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Review: Louise Bourgeois

A New York exhibit suspends the sculptor's disbelief in her own mortality.

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Walking into *Suspension* at Cheim & Read is like walking into a thicket of charms, huge amulets thick with psychic aura. Hung like dreamcatchers, like fat, flaccid cocks, Louise Bourgeois' sculptures defy gravity while confirming its pull; in bronze and fibber, latex and stone, they elevate your soul while forcing you to kneel. Her corpulent corpses weigh heavy in the space between an unbearable materiality and the shimmer of its alternative: dust.

“ Louise-

“ Bourgeois ()

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The show, which went up in October, spans over six decades of Bourgeois' work; the sculptures number 20 in total and are hung from the ceiling, with four illustrations on the walls. The smaller room immediately facing the gallery's entrance includes *The Quartered One* (1964-5) and *Fée Couturière (Fairy Dressmaker)* (c. 1963), two cocoon bulbs, rough, cavernous swellings, like infected cysts. Adjacent are *Janus Fleuri* (1968) and *Hanging Janus* (1968-71), a dyad that resemble two droopy penis-heads conjoined in the shape of a croissant. The principal gallery stars *The Arch of Hysteria* (1993), in which a stunning, headless golden dancer is hung by the hip, both arms unceasingly extending back towards the backs of his calves, never quite reaching his heels. Is he stretching or grasping? Is he frozen at the peak of relief or of desperation? In *Legs* (1986), the only sculpture not suspended in the center of the room but left propped on the wall a few feet away, two worm-like limbs extend like infinite parallels: one foot barely pressed on the floor, the other hovering perpetually just above the ground. Further back into the principal gallery, *The Couple* (2007-9) illustrates suffocation, with two bodies caught up in an asphyxiating spiral of extremities.

The sculptures in *Suspension* are hung on an axis, teetering between the oft-incited polarities of Bourgeois' oeuvre: female/male, malleable/stiff, attenuated/bulging. In speaking of the *Janus* boys, Bourgeois once noted that her own polarity "is a drive toward extreme violence and revolt...and a retiring." The more deathlike of her sculptures recall terrorized images of lynchings or suicides, but the plushness of others, and the pliability with which she manipulates even her metals, can also breed comfort in the familiar. Her famed *Fillette* (1968), hanging a few inches away from *Janus*, threatens castration—an iron hook cutting through the tip of a prick, two heaving scrotums weighing it down—yet when hoisted under her arms, as in Robert Mapplethorpe's portrait of a coyly smiling Bourgeois (<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/mapplethorpe-louise-bourgeois-ar00215>) taken by Robert Mapplethorpe, the sculpture evokes its name, that of a cutely swaddled daughter. As viewers, we pick between extremes.

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Bourgeois' two-volumed memoir-cum-monograph *The Return of the Repressed* features her errant diary entries, which read both as manic lists or litanies and calmer poetics. In one entry, dated January 2, 1996, Bourgeois writes, "I am hanging on to my mother/ you are hanging on to the ceiling/ she is hanging on." *Suspension* evokes these vividly psychoanalytic and even personal preoccupations that take up so much of Bourgeois' work, and which make it, as the critic Lucy Lippard noted, useless to frame Bourgeois' sculptures within any "coolly evolutionary or art-world historical order." Rather, says Lippard, "rarely has an abstract art been so directly and honestly informed by its maker's psyche."

Reactions to Bourgeois' work involve both a visceral pleasure in its homey perversity and a less comfortable, but no less avoidable, analysis of your own psychic tics. Looking up at her suspensions, I recalled Milan Kundera's contemplations on weight and its lack, the "most mysterious, most ambiguous of all" divides. To Kundera, the irresoluteness between heaviness and lightness symbolized an impossible desire for the burden of meaning while strung under the ultimate suspension of matter.

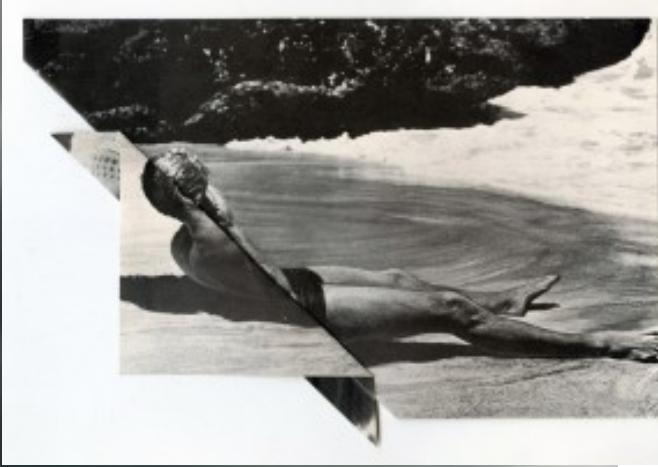
"Horizontality," as Bourgeois said, "is a desire to give up, to sleep. Verticality is an attempt to escape. Hanging and floating are states of ambivalence." The present hovers, however tensely, from a nearly invisible thread, our dense sensations alerting us to the delicacy of our scale.

Louise Bourgeois: Suspension (http://www.cheimread.com/exhibitions/2014-10-30_louise-bourgeois-suspension/) is on view until January 10 at Cheim & Read, 547 West 25th St.

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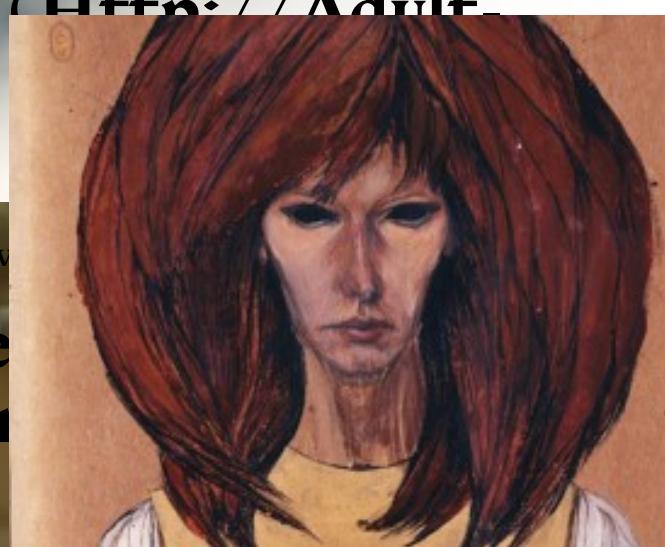
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