

Photography 'Louise Bourgeois interrogated me': an artist unmasked

Jean-François Jaussaud spent a decade photographing the formidable artist. He remembers her fury, her fragility - and her police-style interrogations

Sarah Moroz

Monday 19 October 2015 14:00 BST

717 Shares 3 Comments

Save for later



The art and the fury ... Louise Bourgeois at home, New York, 1996. All images: courtesy Jean-François Jaussaud/the Easton Foundation

"She could be very harsh, then five minutes later, lovely." Jean-François Jaussaud is explaining how quickly Louise Bourgeois flipped from joy to fury.

The French photographer met the legendary artist for the first time in the winter of 1994, at the former garment factory in Brooklyn she used as her studio. Their shared nationality gave him an in. Bourgeois was 84 years old, spiky, mischievous and always sceptical of the press. She quizzed him, police interrogation-style, about every aspect of his life: his whole family, his birthday, even his exact address.

He admitted he had never seen any of her art but had heard about her through a friend. "But the moment I saw her work that day," he says, "I immediately understood it - I mean, I didn't understand it one bit, but I knew there was something important there." That misunderstanding was the start of a decade-long relationship.



At home, New York 20th St, 2000.

The next year, as Bourgeois was getting ready for her first ever retrospective in France, at Paris's modern art museum, he went back to New York to shoot her for a photoessay in the magazine *Connaissance des Arts*. Bourgeois, again, did nothing to make him feel comfortable.

This time, she gave him a fatal stipulation: she must see every single one of his pictures, and be able to destroy any that she didn't like. Jaussaud, quite petrified, relented. After getting the images back from the lab, he went to see her and laid out his contact sheets. Whatever inscrutable test Bourgeois was examining him on, Jaussaud had passed. He was welcome back any time, an invitation he took up every chance he got.



With Maman, Brooklyn, 1995.

Though they were never friends, "there was a complicity", says Jaussaud. Whenever he came to meet her, he had to call before 9am - to purposefully circumvent her team, who would otherwise discourage him from coming because he would disturb her work. When he arrived, the two would always speak for 15 minutes: she loved hearing about where he lived, Ivry, which was near where she grew up in Choisy-le-Roi. Her other favourite topic was all the undervalued female artists who supported their male counterparts but got none of the credit. She lamented their lives, notably that of Alexina "Teeny" Duchamp, Henri Matisse's daughter-in-law and then Marcel Duchamp's second wife. After they chatted, Bourgeois would crack on with work and Jaussaud would quietly watch her.

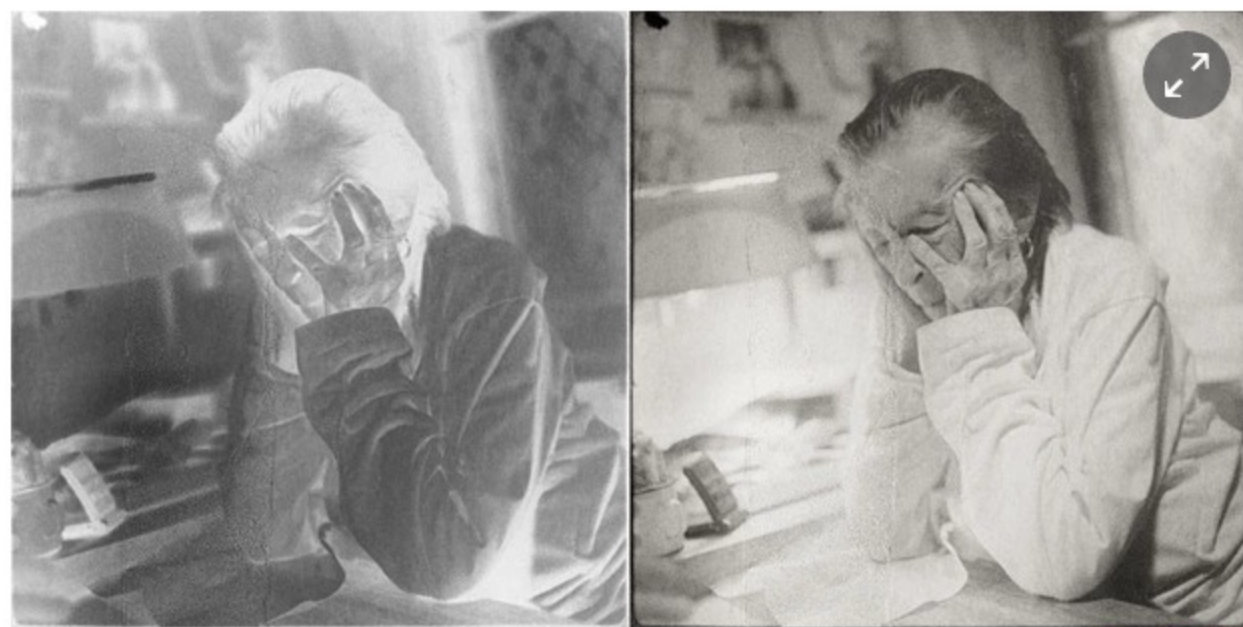
Jaussaud became a photographer after dropping out of engineering school, then dropping out of an audiovisual programme. He ended up assisting Dominique Issermann, a fashion and portrait photographer, and was inspired by her passion for showing creative types in their private spaces. Bourgeois, he says, "was totally implicated in her work - to the point that there was no differentiation between it and her private life". He compares this to other experiences he's had, notably his day at Jeff Koons's studio. Their interaction was "very cold; we only exchanged banalities. He was dressed in white, immaculate, and he didn't touch anything. His assistants do everything - the total opposite of Louise, with her dirty smock, constantly handling clay and plaster or drawing in a frenzy of doing."

"You could feel that in her house, too," he says of her Chelsea home, where she lived and worked for some 50 years and where many of his shots were taken. (Now dubbed the Easton Foundation, the apartment is available to visit by appointment, more or less untouched since Bourgeois's death in 2010 at the age of 98.) She didn't make life cosy for herself: she slept on a small cot surrounded by books and a boombox, with plaster of paris buckets stacked up in her bathroom. She deserted her conjugal bedroom after the death of her husband, art historian Robert Goldwater, and chose to live in Spartan austerity despite the comforts of her large townhouse. Piles of books (Louise Labé poems, a tome of Cézanne's Late Works) and photos and scraps of paper were strewn everywhere, proof of a mind teeming with ideas.



Louise Bourgeois's bedroom, New York 20th St, 1998.

Jaussaud's shots are telling glimpses into all parts of Bourgeois's personality. He captures her frowning, wrinkles puckering in displeasure, as she tries to cast her own hands. "She was yelling that it wasn't working; she had to do it so many times," Jaussaud remembers. In another, Bourgeois stands, poised and assertive, in a white-billed Ellesse cap and chic black-and-white coat, beneath her monumental bronze arachnid sculpture *Maman*.



Double Exposure, New York 20th St, 2006.

But the last shot he took of her, in 2006, tells a different story. It was a double Polaroid snapped at one of her Sunday salons, where writers, curators and young artists would come to her for frank critiques of their work. Bourgeois holds her head in her hands, looking utterly worn out. It is a picture of vulnerability, human and fragile - the woman behind the furious mask.

Photographs of Louise Bourgeois, 1995-2006, is at Galerie Elizabeth Royer in Paris to 25 October.

More interviews Topics Photography Louise Bourgeois Sculpture

Save for later Reuse this content

related content

- Can art change the world? The work of street artist JR - in pictures (11 Oct 2015)
- Who'd marry an artist? The women painted out of the picture (19 Feb 2015)
- Where the scientist lives: the artist who snooped on Google's data farm (4 Feb 2015)
- Artist Sarah T've had death threats' (14 Jul 2015)
- Moran Hearman wins 2014 Louis prize, Australia's richest portrait award (28 Oct 2014)
- He's Barack Obama's favourite artist. But is Britain ready for Glenn Ligon? (2 Apr 2015)
- Art from Mars - the best pictures (10 Jan 2014)

comments (3)

This discussion is closed for comments.

- Order by Oldest Threads Collapsed
- daniel commons 19 Oct 2015 15:37 One of the most remarkable and beautifully genuine artists that have ever lived. This looks like a great book. Report
 - Natalie Sayer 19 Oct 2015 15:44 I'm still haunted by "I do, I undo, I redo". Astonishing artist. Look forward to the book. Report
- View more comments

popular

- across the guardian in art and design
- Jeremy Corbyn warns rebels: I'm not going anywhere over Syria
 - Live / Davis Cup final: Andy Murray v David Goffin - live!
 - Live / Tottenham Hotspur v Chelsea: Premier League - live!
 - Tyson Fury: I knew all along I could win the world title'
 - Isis mocked with rubber ducks as internet fights terror with humour
 - Angelina Jolie Pitt: 'I'm on fire inside'
 - Top Gear returns to BBC on 8 May
 - Tyson Fury beats Vladimir Klitschko: world heavyweight boxing - as it happened
 - Turkish human rights lawyer shot dead during press conference
 - Five ways work will change in the future