

The Passion for Sculpture

A Conversation with Louise Bourgeois

Alain Kirili

For some time I had wanted to conduct an interview with Louise Bourgeois, for her work possesses a sculptural truth that I believe is one of the most important contributions in all of post-war sculpture. In contrast to the English tradition in Caro, the German in Beuys, the Italian in arte povera, and the purely minimalist in the United States, Louise Bourgeois has always—from her first personal exhibitions in New York of 1949–50 to the present—maintained an exceptionally powerful affirmation of verticality, of the monolith in the round.

ALAIN KIRILI: My concern with, my passion for, verticality made me very attentive to your sculpture from the moment I arrived in New York years ago . . . I first discovered your work in 1965 at the Rodin Museum, in the exhibition entitled *Les Etats-Unis: sculptures du XXe siècle* [*The United States: Sculptures of the 20th Century*].

LOUISE BOURGEOIS: I noticed your sculptures at the Sonnabend Gallery in New York. I felt in them the vision of a disciple, in the positive sense of an affinity. I had this reaction even though I'm very different: I'm an iconoclast, that's why I came to America. Whereas with you, there is a tenderness in your work, a feeling of welcome [*un sentiment d'accueil*]. You have positive feelings, while for me the acceptance of revulsion is a crucial subject that obviously has nothing to do with you.

AK: Have you seen my most recent exhibition, in November 1987 at the Holly Solomon Gallery?

LB: Of course! There was clearly an entirely new direction in your bronzes. I had seen your first forged aluminum piece at the Hal Bromm Gallery in the East Village in July 1986. That sculpture has a base, and I'm very conscious of the problem of the base.

What year did you arrive in New York?

AK: My first visit to New York was in 1965. My first long stay was in 1972 and was followed by regular visits. I've had my studio on White Street since 1978. But the attention to verticality in my bronze and aluminum sculpture is linked to a non-puritan ethic of art: to a relation between sexuality, art, and sculpture. This is why, for me, you're an artist whose work in sculpture has an iconographic



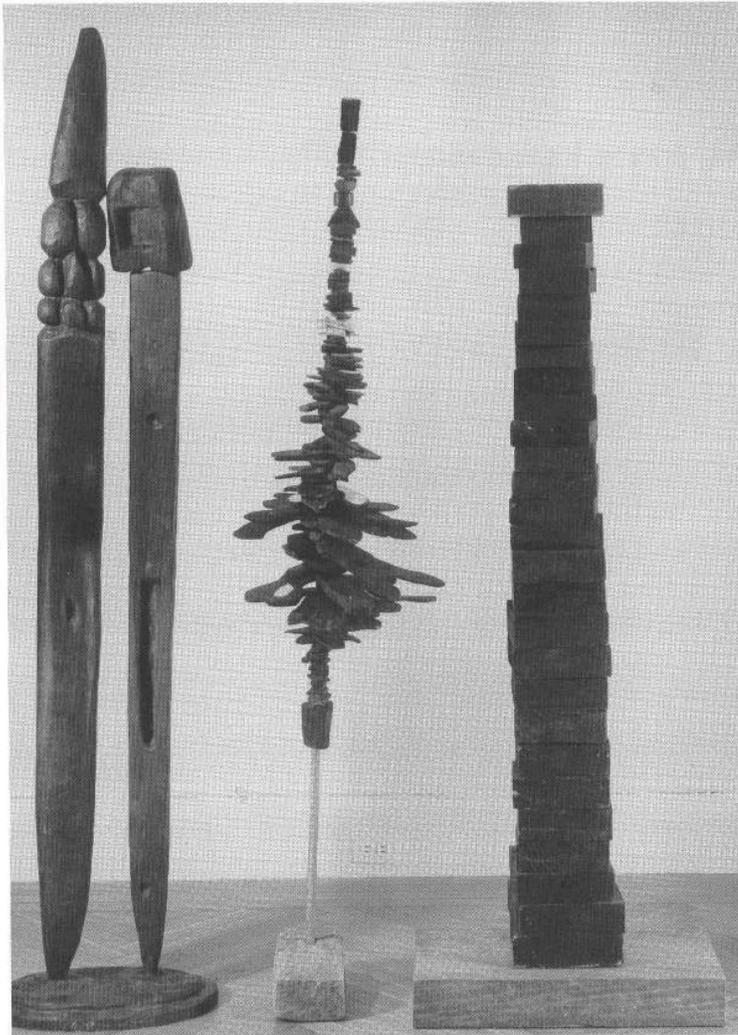
Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison*, 1981, Marble, 48½" x 47" x 49½".
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

and autobiographical richness that is one of the most astounding [bouleversante] and most intense in the post-war period. It is indeed extraordinary to see you today; it must have been in the milieu of the 1970s that I first came here, to this very house. It means a great deal to me that you showed me the two invitations to your exhibitions of 1949–1950, because these verticalities in wood interest me greatly, and I'm going . . .

LB: Be careful of what you're about to say. You cannot put words into my mouth when it comes to that period because it has been done and I object to this very much. The origin of these figures is very clear, as proven by the catalogues of 1949 and 1950.¹

AK: On these invitations you wrote for me, in pencil, in a very poignant manner, "L'époque du mal du pays," or "The period of homesickness." Speaking at the Beaubourg recently, I said I found it somewhat frustrating that your work was not present in the exhibition *L'époque, la mode, la morale, la passion*,² because I think your work is that of a great French artist who should be there.

LB: I wasn't there!



Louise Bourgeois, left: *The Listening One*, 1947, Dark patina, 79" x 20" x 12"; center: *Femme Volage*, 1950, Painted wood, 72"; right: *Memling Dawn*, ca. 1951, Painted wood, 67 1/4". Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

AK: Yes, but for my generation, in order to clarify and understand my identity, I must say that the fact that you were not present was a shock. It was shocking because your work represents for me (and all the more so as I live in New York) a fracture in the general atmosphere of formalism and puritanism. Your work always has a very powerful sexual charge. Could you recall the great shock in adolescence that was determinant in your work?

LB: I think that I can only speak about a particular work. Since we have here the 1949 and 1950 invitations from the Peridot Gallery, I can tell you my story, but only in terms of the examination of a work. The 1949 exhibition was brought about by Arthur Drexler, who at that time was a poet, and who subsequently became the historian of architecture at MoMA. I recall the name of Arthur Drexler with gratitude, for he was the first to discover me. He came to my house, viewed all of the works, and, as Peridot's advisor, said, "We're going to show all of this." Now obviously I was French. I belonged to a certain milieu. Pierre

Matisse and Duchamp came by and said, "This is extraordinary!" I told them that it was simply a manifestation of "homesickness." They looked at each other and understood, that's all there was to it. And it's written on the invitations, you see: one is in French and the other in English. This represents a progression from 1949 to 1950, a progression in my ability to adapt myself at least to some degree.³

AK: Figure qui apporte du pain [Figure Who Brings Bread].
 Figure regardant une maison [Figure Gazing at a House].
 Figures qui supportent un linteau [Figures Holding Up a Beam].
 Figure qui s'appuie contre une porte [Figure Leaning Against a Door].
 Figure qui entre dans une pièce [Figure Who Enters a Room].
 Statue pour une maison vide [Statue for an Empty House].
 Deux figures qui portent un objet [Two Figures Carrying an Object].
 Une femme gravit les marches d'un jardin [A Woman Mounting the Steps of a Garden].
 Figures qui attendent [Figures Waiting].
 Figures qui se parlent sans se voir [Figures Who Talk to Each Other without Seeing Each Other].
 Figure endormie [Figure Asleep].
 Figure pour une niche [Figure for a Niche].
 Figure quittant sa maison [Figure Leaving Its House].
 Figure de plein vent [Figure in the Wind].
 Figure emportant sa maison [Figure Carrying Away Its House].
LB: And thus the titles indicate exactly what I meant. There's no mystery at all!

AK: I'm merely reciting them.

LB: But there is a great intensity and very great personal emotion. This is apparent in the constant repetition of the word "figure," which expresses the fact that I had left my entire family in Europe. At bottom, I wasn't ashamed, but I was sick at having abandoned them because I was the only one to leave. I married an American student and left along with him. Thus my entire family remained in France and the homesickness was doubled by a sensation of abandonment. *I felt I had abandoned them.*

AK: I wanted to ask you . . .

LB: Be careful what you mean to say! What were you asking?

AK: In crossing the Atlantic, did you perceive this situation that I feel: the puritanism of a society, another society?

LB: No, coming from a promiscuous milieu I found all that very admirable. I have nothing against puritans because I had escaped from a French promiscuity, and thus puritanism did not make me suffer.

AK: For me it had a repressive effect. Turning to the sculptures of 1947, can you tell me why you painted these white?

LB: For the sculptures that were shown in 1949 and 1950, that means that they were made during the five preceding years. White is something immaculate. They are absolutely pure. And the common characteristic of all these pieces is that they terminate in a point that expresses the fragility of verticality, and that represents



Robert Mapplethorpe, *Louise Bourgeois*, 1982. © Robert Mapplethorpe. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

a superhuman effort to hold oneself up. This is not completely autobiographical, then, for these are figures of my family. Later there's my brother, but at this point there is no mention of the members of my family. In the second exhibition . . .

AK: Woman in the Shape of a Shuttle.

LB: Every word is significant. Coming from Aubusson, where my mother's family were tapestry-merchants, the *shuttle* was the tool of my grandfather's milieu.

AK: Ship Figure.

Friendly Evidence.

New York City Doorway with Pillars.

Attentive Figures.

Pillars.

Rear Façade.

The Tomb of a Young Person.⁴

LB: *The Tomb of a Young Person* expresses a fear, a kind of protective exorcism for the health of my children.

AK: Letter to a Brother.

LB: Yes, my brother Pierre.

AK: Persistent Antagonism.

LB: Antagonisms because I was isolated from my entire family, and suffered from it.

AK: Woman Carrying Packages.

LB: A woman who carries packages is responsible for what she carries and they are very fragile, and she is totally responsible. Yes, it is a fear of not being a good mother.

AK: Portrait of C. Y.

LB: That was a terrific fight I had with a member of the *su* group. Well, I had a lot of terrible fights, this was nothing. But this one I exorcised, I got rid of by making a statue, put my name on this statue.

AK: Did you encounter Alberto Giacometti at the time of his 1950 and 1951 exhibitions at Pierre Matisse in New York?

LB: Alberto Giacometti I remember. He was difficult. I mean to say that he confided in me, but I knew him well. I was afraid to come out, to come out of the kitchen, at Pierre Matisse's. He was afraid to go to bed, and therefore spent the entire night with his head in his arms. Fear is a phenomenon that affected me immensely. He was numb with fear, he couldn't speak. Pierre Matisse was an outgoing fellow who was married to Marie at that time. Everyone treated him kindly, but he was like a lost

AK: But his sculptures had surprised many artists in New York.

LB: I don't remember those exhibitions. But I do remember that in France he was completely different. In France he was incredibly nasty [*méchant comme un rat*]. Here he was not afraid, but in France he wasn't terrified at all. He sat in the front row at Deux Magots. I was born above the Café de Flore. I was born at 174 boulevard Saint Germain, the building in which the Café de Flore is situated.⁵ He sat there with a Japanese man, and he hated his colleagues.

AK: Captain's Walk on the Irving Place Building.⁶

LB: Yes, that's a reference to the house in which we were born on 18th Street.

AK: Here is a fine title: Blind Vigils.

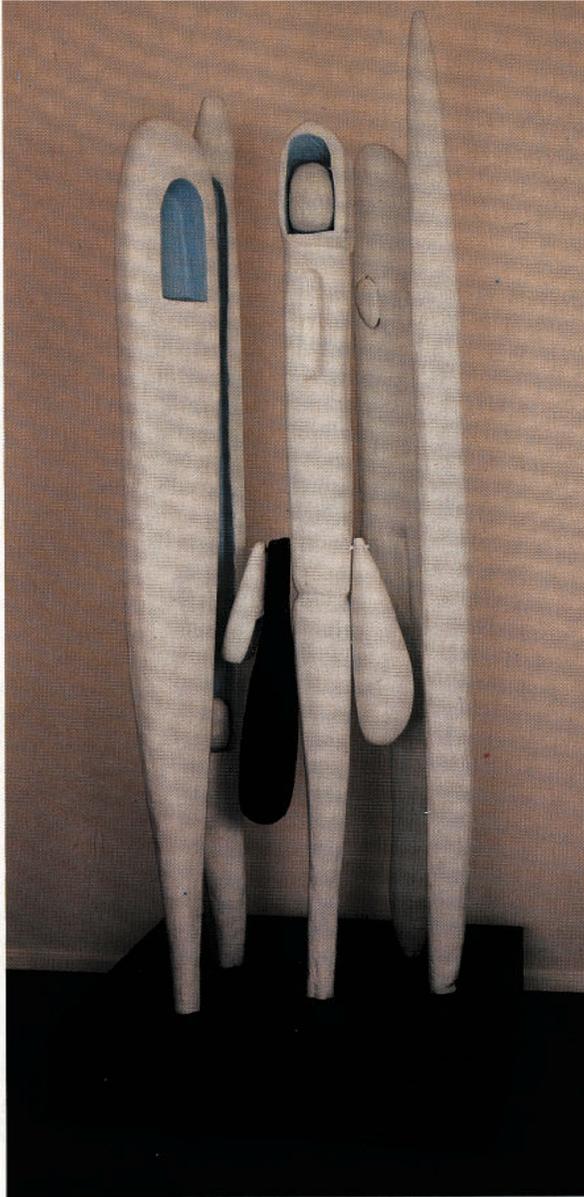
LB: It's ironic. These titles are informative about my entire work. *Blind Vigils* is like *Blind Leading the Blind*. Blindness can be a blush I experienced at the side of the people around me. As I say, my father was promiscuous. I had to be blind to my mistress who lived with us. I had to be blind to the pain of my mother. I had to be blind to the fact I was a little bit sadistic. I was blind to the fact that my sister slept with a man across the street. I had an absolute revulsion of everything and everybody. Mostly for erotic reasons, sexual. So when I met this American student who was a puritan, I was attracted. It was wonderful. And I married that guy.

AK: Therefore you were willing to marry a puritan in order to escape this overload of sexual promiscuity.

LB: Consequently I liked puritans. I still like them. In fact I liked puritans very sexy, because they're a challenge. This is quite important in that there was the great puritan of this period, Alfred Barr. And the fact that I had a crush on Alfred Barr—it is a fact I know. The fact was, he was absolutely inviolable. He was a puritan, he was repressed. He had a repressed sexuality, and that is what attracted me; as a challenge.

AK: You like challenges; you find them stimulating.

LB: Absolutely. How can a fortress of this order be conquered?



Louise Bourgeois, *Quarantania*, 1947–1953, Bronze, white patina, 80½" x 27". Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

AK: Bravo, Louise! Excellent! Now a few words on the difference between the Pillars, between the ones that are monoliths from a single piece of wood, and those that rise in a pile. The play between the two.

LB: The play between the two: first of all, the monoliths are absolutely stiff—the stiffness of someone who's afraid. The way one can say, "he's scared stiff." Immobilized with fear. Stuck. This was an entire period. And then suddenly there's a kind of softening that came from the softness of my children and of my husband; that changed me a little. I got the nerve to look around me, to let go [*m'adoucir*]. *Not to be so nervous. Not to be so tense.* The pilings make it possible to turn around. And consequently it's the fundamental concept of the statue. The *Blind Vigils*: these are

handicapped persons because they're supposed to protect you and they're blind. They're good-for-nothings because they're feminine; and this theme, which is psychological, is figuratively repeated in the sculpture *Blind Leading the Blind*.

AK: That's an extraordinary sculpture. I noticed recently at the Pat Hearn Gallery that *Blind Leading the Blind* exists in a color that's almost flesh pink; I had known the sculpture before, but only in red and black. The first time I saw it was in the exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1976, Two Hundred Years of American Sculpture.

LB: There it was entirely black.

AK: Yes, there's also an entirely black version.

LB: It was born entirely black, because it's a dramatic subject.

AK: There are three versions, then: black, red-black, and flesh pink. Can you give me the chromatic symbolism of the transition between these three sculptures?

LB: It's a psychological evolution.

AK: You told me that it was an evolution that went from a dramatic situation to something softer.

LB: The tragic aspect of the period, and of the homesickness. It's the tragic aspect of a person you miss. It's the tragic aspect of mourning, in other words of people one has lost. The fact that I lost them because they stayed in France, or the fact that I lost them because they died is not the important thing. It was an immense mourning. It's the black of mourning. So someone can say to me: what are you talking about, no one died in your family. And it's true. No one died, it's just that they were missing in my unconscious.

AK: Are the wood pieces found or carved?

LB: At that time, the wood sculptures were not found objects. I still like fine material. But today I have a certain affection for found materials. In that period these materials came from the makers of *water towers* for *high buildings* in New York. The *water towers* which sit on the top of the buildings were made of a special wood, were made of red wood of California.

AK: So there was an attack directly into the wood, which is very important, and the holes pierced through the monoliths?

LB: I made the holes myself, with razor blades.

AK: There are also drawings on some of the monoliths.

LB: Yes, that's quite important.

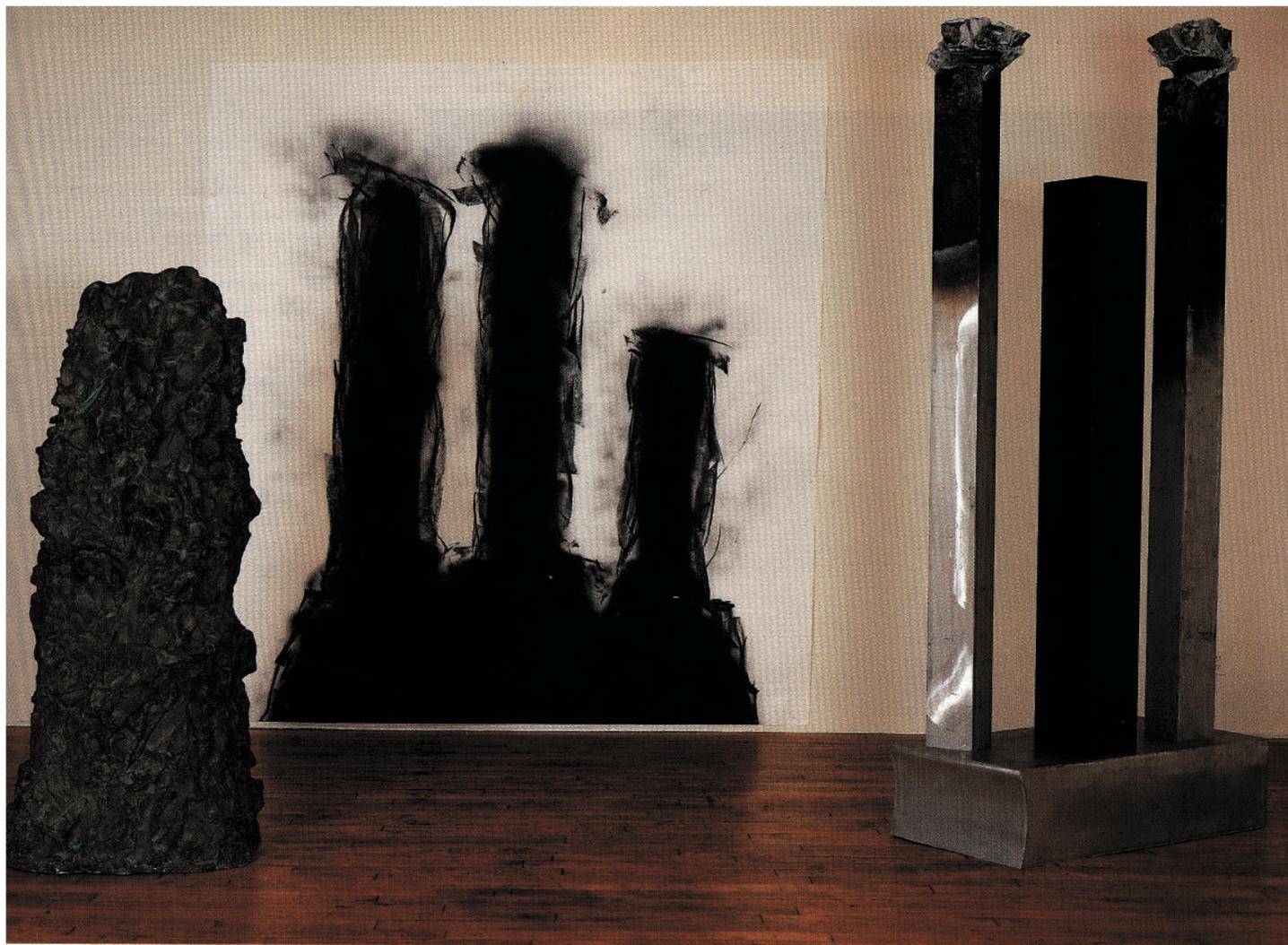
AK: Similar to the ones on paper. What is the significance or the role of the drawings on the sculptures?

LB: They're openings; very often they're openings, and very often they're embeddings, attached pieces, or one element fixed in the other.

AK: I was referring to the drawings that are painted on the white surface.

LB: Yes, that means they have to be carved out.

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Alain Kirili. Studio Installation, 1987. Bronze, drawing, forged aluminum.

AK: *Ab yes, excellent. And certain of the wood pieces were also transferred to bronze, such as Pregnant Woman.*

LB: Oh, that was done thirty-five years afterwards!

AK: *Thirty-five years later, then, you wanted a version in bronze.*

LB: I'm not the one who wanted it. These things existed for thirty years without being exhibited, because I have no need to exhibit. It's not a necessity for me. I need to make things, but I have no need to show them.

AK: *But you were in agreement with the casting in bronze?*

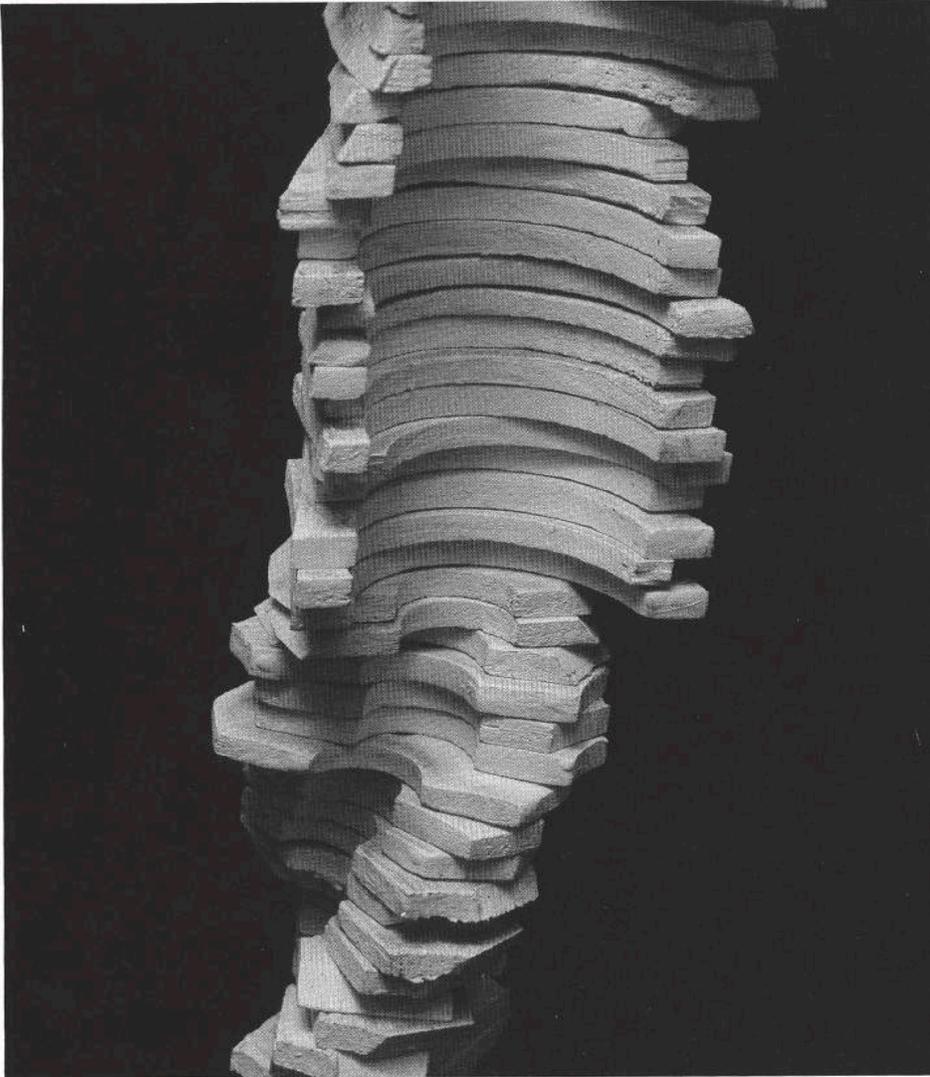
LB: Yes, I agreed, but it wasn't my initiative, any more than the large exhibition of drawings that took place at Robert Miller. I have nothing against it. They're drawings that date from that period; I have nothing against it, but it's not the result of my own initiative. I myself wouldn't have shown them. But Robert Miller is diplomatic, he does what he wants and then tells me about it.

**"I need to make things,
but I have no need
to show them."**

I myself am a woman with no secrets; but I would never have shown these drawings. That for thirty years they stayed in boxes, in storage, proves it.

AK: *The sculpture Memling Dawn is a very fine piling. Were these squares, these wooden cubes, found?*

LB: Yes, they were found and almost all of them are in redwood because in the neighborhood where I was living there were many carpenters making those tanks for the water towers. The wood was marvelous because it had beautiful grain and because I could cut it.



Louise Bourgeois, *Spiral Woman*, 1953, Wood, 6'. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery.

**"It's a polarity
between the tenderness
that I express
and the violence
that is inside me."**

AK: *Let's move forward a few years, thanks to the beautiful photograph of your 1964 exhibition at the Stable Gallery, which is reproduced in the MoMA catalogue (1983) of your work. I am also very interested in these curves that are the opposite of the Pillars.*

LB: Wood is less satisfactory because it's perishable and all of the statues were breaking, deteriorating. For this reason I moved from wood to plaster.

AK: *And these works in plaster reveal forms that spiral. What is the importance of spirals for you?*

LB: The spiral is the beginning of movement in space. As opposed to the rigidity of the monolith, the subject is exploring space.

AK: *This is why you call one of them Homage to Bernini. And then there is Spiral Summer, Rondo for L. In the introduction to the MoMA catalogue, I read: "When you experience pain you can withdraw and protect yourself but the security of the lair can also be a trap." What is this "lair"?*

LB: It's when a rabbit takes shelter in his refuge. Therefore a refuge can also, in a certain sense, be a trap. Yes, of course, it's the bipolarity of what's a trap and what's a refuge.

AK: *In certain of your sculptures there are explicitly sexual forms, for example in Fillette [Little Girl], which includes both masculine and feminine elements.*

LB: Mapplethorpe took a photograph of that sculpture, *Fillette*, in which I'm holding it in my arms. Which means simply that from a sexual point of view I consider the masculine attributes to be extremely delicate; they're objects that the woman, thus myself, must protect. It's a very very strong thing, because I was considering the masculine genital parts as attributes that I had to protect. Perhaps this is childish; you're asking me what I think, but this is the origin of the word *Fillette*. The word "fillette" is an extremely delicate thing that needs to be protected. And I displace these attributes onto something that is dear to me in fact, the attributes of my husband. It's very complicated.

AK: *Very profound!*

LB: Very profound. People won't necessarily understand.

AK: *At some point this touches on the truth of sculpture.*

LB: But it's the opposite of aggression. It's a polarity between the tenderness that I express and the violence that is inside me.

AK: *I understand you very well. When I'm working the clay for my terra-cotta pieces, I express all sorts of violence. I bring out feminine forms in the modelling. The verticalities, on the other hand, are more hieratic.*

LB: This is to say that we're made of completely contrary elements, opposed elements; and this produces formidable tensions.

AK: *Often when I sculpt, the part that I finally free from the unconscious, the part that is repressed for me, is in some sense feminine. Let us talk now about the marble sculpture *Cumul I* of 1969, which is at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris. When did you begin using marble?*

LB: 1967.

AK: *You went to Carrara several times, then.*

LB: First to Pietrasanta. I don't like Pietrasanta, though, because it's overtouristed, whereas Carrara is much more serious. The transition stems from the fact that the aggressive side of my nature liked the resistance of the stone. Wood is too soft a material, and above all it's perishable and offers no resistance. Whereas the resistance that must be overcome in stone is a stimulation; like the fact that puritans attract me sexually because they're a formidable challenge. It's almost a playing with the impossible.

AK: *Ha ha! I love that. And so marble is calming.*

LB: *It is a fight to the finish. So it is a challenge.*

AK: *This the extraordinary advantage of the art of statuary and of sculpture over painting.*

LB: Painting doesn't exist for me.

AK: *The resistance of the material allows all sorts of drives to be freed. It's true: when I forge my aluminum and it explodes, I can tell you that I'm very calm when I leave the studio afterward.*

LB: It's the physical aspect of sculpture.

AK: *Yes, and this marvelous truth of the resistance of materials.*

LB: There is a redemptive quality in this. That is, one has the right to be aggressive, one has the right to cut everything and break everything, and to do it for something useful, for something beautiful.

AK: *For something sublime. A word on the title *Cumul*.*

LB: The title *Cumul* comes from a system of clouds.

AK: *Ah yes! A very beautiful drawing goes with it, as well.*

LB: It's a system of clouds, and for me it's the study of clouds, of the sky, of the heavens; which is something very positive, very calming, and very verifiable, anticipated, and reliable. Consequently it is peace, the peaceful side of things.

AK: *There is a certain serenity.*

LB: It comes back all the time. In addition, there is a repetition, an *endless repetition* that is also something very calming.

AK: *And Clamart?*

LB: *Clamart* is very important for me because my grandparents and my parents are buried there. It's the family tomb.

AK: *And this absolutely magnificent sculpture that makes me think of Brancusi's Penguins, which is called Eye to Eye. It's at our friend Aggie Grand's, and is a very fine sculpture from 1970. Can you tell me something about its title, Eye to Eye?*

LB: Yes, it involves elements that relate to each other. In effect, elements that look at each other like little windows in a house.

AK: *And this extremely beautiful repetitive series entitled No March No. 72, which has all these elements—cylinders of a sort—and cuts that are sometimes oblique.*

LB: This work is in the open air, and that is very important. Because the rain cannot harm it.

AK: *It makes me think of my sculpture *Commandment*, which is a veritable field of varied elements. Your sculpture No March No. 72 is a grouping of cylinders in marble that rise up softly, and this becomes particularly beautiful when it is outside on the grass, in nature.*

LB: Moreover, they take very good care of it at the Storm King Art Center.

AK: *I had a similar experience when I installed my sculpture *Grand Commandement Blanc* in the Tuileries in Paris. To see the iron elements, which are painted white, outside the studio, on the grass, emphasizes the aspect of birth, of scriptural growth in three dimensions; and it does so in contrast to the vertical writing of the Obelisk, and at the side of the Orangerie and the Nymphéas.*

We had decided that the interview had reached its conclusion at this point, when Louise Bourgeois asked me to record the following remark.

LB: I consider this interview with Alain Kirili to be very important because it's really the only occasion on which I have been given the chance to speak about this period and about the origin of the figures in wood, which are completely autobiographical and French in origin, and about my concerns with France. □

Translated from the French by Philip Barnard

1. In this passage and in a number that follow, Louise Bourgeois's words are italicized to indicate that they were spoken in English rather than French.

2. An exhibition commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Pompidou Center, with a presentation of sixty artists.

3. The titles for the exhibition of 1949 are in English, those for the exhibition of 1950 in French. Thus the progression and adaptation in question moves toward an affirmation of the French titles.

4. Titles from the exhibition of 1949.

5. That is, only a few yards down the street from the Deux Magots.

6. One of the most important sculptures from this period, notable for the startling formal repetition of its composition.

Alain Kirili is a sculptor who sometimes writes about art.