



# Louise Bourgeois. The Structure of Existence: The Cells

Jessica Hemmings

To cite this article: Jessica Hemmings (2017): Louise Bourgeois. The Structure of Existence: The Cells, TEXTILE, DOI: [10.1080/14759756.2017.1352138](https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2017.1352138)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2017.1352138>



Published online: 04 Aug 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Exhibition Review

# Exhibition Review

***Louise Bourgeois. The Structure of Existence: The Cells*, Humlebæk, Denmark: Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, October 13, 2016 – February 26, 2017.**

The entrance to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art is through what looks to be a house. But it is a mistake to think, as I did, that is the full scale of the museum. Only once inside do you realize that the galleries extend to the left and right through linked spaces that keep the beauty of the grounds and the waters of Öresund in sight throughout. The recent Louise Bourgeois exhibition here was organized by Haus der Kunst, Munich, in collaboration with the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, and Louisiana (confusingly, for some, not a reference to the American state but homage by the property's first owner to his three wives who, strangely, all shared the name: Louisiana).

Twenty-five of Louise Bourgeois' (1911–2010) *Cells* (of the 62 created) are included in the exhibition. While some *Cells* have been exhibited widely, they are often installed alone and alongside exhibition material of another scale: drawings, prints, smaller scale works on cloth. Seeing the *Cells* throughout the entire South Wing of the Museum puts them in a different light. When experienced as multiples, Bour-

geois' compulsion to return to the format over and over again becomes inescapable.

In the last prolific decades of Bourgeois' life textile materials made an increasingly frequent appearance in her sculptures. (Her series of faces, many made of crepe bandages, exhibited at *Stitches in Time* in the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, in 2004 is still one of the most powerful exhibitions I have ever visited.) The format of *Cells* also appears relatively late in her life, first drawn from materials such as doors and windows harvested from the former garment factory she occupied as a studio from 1980 (her first dedicated work space), as well as a house renovation she was undertaking in Staten Island, New York, and—as friends knew of her affinity—dumpsters of materials she was told about.

Jerry Gorovoy, Bourgeois' assistant of 30 years, explains the *Cells* series as her desire for control over the environment in which her work would be viewed: "she wanted ... to create her own architecture to house the pieces that she had made, the body parts that are carved and the things that belong to her ..." But seeing so many *Cells* in one exhi-

## REVIEWED BY JESSICA HEMMINGS

Jessica Hemmings is Professor of Crafts at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.  
[Jessica@jessicahemmings.com](mailto:Jessica@jessicahemmings.com)

Textile

DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2017.1352138



© 2017 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



**Figure 1**  
Installation view of *Louise Bourgeois. The Structure of Existence: The Cells* at Louisiana Museum.



**Figure 2**  
Installation view of *Louise Bourgeois. The Structure of Existence: The Cells* at Louisiana Museum, including *Cell (The Last Climb)*, 2008.



**Figure 3**

Installation view of Louise Bourgeois. *The Structure of Existence: The Cells* at Louisiana Museum, including *Cells I-VI* series, 1991.

bition also teaches you something else. The artist's family biography and references to her philandering father have been evoked on numerous occasions by Bourgeois in her writing and artwork. While fiction and fact at times feel indistinguishable, seeing the *Cells* in multiple seems to confirm the artist's preoccupation with voyeurism. The more *Cells* you see, the more you are reminded of how many corners viewers are left to peer around; how many mirrors allow a line of sight into spaces where your body is barred.

Admittedly, the artist originally intended for us to be able to enter these spaces. It is only later curatorial direction which has made us—to such an extreme—the peering, craning viewers we are today. But the corners, the mirrors and the obscuring were there from the start. Then there is Bourgeois' sense of humor, which is evident in her photographic portrait by Robert Mapplethorpe grinning and grasping her sculpture *Fillette*, a large phallic bone, but here also felt in the strategies of visual *double entendre*. You are left both sure of the allusion

she is making and concerned that your imagination has drifted into the gutter.

At the Louisiana Museum only one of the largest works, *Articulated Lair* (1986), allowed viewers access inside the space. Black paneled doors hinged together create an impenetrable exterior with the exception of one entrance door. Inside the black paneling turns white to provide a backdrop for suspended black bulbous forms that look like stretched breasts or scrotum. Or perhaps most accurately they are black bulbous forms.





**Figure 4**

Installation view of Louise Bourgeois. *The Structure of Existence: The Cells* at Louisiana Museum, including *Cells I-VI* series, 1991.



**Figure 5**

Installation view of Louise Bourgeois. *The Structure of Existence: The Cells* at Louisiana Museum, including *Spider*, 1997.

Confined in this world of hinged doors gives a real sense of the immersion Bourgeois sought when building these walls for her worlds. For a few minutes, I did not see any visitors wittering on mobile phones, teenagers bored with life, or fashion crises for me to ponder at the expense of my own concentration. Instead I stood inside a room that was entirely the artist's world.

Gorovoy explains, "by creating her own architecture, they [the *Cells*] become a self-enclosed world. They are not dependent on the architecture of the museum ..." But even if the galleries of the Louisiana

Museum were empty, the site itself is a powerful presence. Ironically, this predicament may also have been on Bourgeois' mind. The *Cells* turn away from architecture that may vie for the viewer's attention as comfortably as they turn away from a disappointing context for the artwork. Remember that Louise Bourgeois did not enjoy her own dedicated work space until the age of 70. Her career flourished in the final decades of her life up until her death at the age of 98 in 2010, and her two final decades were some of her most productive. As Virginia Woolf advocated in her 1928 lecture

"A Room of One's Own" a space to work is essential. Bourgeois' building and rebuilding of *Cells* allowed her to create spaces determined by parameters that she alone built and controlled. She was building rooms of her own. Over and over and over again.

## References

Gorovoy, J. 2016. <https://en.louisiana.dk/exhibition/louise-bourgeois>.

Woolf, V. 1929. <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebookso2/0200791h.html>.