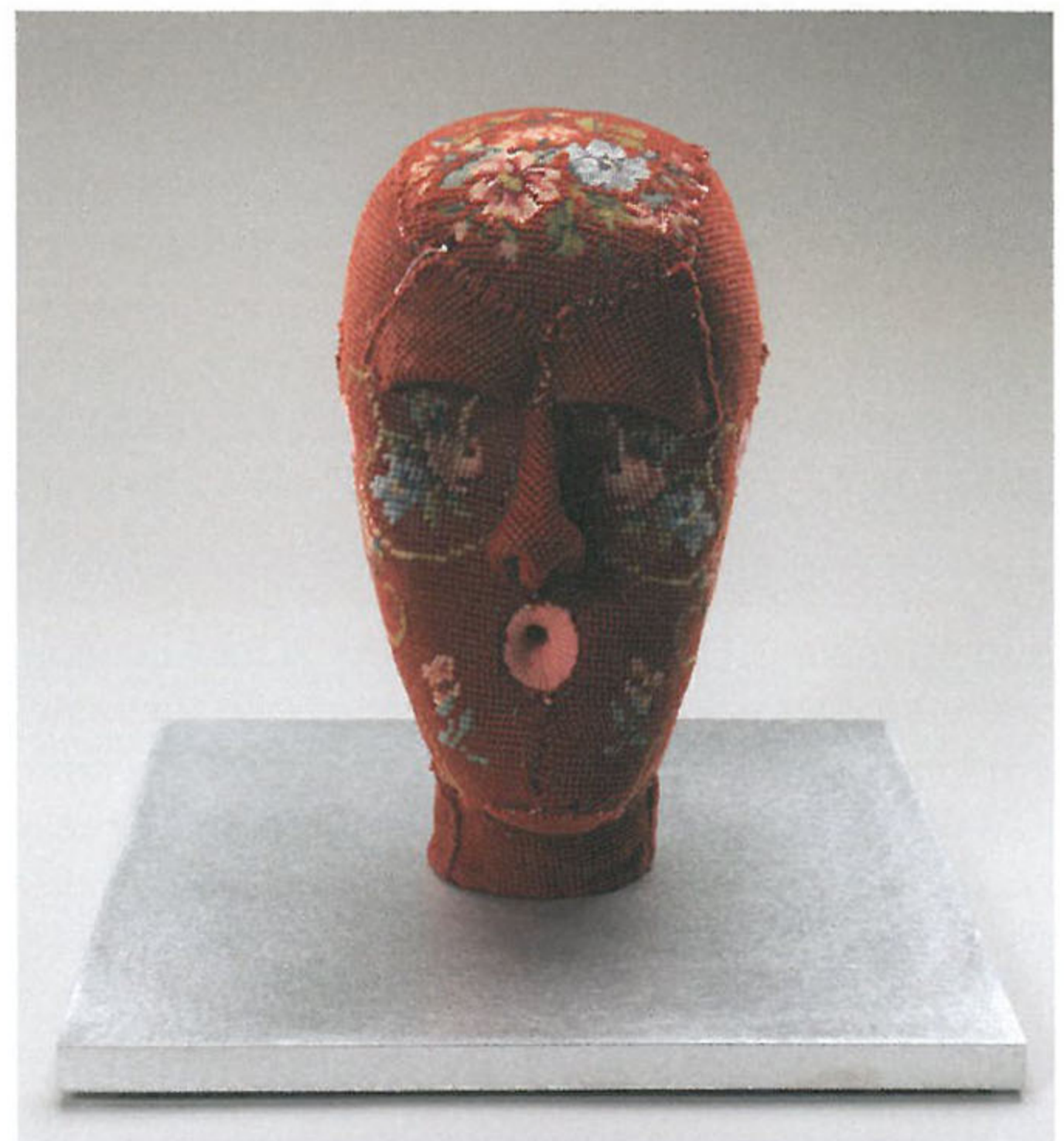
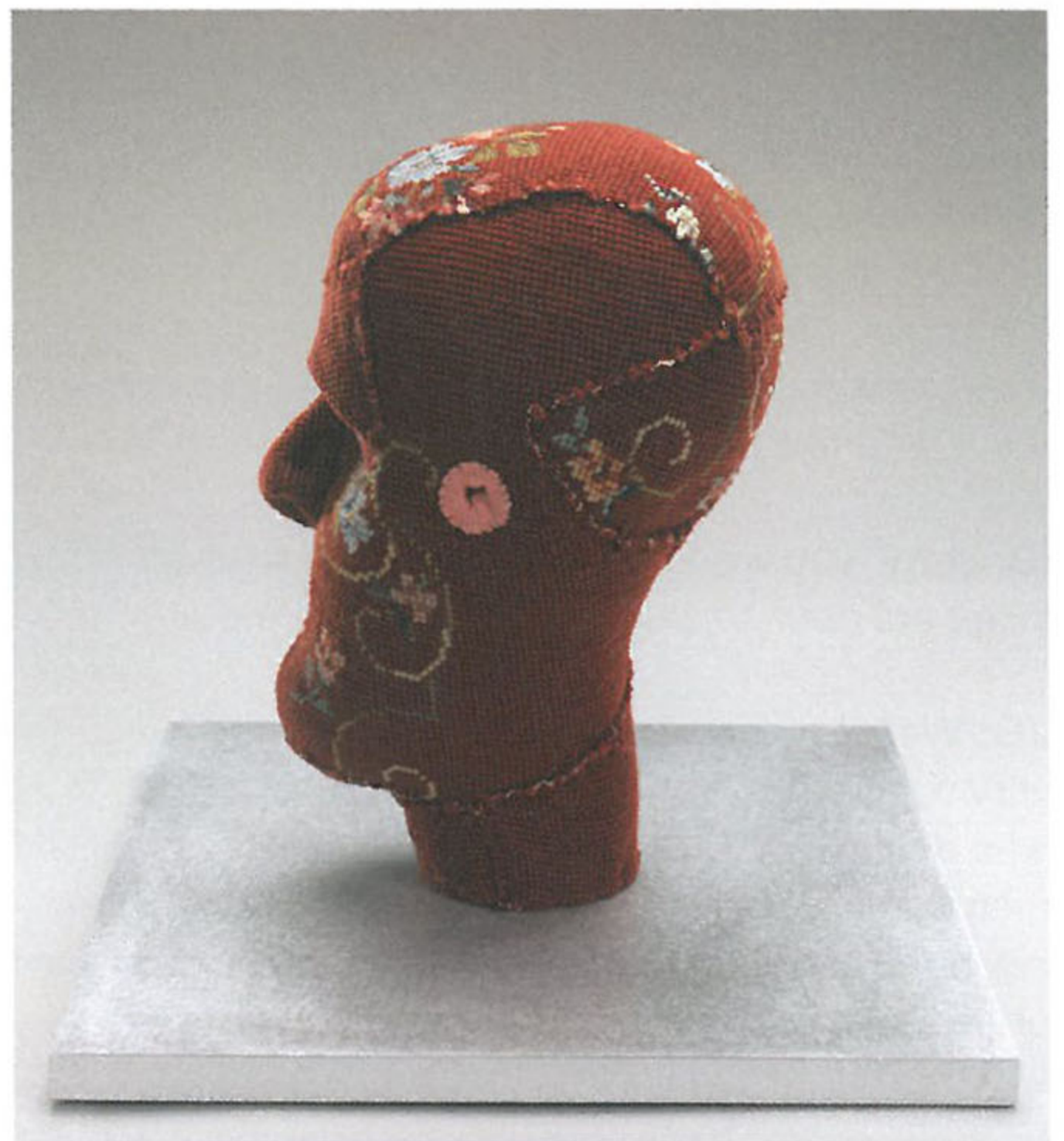
JG: But you have to admit, the body changes, what looks good at a certain point in your life may not work a little later on!

SR: That is very true. But I think it's about adapting it to your personal style: I might be not able to wear a whole look that I wear now when I'm in my sixties, but I could probably still wear the lace skirt... with a larger jacket!

IB: I think it has a lot to do with memories: this idea that garments can hold memories and they become specific to a certain time and emotional connection.

JG: I'm always amazed when you look at old photographs of yourself, how the clothes look dated. It does have this lock into a moment.

SR: I think there's something nice about that. It's about seeing it then in that time, and having nostalgia for it. Then seeing how you can relate to it now and



Louise Bourgeois, Untitled, 2002

make something relative today. But there's still that feeling of nostalgia, because they probably wore a skirt like that in the 90s or their mother wore a skirt like it the 80s. They can relate to it, but they still feel like they are wearing something unique to them because it's a different time.

IB: Jerry, you worked for Louise for almost 30 years. What are your strongest memories from that time?

JG: Well, Louise was very emotional: she could be very volatile and very irrational. Sometimes I felt like I was dealing with this amazing, sensitive woman and then sometimes I felt I was dealing with a three-year-old baby. She had this hilarity in her, and that was pretty consistent. She said this herself: she was very fearful and anxious, yet in her work she was totally fearless. Now I feel very lucky to have been around her; I learned an incredible amount of things about myself through her.

Simone, I wanted to ask, do you feel with the younger artists that there is a pressure in terms of the market and the fashion? Do you feel that pressure? Or do you feel free to do it and just see what happens? I sense there's a relationship now to money and marketing; do you think it's a good thing? Do you think it's healthy?

SR: I don't think it's healthy. It's so exposed. I work with my mother: I have a 'studio' here in East London, and we close the door, and we are living, working, breathing studio. It's about how I feel at the time – negative, naïve or positive – and that's what really shapes my work. If you start thinking about what other people want, you'll never please everybody. We're an insular studio, and we have to release that in a show every six months to the world, but we do it in the most poetic and sincere way we can. Then we retreat back into our studio and start thinking about how we're feeling and what we'd like to say next. It is a real race and there is a huge amount of pressure, but I've always thought you can't please everybody, so why would you try, and why would you want to?

JG: I want to tell you how pleased I am. You hear all this stuff about the way fashion is moving, that from an economic point of view it's a business model, and there's a lot of pressure.

SR: There is a lot of pressure day-to-day, but we've been really lucky. We've had wonderful support from people like Dover Street Market and Colette in Paris. The way we've been able to grow is (from) people actually wearing (our) clothes. Which my mother, who has been in the industry for 30 years, says is a miracle!

JG: You see the same thing with young artists; the market has such a strong force that the young artists

who want to get some kind of recognition have to start marketing at a very early age. It's quite destructive.

IB: How did Louise deal with the selling and the art market side of it?

JG: She never got involved. To be honest, she gave up on all that. She saw it as something destructive to what she wanted to concentrate on. That was the deal we made out of the exhibitions: she would just make the work, she didn't have to go to the openings, she didn't have to do anything she didn't want to do. Once the work was done, I would do the installations. I would organise the shows. People would visit her and say, 'oh, I saw this show!' and she wouldn't even know what was in the exhibition. She was glad when people said they saw her show and reacted to her work: the communication she enjoyed.

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