

Reconciliation and Symbiosis in the Art of Louise Bourgeois

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Abstract. Sentimentality is a magical force that can achieve and destroy. People have always been able to express their emotions in various outward ways, sublimating them into art. The artist creates the work of art, and in the same way that the artist expresses their feelings, thoughts and desires in their artworks, it is the process of objectifying their own emotions that allows the artist to speak out, organize and give vent to their feelings. In Louise Bourgeois' work one can see the desire to speak that art gives her, exploring timeless, universal emotions, especially violence, anxiety and fear stemming from the pain of her childhood deep in her memory. Her long career as an artist has carried her varying thoughts, whereas it is more worth discussing in her works the positive effects of art-making on the artist. From the presentation of her own painful life and the memorialization of her mother to the forgiveness of her father and self-relief, her works embody the powerful effect of art therapy, revealing in the process of creation an awareness of sentimental emotions, a confrontation with the inner world, and thus a sense of peace and redemption.

Keywords: Louise Bourgeois, sentimental emotions, art therapy.

1. Introduction

Louise Bourgeois is one of the greatest female artists of the 20th century, her career spanned nearly a century, with a wide range of works that included not only painting, sculpture, and installation but also extended into the field of music, and she is widely known for her psychoanalytic theories. Her work has a unique and intensely personal style, and the trajectory of her work has a particular evolutionary logic throughout her long creative career. The core of this unique variation is her distinctive personal experience of growing up and the uncommon understanding of things that results from this particular experience. It is this different way of living, approaching things, and thinking from most people that makes her works so vivid and direct to the heart, independent of any doctrine or spirit; in other words, she is herself.

In her works, the female human body, spiders, hands, organs and other images often appear, which make the audience feel the weirdness, horror and anxiety of these metaphorical artistic images. These works precisely reflect the artist's life and her self-analysis and catharsis of the psychological trauma of her childhood, which is the reason why many art researchers are so fascinated by her artistic life and her works that are full of autobiographical color.

Current research on Luise Bourgeois focuses on several topics. There is a discussion of the development of feminist thought in relation to her work and artistic career, as well as her work and political misuse. Another kind of topic is the dissection of the style of her work.

Her creation trajectory goes from exposing her wounds in the earlier days, analyzing them, then repairing them, and finally facing them and not trying to fix them anymore, and showing the audience her reconciliation with her own mental illness. This article focuses on some of Louise Bourgeois' works. The article begins with the symbolic and emotional origins of the visual images in some of Bourgeois' works. Then, the motivation for creating these visual images is described, as well as the evolution of these motivations in her works as she aged and her psychology changed. After that, this study explores the significance of art therapy in Louise Bourgeois' creative process. At the end of the article, it is discussed that the artist's attitude towards his own mental illness is also informative and inspirational in contemporary times.

2. The Background of Luise Bourgeois' Upbringing

Much of the reason for the unique expression of Luise Bourgeois' spiritual world and the powerful, soulful communication one feels when viewing her work is due to her upbringing. Luise Bourgeois was born on 25 December 1911 in Paris, France, to a wealthy family who made a living running a carpet restoration business. Their life was not at all as good as they seemed. She had three siblings, and the birth of the daughters did not seem to be appreciated by their father, who always wanted a son. She was a delicate and sensitive girl whose father's jokes and unintentional remarks in life were sometimes arrows that wounded her, and these wounds were buried deep in her heart. She once said that she could not start a conversation with her father because she did not know how to respond to the dark humour he displayed in the conversation. It is also these moments in her life that reveal her suffocating family atmosphere. She grew up recognising her insignificant place in her father's heart, being used as an object of amusement. This was the beginning of her tragic ordeal. After the birth of her brother, the family moved to the country house of Choisy le Roy. Their mother was seriously ill, and it was at this time that Miss Sadie, her nanny, moved into their home, a person who would turn out to have a profound psychological impact on Luise Bourgeois. She soon stumbled upon Sadie as her father's lover. This twisted relationship between the sexes was blatantly on display, and her mother endured this fact, standing strong against her father's infidelity. The young girl had to pretend to ignore her father's vile behaviour, while her mother was irritable and disturbed in her presence. Her mother once said frantically, "What can I do to get my husband back"[1]. All of those things came as a powerful shock to Luise Bourgeois. She once said: "She was not interested in me at all; she was interested in sleeping with my father. She turned me into a wild beast". This dysfunctional family pattern lasted for 10 years. In this family environment, Luise Bourgeois was severely traumatised, and these childhood tragedies became a constant source of inspiration for her later work.

When Luise Bourgeois' mother died in 1932, at the age of 21, she enrolled at university to begin her studies in mathematics, during which time she was plagued by mental problems, and from there she began to approach art, studying painting at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and in a number of small studios - escaping from her family situation through the creation of art. In 1938, she seriously began to produce work as an independent artist.

3. The Symbolic Meaning and Emotional Origin of the Work's Visual Images

Throughout her long career, Luise Bourgeois's work has shown a variety of different forms of expression at various periods. Her work is often so rich in symbolism that she said, "Through symbolism, one can communicate on a deeper level of consciousness, but one must also understand that a symbol is a symbol; it is not a physical communication." The meaning of each object to her is not permanent; for her, everything changes and her understanding of the symbolic meaning of things also varies.

Her work explores the relationships of the human subject, such as family relationships, gender relationships, life and death, and the subconscious. In particular, the painful memories that her father brought to her during her childhood and the reflection of her female identity are always present in the works themselves. Her early works are mainly characterised by her emotions towards her father. The human body has become a frequent element in her work, and its symbolic meaning has evolved from one work to another. The imagery of these works contains her memories and is unique to her. Therefore, understanding the meanings and stories of these symbols is a necessary process in interpreting her works. Luise Bourgeois said that the eyes took on different imagery in her view after she had accomplished revenge against her father in a dream, where her father was telling a joke, and then his eye fell on the dining table and was eaten by a cat. In her work *Eyes*, there are many sculptures made of marble, some carved with the structure of a figurative eye, others like in the installation *Cell (Eyes & Mirrors)* with two hollow stones as eye sockets, with two marble eyeballs sunk deep inside. These works can be perceived as vacant, deeply penetrating eyes gazing at the viewer as if they are the ones being observed, conveying a feeling of extreme discomfort. Luise Bourgeois'

autobiographical sculptures of these eyes and the sense of being gazed at that she expresses are her father's way of mocking herself. She said, "My father cut the shape of a girl out of a tangerine peel, and then he held it up and said, 'Look everybody, this is Louise. She has nothing! All she is got between her legs is a couple of white threads!' Everybody laughed at me [2]." Her father belittles her easily with a slice of tangerine peel, a disappointment in her gender concealed underneath the cruel joke. Her stubborn character expressed the aggression she suffered in her work, and the revenge she received in her dreams allowed her to overcome her fears for a moment seemingly. At a time when the feminist movement was in full swing, her work became a driving force for feminism while also giving voice to her own questioning of her vivid experience of being misogynistic because of her gender. Such contradictions between masculinity and femininity, strength and weakness, are intensified in her creations, and Luise Bourgeois's *Little Girl* is like a rebellion against her father. The latex male genitalia is suspended in the air with a strong visual impact, exposing the symbols of the male gender to public scrutiny, which creates a clear contrast with the title of the work. The work is suspended to show its instability, and a sense of shakiness, highlighting the fragility of the male.

After the female movement in the 60s, and the figurative installation explorations in the 70s, her work matured in the 90s, and the popularly known *Spider* series, which showed the artist's sentiments towards her mother at different stages, was also the period that received more recognition from the public. The giant spiders on display in the square and in the exhibition do not seem to be closely related to 'mother', but for Luise Bourgeois, her mother is a spider-like figure. This dramatic fusion of the two images adds depth to the intriguing nature of her work. Her mother, a weaver who also runs the family tapestry business, was a strong woman, so there is a connection with the spider, who also weaves webs and its predator image. The deeper connection is that when her mother is seriously ill and her father flagrantly brought home a lover, she saw her mother's struggle and indignation as she watched her parents argue, but at the same time, her mother tolerated her father's infidelity, like a spider swaying on its web, which it could only keep mending in the face of its brokenness, trying to keep the family together. Beneath the spider's huge body, she is as much in her mother's arms. She remembers her mother in this way.

4. Motivations for the Creation of Visual Images and their Evolution

Childhood experiences subconsciously influence one's personality, values and way of thinking; for most people, this is a latent and hidden influence that changes over time in a constant process of self-adjustment. Sentimentality is well illustrated in the work of Luise Bourgeois, whose childhood experiences have been a recurring theme of expression and accusation throughout her long life. Her father's sarcasm, his betrayal of her mother and her mother's secrecy contributed to the insecurity of her childhood, and many of her works express this unease, as in the installation *Cell*, which collects objects in a steel cage that evokes traumatic memories of her childhood and provoke disturbing associations, demonstrating the sadness from which she could never escape. The motivation for Luise Bourgeois to create these visual art images can be found in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories.

Sigmund Freud mentions in *Totem and Taboo*: "What happens only in art all the time is that a man tormented by desire does what desires seem to be fulfilled; and that what he does in play produces an emotional effect - thanks to the illusion of art - as if it were some real thing [3]." For Luise Bourgeois, art was an outlet for emotional catharsis, a haven in the face of traumatic memories, and a way to achieve revenge. Such a nasty scandal in the family made the young Luise Bourgeois feel betrayed, "It was not just my father who betrayed me, she [Sadie] betrayed me too. It was a double betrayal [4]." Moreover, the superficial calm that her mother struggled to maintain forced her to suppress her emotions as a child with nowhere to express and vent them. In her installation, *Seven in Bed*, the entire work consists of seven pink mannequins sewn from linen. They are lying on a large bed kissing each other in a very intimate manner, yet a closer look reveals that the mannequins in work have two heads facing in different directions. These dolls are a metaphor for her family members, who appear to be harmonious and sweet, but are, in fact, divided and betraying each other, expressing her desire

for a complete family and her disdain for the distorted relationships in reality. This work is the embodiment of her inner desires. For her, the suppression of these childhood 'desires' was painful, and the release of the emotions that she had not been able to release for so many years was cathartic when she approached art. In fact, it would be one-sided to interpret Luise Bourgeois's work as a simple superimposition of pain and emotional catharsis. Her artistic exploration can be understood as a process of maturation of her psychological mechanism of 'desire'.

Initially, Luise Bourgeois turned to paint as her main form of artistic expression, but she gradually felt that graphic painting could not really express the full range of her pent-up emotions and turned to sculpture. She says: "In order to fully express the limits of my intolerance for this family, I had to choose a form that gave vent to the anxieties of my heart and that could constantly change, destroy and be reborn [1]." She uses genitalia to express her rebellion against her father, spiders to express her admiration for her mother, and cells to show dark fragments of memory. Desperation, struggle, pain, anger and aggressive emotions are shown in many of her works, but are also seen in her work *Knot*, where she lets go of a painful memory that she cannot escape; for her, that memory is the unbreakable knot that haunts her forever, but that she no longer struggles painfully to try to untie. The *Couple* series is also a theme that she has been exploring and developing, using different materials to explore the form of lovers embracing each other in different positions. The fabric contains her family memories of childhood, and the embracing and kissing of this soft material convey a sense of falling into a tender place. The *Couple* works often contain an appeal to love and attachment, an exploration of the relationship between the sexes, and although influenced by her family, Luise Bourgeois chooses to continue to seek emotional stability; her inner emotional expression tends to stretch and calm. This is a positive emotional output, an emotional suggestion of reconciliation with her own wounds.

5. The Meaning of Art Creating for Luise Bourgeois

Artists have an uncanny sensitivity, a unique inner response and an understanding of everything, and these perceptions become the inspiration for their art. For Luise Bourgeois, her inner pain is the core of her work, and she has found a unique way to work through her complex emotions of pain, resentment and anger, and her work is more of a soothing therapy for her than a work of art. She has materialised her own emotions through various forms of work. For the viewer, the work enables them to understand and empathise with the artist's inner world, and for the artist, it is a sort of emotional collation, expression and catharsis. Xiang Jing, a prominent Chinese contemporary female artist, said, "If I had not become an artist, perhaps I would have been a mental patient." This is how important emotional expression is to the artist.

Luise Bourgeois' artworks reveal her complete subconscious world, where she is constantly in a state of despair, struggle, pain, anger and aggression, which she translates into emblematic forms and symbolic acts such as cutting, drilling, sculpting and pouring, in the process of creating sculptures that give vent to her emotions. For her, these works are the home of her emotions. "My sculpture allows me to re-experience the fear, to give it a physicality, so I am able to hack away at it. Sculpture allows me to re-experience the past, to see the past in its objective, realistic proportion [2]." Luise Bourgeois said that grief could make people face up to the inner world and make the restless mind calm, and a peaceful mind helps the artist to look at himself better and observe the world. Luise Bourgeois' repeated use of various materials and media in response to dreams and memories throughout her life had produced works that today appear to us as works of art, but which for her were most significant as the product of psychological healing, creating as a way of self-redemption. Her greatest motivation for making art is to heal her own soul. "I have been a prisoner of my memories, and my aim is to get rid of them [5]." She once mentioned although these memories were still haunting her, she had gradually found a way to live with them. In her "Spider" series, the scary-looking figures are connected to her family, who run the fabric industry, and to predators. The emotion of intimidation in the spiders is also a reflection of her fear of her mother. For the viewer, one is beneath these

sculptures, within their reach, which feels like their prey, and this is one of the meanings of these sculptures, to confront deep-seated fears, while at the same time, they have another meaning of freeing people from their fears by placing them in an objective way so that the viewer feels safe in the process of looking at them. They are about suspending suspicion for a moment and engaging with the unease projected by the viewer herself. She has done a good job of bringing her own fears and the ways of facing them head-on to the work while also seeing the immense power that art-making has given her, for whom the hurt no longer bothers her and she has learned that facing it is true healing. Similarly, the psychological changes brought about by art therapy are shown in some of her other works. In the 1960s, under the tide of the women's liberation movement, her works on the subject of sexual organs became rich and aggressive, and she began to accept her own gender identity from within, the long-standing gender discrimination in her family and society that had made her feel inferior, this is an era in which she began to show resistance in her work, no longer self-deprecating, art brought her a new wave of thought, a new way of thinking and found solace for her soul. Artistic creation has brought Luise Bourgeois the best of spiritual healing and has been the means by which her spirit has been able to repair, rebuild and refine itself. This is something that cannot be replaced by anything else, and the subconscious spiritual need for a sense of belonging and emotional security that she has been seeking for so long is expressed through the means of creativity, which is fulfilling and emotional sublimation.

6. Suggestion

In the case of Luise Bourgeois, it is significant to recognise that her works achieve a high level of sublimation, completing sculptures that are timeless and famously, and more generally, closely related to human consciousness and human cognitive experience. More than anything else, her artistic production is accompanied by an extreme 'multi-layeredness' in her aesthetic that focuses not only on the artwork as the end goal but also on the process of creation itself as a journey that contains significant and constructive power. In viewing Luise Bourgeois' artistic journey, the viewer is made to feel the human emotions of suffering and pain, irritation and aggression, guilt and anxiety, depression and isolation that have accompanied her throughout her life and are a way of contacting the external world. These all resonate with the recent health crisis, she had said: there was a virus in her family, mutilating her, her siblings and tearing her family apart [4].

Significantly, Luise Bourgeois depicted her art as lifesaving, and in 1992 she wrote 'Art is a guarantee of sanity' on the outside metal of her sculpture-environment *Precious Liquids*. She believes that art is a form of spiritual repair and that there is power in making art. "I need to make things. The physical interaction with the medium has a curative effect. I need the physical acting out. I need to have these objects exist in relation to my body [6]." Her work is particularly important in the context of the current pandemic; people's lifestyles have changed dramatically, people are distant from each other, and they are isolated in concrete squares, and this has a serious impact on their psychological state. In this case, the artist's precognition proclaims some concepts that are gradually becoming more broadly recognised in psychiatry, such as the importance of perceptual pathways in emotional experience and the interplay of mind and physical signals. Nor can we overlook the questions currently being raised about the relationship between humans and the built environment, with recent studies suggesting a strong correlation between urbanity and brain development and function. Equally compelling is the synergistic effect of the integration of art and nature activities to improve adult physical health and mental well-being. What is important is the strong emotional load, the organic metaphors, the ever-present physical symbols, and the interpersonal play contained in her work that inevitably transmits sympathy and compassion to the viewer. This is particularly challenging in the context of the present social, economic and health crises, as altruism and social harmony are crucial to social resilience, and her art-making has been used by Luise Bourgeois as a therapeutic process to heal her wounds. Likewise, patients can be helped by artistic activities that build self-awareness, turn their experience of being sick into a positive one, and enhance their welfare and quality of life. There is mounting proof that the arts can play a role in promoting health. In the English Longitudinal Study

of Ageing, a recent study by Fancourt and Steptoe reported a 14-31 per cent reduction in the risk of death for those involved in receptive arts activities after controlling for demographic, socio-economic, health-related, behavioural and social factors [7]. In a recent report, the World Health Organisation [8] determined the primary role of the arts in the management of illness in the prevention of mental issues, the advancement of health and welfare, and personal health. Artistic participation and inventive art therapy can facilitate the prevention and treatment of mental illness, for example, trauma-related illness. Art therapy specifically is an empirical intervention that provides a therapeutic representation of individual experiences (memories, feelings and emotions) through the use of artistic materials, such as sketches, sculptures and clay sculptures, in order to focus on individual therapeutic goals [9]. Interestingly, neuroscientific research has shown that art triggers neural structures associated with the regulation of bodily states (through biochemical, neuroendocrine and neurocognitive processes), reverses the harmful inflammatory biological effects of social adversity, regulates emotional mid-states and has pro-social effects [10].

In this period of the COVID-19 pandemic, people should not neglect to participate in the arts in order to enhance and upgrade the health and well-being of society, as Luise Bourgeois has done throughout her impassioned and productive life.

7. Conclusion

In this essay, Louise Bourgeois' childhood background is used to explore hatred, betrayal, anger, revenge, anxiety, aggression and loneliness, abstract and esoteric feelings and themes that permeate her work and give it a powerful impact. She has been drawn to these themes throughout her life but has continued to explore them in depth by changing materials, styles and forms so that her work remains vital. As times change, technology advances, and the art world becomes more vibrant, but no matter how much visual imagery changes, the only thing that matters is the emotional resonance with the viewer. The power of art is appreciated in the artist's work, a power that is not only external but also a way for the creators to reconnect with themselves, face their hearts and heal their wounds.

Nowadays, more and more people are concerned about mental health, and many people with mental illness resist psychiatric treatment. Louise Bourgeois have never been treated with psychoanalysis, although she had no confidence in systematic psychiatric treatment, she found a way that suited her and was even more effective. And her very act of creating art is an artistic healing method that fits into the heart of psychoanalysis. As an artist, she has the ability to symbolise the subconscious in a way that psychiatrists do not, and the complexity of her emotions and the richness of her forms make her work mysterious and inscrutable. But these abstract spirits are both direct and hidden.

The different forms and materials Louise Bourgeois used at different times were essentially designed to explore and reproduce her subconscious realm in order to dispel her inner fears, and later her work became more complex and intense with her emotions, always based on herself rather than on the times, and the form of her work served her emotional expression, and on this level, it is understandable that Louise Bourgeois' work is unique.

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