

Q&A with Stephanie Rosenthal, Director of the Gropius Bau

How does the Louise Bourgeois exhibition fit into the Gropius Bau's programming?

SR: Since 2018 the Gropius Bau's programme has touched on an array of topics including: questions of material, symbolic and psychological healing, care and repair; embodiment, performance, and bodily knowledge. The exhibition *The Woven Child* continues these trajectories by showing the psychological and material interplay associated with weaving, stitching and mending, as well as by casting a new light on an established artist. Whereas Hella Jongerius's exhibition in 2021 also focused on weaving and stitching as a form of activating high-tech research, Bourgeois's works generate psychological, psychoanalytical and feminist readings. Within the context of a programme exploring the many inflections of repair, stitching becomes a way of confronting and healing the individual psychology of the past.

What relevance for the present does Louise Bourgeois's late works have?

SR: Louise Bourgeois remains a role model and source of inspiration for artists today. Her late works remain highly relevant for many present-day concerns, among them the lasting legacy of individual trauma and the role that art can have as a form of repair, regeneration and as a form of generative re-purposing. Bourgeois's decision to create artworks from her clothes and household textiles was a means of transforming as well as preserving the past. She viewed the actions involved in fabricating these works – cutting, ripping, sewing, joining – in psychological and metaphorical terms, relating them to notions of reparation and to the trauma of separation or abandonment. In an era in which questions of repair and reparation are increasingly voiced, Bourgeois's works today seem startlingly original and daring, perhaps more than when she made them.

Q&A with Julienne Lorz, Co-curator of *The Woven Child* and former Chief Curator of the Gropius Bau

Louise Bourgeois began using textiles late in her life-long career. How is her storied personal history reflected in the works on display?

JL: Textiles in Louise Bourgeois's oeuvre relate very directly to her childhood growing up with tapestries. Bourgeois's parents ran an antique tapestry gallery in Paris while also managing a tapestry restoration atelier in the Parisian suburbs of Choisy-le-Roi and then Antony. While her mother, Joséphine Bourgeois, oversaw a team of tapestry workers that executed repairs in the suburbs, her father, Louis Bourgeois, sold the tapestries in the Paris gallery. Since the tapestry restoration business was on the same property as the family home, Bourgeois witnessed these activities from an early age, and even became involved with them, helping to draw in missing elements – often the feet – of the figures in damaged tapestries.

Several of the works in the exhibition include personal clothing either having belonged to Bourgeois herself, as in *Cell XXV (The View of the World of the Jealous Wife)*, or her mother, as in *Cell VII*. It is telling that Louise never cut her mother's clothing, even though she modified her own. There is a sense that these items are capsules of memory.

What role does material play for Louise Bourgeois in her fabric works?

JL: Louise Bourgeois was incredibly adept at employing material in an immediate and deeply meaningful manner. Whilst she uses fabric's inherent qualities of pliability and tactility – often in contrast to harder materials such as steel or wood – she primarily foregrounds the handling of material, revealing how a work is made. This is particularly apparent in some of her head sculptures or in *Endless Pursuit* (2000), for example. Their rough stitching, visible seams and patchwork of fabrics lend these sculptures a sense of violence or vulnerability. The vocabulary of sewing, which involves cutting, piercing, mending, repairing and re-joining, resonated deeply with Bourgeois on an emotional level.

In other fabric works, the given colouring or patterning of a textile function like a painterly palette, some even determining the visual structures in Bourgeois's abstract "fabric drawings".

In her figures, Louise Bourgeois portrays the body in both recognisable and ambiguous ways. What influenced her depictions of the body?

JL: The body – as well as parts of the body – in Bourgeois's works can indeed be ambiguous. At times her figures are clearly male or female, but they are often both. In this exhibition, there are several works where the artist deals directly with the female body, especially in relation to sexuality and motherhood. In *Do Not Abandon Me* (1999), mother and child are connected via the umbilical cord, which is attached at both figures' navels. This inter-dependency could relate to Bourgeois's close relationship with her own mother and her ongoing desire to be cared for and protected, but also to her lifelong fear of abandonment. In her later work, she often identified with the child.

How does the exhibition take the specific architecture of the Gropius Bau into account? What are the curatorial differences to the Hayward Gallery exhibition?

JL: The Gropius Bau, originally built in 1881, has spaces with a very different architectural feel to the Hayward's galleries, which occupy two floors of a brutalist building built in 1968. Here in Berlin, the exhibition covers the whole first floor: a succession of rooms with wooden floors and grand windows. For reasons of conservation the windows are covered, though not without offering a glimpse of the museum's surroundings, such as the remains of the Berlin wall. You could say the galleries at the Gropius Bau have a more domestic scale and atmosphere.

With one exception, the list of works is identical for both venues. It is essentially the distinct idiosyncrasies of the architecture that determines the curatorial differences between the two. The Hayward show was full of moments of return, doubling back on itself like a spiral, whereas the show at Gropius Bau is a mostly linear progression that flows from gallery to gallery, like a narrative, albeit not in a chronological manner.

A special feature of the exhibition is the installation of the sculpture *Couple* (2001) in the Atrium of the Gropius Bau, which is open to the public and free of admission.