

Louise Bourgeois, late works and Australian artists

Courtney Collins



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French-born American artist and sculptor Louise Bourgeois (1911 –2010) continued to create provocative works well into her 90s. Heide Museum of Modern Art presents an exhibition of her work focusing on the final fifteen years of her career and another exhibition that looks at the relationships between her art and 10 Australian artists. Courtney Collins finds living traces of the woman, nick-named ‘the Spiderwoman’.

‘I pick on everyone, dead or alive.’

- Louise Bourgeois in *What is the Shape of This Problem?* (1999)

There is a portrait of Louise Bourgeois taken by Robert Mapplethorpe in 1982 of the artist carrying *Fillette*. Bourgeois has tucked *Fillette* (1968), a penis-like sculpture, under her arm and she is holding onto it with one hand like it is both a weapon and a trophy.

I am moving into the exhibition *Louise Bourgeois: Late Works* at Heide Museum of Modern Art and despite how striking an object it is (you can see it for yourself in the catalogue) I am now not thinking at all about *Fillette*. I am thinking about Louise Bourgeois’ hands. Room to room, there is no escaping their concentrated presence.

Late Works is an exhibition of thousands and thousands of stitches, hand-sewn by Bourgeois, the cutting and stuffing of fabric to form human heads and hanging bodies. There is a feeling of the artist’s instinct for repair but then the feeling is swiftly disturbed by some deliberate decapitations such as *Couple IV* (1997). Throughout the exhibition, the first survey of Bourgeois’ work in Australia since her death in 2010, there’s the compounding and repeated drama of bodies missing heads and heads missing bodies.

I think I am taking a break from such drama, facing the ocean-coloured tapestries of *The Waiting Hours* (2007). At first look, the individual abstract works seem pretty and benign, so much so I imagine them all sewn together as a patchwork quilt covering a big old bed. But as I train my eyes over each delicate panel I do not realize each one is gently tipping me up until I am tipped over. They bring on crying.

I'm moving further in, taking in sculptures, fabric drawings, watercolours and embroidered texts. By the time I reach *Spider* (1997), a vast, five and a half metre-tall steel and mixed media sculpture, I am so convinced of the power of Bourgeois' hands I cannot think of her dead, even at 99. She must have installed this work herself. She must be responsible for the fine weave of webs I can now see trailing these gargantuan spider legs.

I ask the guide with the peacock earrings who is responsible and she said, 'That's our resident wolf spider. She's been very, very busy making webs.'

Next door, in Heide II, is *Louise Bourgeois and Australian Artists*.

Del Kathryn Barton takes up the vision and in this case the needle, to thread together her own Bourgeois-inspired tapestries. Along with Barton, the second show features the work of Pat Brassington, Janet Burchill, Carolyn Eskdale, Brent Harris, Joy Hester, Kate Just, Patricia Piccinini, Heather B. Swann and Kathy Temin, all revealing the deliberate and sometimes unconscious influence of Bourgeois.

Wolf spider or not, I take it all as proof that, even in death, Bourgeois' hands continue to weave, repair and decapitate.

- Courtney Collins



Louise Bourgeois, 'Spider' (1997). (The Easton Foundation, New York, NY Copyright Louise Bourgeois Trust / Licensed by VAGA, New York / Viscopy, Sydney)



Louise Bourgeois, 'Couple IV' (1997) (Courtesy Cheim & Read and Hauser & Wirth. Copyright Louise Bourgeois Trust)



Louise Bourgeois, Knife Figure (2002) and Untitled (2002) (Courtesy Cheim & Read and Hauser & Wirth. Copyright Louise Bourgeois Trust / Licensed by VAGA, New York / Viscopy, Sydney)

Louise Bourgeois: Late Works at Heide Museum of Modern Art is on show until 11 March, 2013

Louise Bourgeois and Australian Artists at Heide Museum of Modern Art is on show until 14 April 2013