

LOUISE BOURGEOIS: THE RETICENT CHILD

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Catalogue Essay by Scott Lyon-Wall

Over the past ten years, Louise Bourgeois has withdrawn into a solitary existence that has intensified her awareness of her sensations and memories. She has not left her Chelsea townhouse since the mid-1990s leaving her perpetually suspended inside its temporality. Folded into this home, her sensitivity to time is amplified. She experiences the world as it fades day-by-day, hour-by-hour. Her world is in flux but it is also a continuum: “Has the day invaded the night or the night invaded the day?” she asks. Drawing has played a central role in Bourgeois’ creative process for more than seven decades. As she has noted, her drawings often unconsciously emerge decades later in one of her sculptures. Appearing as some apparition of the past they nevertheless constitute a distinct investigation of their own. What distinguishes this new group of abstract drawings is their documentation of the rhythms and fluctuations of her emotions as time passes. In these, time is transformed into a tangible reality where lived moments come to life as a simple mark or shape, edited, recreated, or elaborated upon. In other words, the nature of autobiography is the experience of evanescence, of time as a vanishing reality. She sketches a line that expresses a single instant or fifty lines that express an hour as it passes. A new day begins and the drawings completed over a week slowly merge into the mood of a month. Conversely, her marks can also represent the last minute passed, or her memory’s recall of something that happened a month ago, or even an event from her childhood.

In her *Insomnia Drawings of 1994–95*, Bourgeois produced an unfolding narrative of two-hundred and twenty individual pieces made during seven, sleepless months. In these works, she established a new typology of the diary. The drawings helped her achieve “peace, rest and sleep.” They served to reassure her by

recovering unconscious memories. As in the *Insomnia Drawings*, her recent work reveals an inner need for repetition. By way of an obsessive reenactment of past psychological trauma, her visual, tactile, wordless diary brings her to a state of rest. Such repetition is the essence of this latest body of work. The drawings pulse with the physical process of unconscious recurrence. They become a psychological equivalent of a seismogram—a graphic record of her unconscious travels. Before the *Insomnia* series, Bourgeois would create a drawing and corresponding form as a way to resolve her current emotional state as a singular representation. In the recent drawings, the physicality of her rhythmic marks brings her drawings visibly closer to her sculptural processes. The relationship of drawing to sculpture is evident when she draws on both sides of the paper. It serves to remind us that even a thin piece of paper is an object with mass. Paper is subject to the tactile manipulations of a hand just as sculpture is shaped with the palpable impressions of a knowing touch. Her marks on paper are acts of intimacy—an index of her interior life. Unlike the singular objects of the past, her new compositions are graphic fibrillations of time and place, as well of the self and its relationship to the other. She weaves these elements into gauze-like structures, reminiscent of the warp and weft of the tapestry looms of her childhood. Her grids, lines, and concentric circles are an affirmation of the present, a place for her to roam. They exist as vibrations of the past and the future. The consistent structure of her motif creates a buffer against the chaos and free-floating nature of anxiety as well as an axis for the permutations and calibrations of her emotions over time. These drawings constitute personal expressions of Bourgeois' current sedentary life. Rarely leaving the house, the visual landscape that engulfs her is utterly familiar and fixed. In the drawings, we encounter the subtle nuances of her closed physical world and heightened relationship to time. Viewed together, these new drawings are a tenuous geometry of the self. They reveal the trembling conduit between memory and time. Oscillating between *toi* and *moi*, her lines connote reparation, reconciliation, and restoration. The fragile lines are the equivalent of threads in her sewn sculptures. And like her sculptural objects, these drawings ward off the fear of abandonment, disintegration and chaos. They are her record and guarantee against the slow disappearance of memory and existence.