At first glance, Louise Bourgeois's Femmes-Maisons, a series of four 36" x 14" ink or oil and ink on linen paintings, fill us with puzzlement. They depict nude females, whose heads and torsos are replaced by houses. These images were created concurrently between 1945 and 1947, at a time of crucial personal and professional growth for the artist as well as for New York City’s art community. Jerry Gorovoy and Deborah Wye, both of whom have written on the artist, have been quick to relate Bourgeois’s unique and intimate works to the artist’s troubled childhood. The artist herself has allowed, even promoted, a Freudian psychobiographic interpretation of her work. However, that avenue fails to explore the parallel themes found in Bourgeois’s art and in the writings of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Such a comparison not only allows a Lacanian reading of Bourgeois, but it also demonstrates how her work critiques Lacan.

Bourgeois claims that the underlying motives for her art stem from her early years in France, where she was born in 1911. As a young girl she was caught between “a nurturing, calm, and clear-thinking mother…and a powerful, volatile, and anxiety-causing father.”1 Paul Gardner, Marsha Pels, and others have focused on the affair that her father had with her live-in English tutor, an affair that Louise’s mother knew of and accepted in order to keep the family together. Bourgeois recalled that “she [her tutor] rode in the couple with him [her father], in the front seat. Mama and I sat in back. I hated her!”2 In recent years, Bourgeois has been quite vocal about this period in her life, attributing to it feelings of anxiety and rage that continue to affect her and influence her art.3

The story of this affair—whether true or apocryphal—has taken on the aura of myth. No one interested in Bourgeois’s work has looked beyond this Freudian idea of a traumatized childhood to see what other factors may have inspired Bourgeois. Her openness about her past and insistence that it is the source of her artistic ideas seem, in some ways, to be not only avowals of this myth but also means to circumvent other issues in her art.

However, the Femmes-Maisons beg interpretations beyond that of personal experience. In early images Bourgeois explores not only her own history but also issues of femininity, psychoanalysis, and communication. Throughout her career she has presented ambiguities of gender identity, often through a denial of individuality. Through the duplicity of the Femmes-Maisons, the artist explores problems of gender differentiation, particularly when a woman is forced to find her own identity in terms of a man. But perhaps the most overlooked matter in Bourgeois’s work is the dilemma of communication. The question is twofold; it deals not only with the theme of communication within a work of art but also with the difficulty of communicating with the viewer. It is this issue that brings Louise Bourgeois and Jacques Lacan together.

In fact, Bourgeois recently acknowledged that she knew Lacan and long had an interest in his theories. However, her approaches to the feminine and the unconscious are quite different from his. She has expressed her disapproval of the psychoanalyst by calling him a guerisseur—a quack doctor.4

In the 1940s and 1950s Lacan formulated his ideas concerning human language, studying its structure as a means to understand the unconscious. For Lacan the patriarchal framework of language provides the key to sexual difference. Language divides male from female, placing the male in a dominant position. Furthermore, language is composed of signifiers that function in terms of figures of speech, primarily metaphor and metonymy. Lacan sees metaphor (a figure of speech in which one object is likened to another by speaking of it as if it were the other) as a privileged, masculine function, and metonymy (the naming of a thing by substituting one of its attributes for the thing itself) as divisive and suggestive of femininity, which therefore prevents clear communication.5 In fact, Lacan convoluted his own writing style—i.e., made it feminine—in order to emphasize this problem.6

Bourgeois struggles with the same questions as Lacan, but she transforms verbal examples into visual ones; and more importantly, she reaches different conclusions. As with Lacan, Bourgeois’s impenetrability was noted early. In a 1979 interview, Bourgeois recalled that after viewing her first one-woman show at the Peridot Gallery in 1946, Marcel Duchamp claimed he could not understand her work and disliked it for its lack of puns and excessive emotional content.7 It is hardly coincidental that Bourgeois’s paintings and drawings of the 1940s often parallel the early studies of Lacan. Both knew many of the same members of Surrealist circles in France in the 1930s and later in New York City.8

Bourgeois’s relationship to the Surrealists, aside from similarities in her visual representations, has yet to be examined in depth. The Surrealists’ interest in the work of Freud and psychoanalysis, as seen in their concentration on the omnipotence of the dream and power of the unconscious as well as their attraction to non-Western culture and the desire to escape the inhibitions of society, is linked to Bourgeois’s own interest in personal psychology and the influence of childhood on adult actions.9 Bourgeois’s work often draws on the unconscious, producing startling dreamlike images that coincide with the Surrealist aesthetic.

Although she developed her own distinct style, Bourgeois, in fact, had a close relationship to this group. While a student in Paris during the 1930s, she lived in Isadora Duncan’s house, above the gallery that served in 1936 as the site of “Gradiva,” André Breton’s first Surrealist exhibition.10 This show displayed a variety of objects—mathematical, primitive, natural, found, irrational, readymade, and so forth—which were displayed out of context and in unusual combinations in order to
stretch the limits of knowledge.\textsuperscript{17} Certainly Bourgeois saw and was influenced by this juxtaposition of curious and normal everyday objects.

In June 1945 at New York’s Norloly Gallery, Bourgeois, with the help of Duchamp, organized “Documents France, 1940-44: Art-Literature-Press of the French Underground” to inform the American public and draw sympathy for the French avant-garde. Works included anti-Nazi press, poetry by Paul Eluard and Max Jacob, prose by Jean-Paul Sartre, Gertrude Stein, and André Gide, and art ranging from Bonnard to Picasso. Despite this collaboration and her friendships with many of the Surrealists, Bourgeois thought them “lordly and pontifical.”\textsuperscript{12}

The Surrealists’ interest in psychoanalysis is probably what attracted Lacan to their circle in the 1930s. He published two articles in the Surrealist journal Minotaure, one on a case concerning women hysterics.\textsuperscript{13} These studies greatly interested the Surrealists; in fact, Paul Eluard later published the “involuntary poetry” of an erotomanic woman whom Lacan had examined. The idea of the woman hysterical intrigued the Surrealists as much as it did Lacan. Being closer to nature and the “uncivilized,” women could instinctively tap into natural drives. For the Surrealists, woman represented the active sexual force in the world and in man’s creative life. She served as artistic muse, an object of man’s desire, and seductress.\textsuperscript{14} In the Surrealist world, woman existed for man’s creativity, not her own.

Lacan also found other sources for artistic style and production. In the first issue of Minotaure, his article “Le Problème du Style et la Conception Psychiatrique des Formes Paranoïaques de l’Expérience” linked symbols of artistic vision to symbols in myth, folklore, and visions of déliirants, frenzied or mentally disturbed people.\textsuperscript{15} The fundamental tendency of a specific symbol to be repeatedly identified with an object is matched by the constant process of la création poétique, the creation of style. He goes on to discuss the value of these symbols, noting that their power does not diminish even among déliirants, because they are grounded in a collective human identity. In this sense, déliirants resemble women hysterics because they have access into the unconscious. Lacan concludes that the original syntax of these symbols is the basis for understanding the symbolic values of art as well as the problems of style. Thus, art can be understood through the psychological and anthropological study of individuals and cultures.

Lacan linked the symbolic dimension in analysis with the symbolic order that Claude Lévi-Strauss claimed as an organizing principle of the systems of myth, language, kinship, and economic exchange in a culture.\textsuperscript{16} Since most cultures are patriarchal, this symbolic order is also patriarchal. It is the pre-given structure of social and sexual roles and relations that make up the family and society. Lacan based all his later theories of language and sexual difference on this order structured around the transcendental signifier, the phallus.

In 1933, when Lacan published his articles in Minotaure, Bourgeois was studying math and geometry at the Sorbonne (1932-35). Although she did not read the articles, she may have been aware of Lacan’s developing ideas on the unconscious and psychoanalysis. It is possible that Bourgeois communicated with Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, particularly after the war when Bourgeois and Lévi-Strauss were in the United States. However, the artist herself has refused to clarify the existence or extent of any communications.\textsuperscript{17} She has said, however, that she began reading Lacan’s books in the early 1970s and that they interested her a great deal.\textsuperscript{18}

Nevertheless, Bourgeois focuses on issues that also concerned Lacan; her paintings and drawings of the 1940s seem to parallel those early studies in which he began to explore the structure of language as a means of explaining sexual difference. Femininity is the area where Bourgeois deviates most strongly from Lacan. It is also the most pervasive theme in her art, appearing in paintings and sculpture that combine genders or question accepted modes of communication. Although both Bourgeois and Lacan are concerned with issues of gender, Lacan sees sexual difference as grounded in a world in which the phallus is the transcendental signifier. Not only does the phallus divide the male from the female, it also divides the real from the imaginary. On the other hand, Bourgeois seems more interested in overcoming patriarchal dominance through the combination of the sexes and the undermining of language, Lacan’s symbolic order.

These issues can be examined best by focusing on Bourgeois’s art of the 1940s, especially her Femmes-Maisons, which explore two major Lacanian themes: sexual difference, in terms of woman’s role in society, and problems of communication. However, these universal concerns never lose their emotional impact because of the personal feeling that comes through to the viewer.

There is no doubt that Bourgeois incorporates her own life into her work. In 1938 she married art historian Robert Goldwater and moved to New York City. Despite Goldwater’s contacts in the art world, she remained outside mainstream art movements.\textsuperscript{19} Bourgeois also suffered isolation and alienation as a young mother: in quick succession during the early 1940s, she gave birth to three sons.\textsuperscript{20} She now recognizes, however, that such feelings are not uncommon for women with young children. In the Femmes-Maisons (Figs. 1-4), the artist addresses these sentiments, perhaps to come to terms with them or even to expunge them from her life. Here she universalizes women’s domestic and societal roles and their place in the systems of communication.

The Femmes-Maisons depict nude female bodies fully exposed except for the houses covering their heads and sometimes their torsos. In some images the arms are trapped within the buildings; in others the arms wave or flail at the viewer. In Figure 1, a profile of a woman’s body is topped by a simple, white clapboard building that covers her head and arms and rests on the upper part of her breast. Her hair, flocked with pink, yellow, and brown, flies out of the roof top, like smoke or fire from a chimney. The woman, whose body is yellow, stands in front of what appears to be a red curtain or backdrop on which is painted a large red and white flower with a long narrow stem. Below the curtain is a pair of white legs visible from the knees down. The pale coloring of the woman-house and flower contrast with the dark background of the painting’s surface. The “housed” woman faces the flower, her hair flowing toward but not touching it, desirous but afraid of its fragile beauty. However, the exposed legs behind the curtain suggest an aspect of deception in that the flower’s beauty may be only a lure to further entrapment.

The Femme-Maison in Figure 2 is viewed frontally, her head covered with a classical structure, which, as in the first image, rests on the woman’s breasts. Although the upper part of the woman’s body and the building blend into the background, the delicately colored genitalia attract the viewer’s eye. No arms are evident and the legs are cut off at the knees, reducing the figure to a fragmented torso and adding to the feeling of dependence or lack of freedom. Here Bourgeois...
presents the female body as an object—a prisoner not only of her home or domestic sphere but also of her sexuality.

In Figure 3 the body is almost subsumed by the long, block-like building that covers her head, breasts, torso, waist, and hips. Only the genitalia suggest that the body is female. The building not only hides the body but also distorts it, making it appear unnaturally long. The three arms of this Femme-Maison protrude from the building, flailing as if trying to free the body of its prison. The legs, too, are bent and cramped in the bottom part of the painting, intensifying the feelings of anxiety and imprisonment. These emotions are heightened by the rough brushwork used on the building and in the background. This work exemplifies what Lucy R. Lippard calls the "uneasy spaces" that conjure up themes of containment, anxiety, and the desire for escape.21

The figure in the fourth Femme-Maison (Fig. 4) seems quite well integrated with her house. As in the other works, Bourgeois uses ink to outline the form of the woman and her house but leaves the figure unmolded by color. Instead of the fiery emotion conveyed by the Femme-Maison in Figure 3, this one presents a calm, composed facade. The lower stories taper smoothly into her waist, and the woman’s role as fertility figure is evident in her bare genitalia and rounded hips and thighs. The stairs leading to the door between the woman’s breasts signal accessibility without struggle. Her left arm hangs limply by her side; however, the tiny right arm is identical to the flailing one in Figure 3. Is Bourgeois suggesting here woman’s acceptance of her place in society or is she conveying the tension that arises between contentment in domestic confinement and a desire to break free of traditional roles?

The Femmes-Maisons suggest that Bourgeois did not resolve these issues in the 1940s. Her life was not grounded: for her the decade was "a period without feet."22 Wye has likened Bourgeois’s sculpture Portrait of Jean-Louis (c. 1947-49; Private Collection) to the Femmes-Maisons in that they both use “anthropomorphized architectural imagery.”23 Indeed, the figures represented in both the paintings and sculpture are recognizably human only in that they have arms or legs. Like the Femmes-Maisons, Portrait of Jean-Louis conveys instability despite the feelings of comfort commonly associated with a house. The 35-inch high painted wood figure is narrow and cylindrical, with rough holes to represent windows carved into the skyscraperlike top. Halfway down is a larger hole framed by arches scratched into the wood, signifying the foundation or entrance into the building. This structure stands precariously on two limbs that have rounded ends rather than feet. Of this sculpture Bourgeois remarked: "It wasn’t grounded. But this is a very important word, this idea of being grounded, because during that period things were not grounded."24 A year or two after the creation of the Femmes-Maisons, Bourgeois still had not found stability.25

The ambivalent messages of the Femme-Maison paintings can, perhaps, be partly explained by Gaston Bachelard, who, in his Poetics of Space (1958), discusses the various meanings of houses. They surround the inside space of the mind, he writes, and are "one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind."26 He later adds that the “room and house are psychological diagrams that
guide writers and poets in their analysis of intimacy.”27

Although Bachelard wrote his book years after the Femmes-

Maisons were created, Bourgeois’s images follow similar

ideas.26 The house typically is remembered as a source of

warmth and maternal protection. Yet for Bourgeois, at least

place of anxiety, pain, and anger. Thus for her the house held

ambivalent associations.

Bourgeois’s interest in Freud cannot be ignored, for the

relationship between mother and child has great importance

in the discussion of sexual difference in psychoanalysis.

Although the Femmes-

Maisons do not directly relate to the artist’s children, as does, for example,

Portrait of Jean-Louis, named after one of her sons, the traditional role of

the woman as homemaker and caretaker is obvious. In

Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex, the adoption of gender roles

allows the boy and girl to grow up assuming their predestined positions in

society. For Freud, the Oedipus complex set forth the structures of morality,

conscience, law, and all forms of social and religious authority.

However, all these entities cannot completely wipe out the unruly and

unpredictable unconscious, which is the source of all human desire, repressed or unrepressed.

Despite the potential destruction the uncontrolled unconscious could bring into society, Freud believed it held the key to finding ways to expose and subdue problems that arose in individuals and in society.

Where do Lacan and Bourgeois fit into this scheme? Lacan sees the unconscious as being structured like language and so turns to language as a means of probing the inner recesses of the mind. According to Freud the unconscious mind uses dreams to communicate to the conscious mind, but it couches and distorts meanings, thereby producing a series of symbols that have to be deciphered like a rebus.29 In language, real objects must be substituted by signifiers, but often this meaning is displaced through metaphor and metonymy. Thus, the very structure of language prevents clear communication and understanding. Metonymy serves only to divide and differentiate all identities, a phenomenon Lacan emphasizes by making his own writings convoluted.30

Bourgeois explores these problems through visual imagery. Her art is infused with ambiguous meanings that underlie problems of communication. The Femmes-Maisons exemplify the difficulties of communication between humans through images rather than words. Without faces, none of the women have an identity. Only the various styles of their houses differentiate them. Some figures seem to fight their containment while others accept it. In addition, while all the houses have windows and some have doors, implying accessibility, Bourgeois does not tell if the windows and doors are open or closed, locked or unlocked. Although the women’s sexual organs are exposed to whoever wishes to exploit them, their minds are closed off from all outsiders by the houses on their heads. Taken together, the images cannot help us decipher their meaning. Just as in Lacan’s metonymic chain, we are trapped in a circle of signifiers and signifieds with no single concrete meaning.

Julia Kristeva explained the semiotic as an archaic dimension of language. It is preverbal, linked to bodily contact with the mother. Only when the child is confronted by the paternal order of language is she separated from the mother. Thus, semiotic order exists prior to Lacan’s symbolic order and coexists with the pre-Oedipal stage. Art gives the semiotic freer play and, consequently, threatens the dominance of written and spoken language. The semiotic challenges all transcendental signifiers, which, in a phallocentric world, denote signs such as the Father, the Law, and God. By moving away from fixed signs, the semiotic focuses on signifiers that have ambiguous meanings.31

In addition, since the semiotic is linked with the pre-Oedipal phase and the mother, it is also connected to the feminine. This association, combined with the fluidity of meaning, directs signs toward a sort of bisexuality neither wholly masculine nor wholly feminine. Taken further, the semiotic breaks down all binary oppositions concerning power and possession in society, decentering the subject and destroying established cultural beliefs and institutions.32

Bourgeois’s art differs from that of her male counterparts in the New York art world of the 1940s and 1950s because she did not have the advantage of written language. Critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, for example, characterized the paintings of New York School artists Jackson Pollack, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko in masculine terms, focusing on the size and aggressiveness of their work. Although Bourgeois’s work had been included in journals of the proto-Abstract Expressionists, she found herself on the fringes of this group. When she turned to sculpture, she moved even further away from the Abstract Expressionist core. Works in media other than painting or created by artists other than American men with European roots were not given a place in the Abstract Expressionist movement.33

By expressing herself through art rather than language, Bourgeois circumvented the symbolic order of patriarchal society. Since language exists prior to the individual, the child who

![Fig. 5. Robert Mapplethorpe, Louise Bourgeois (1982), gelatin silver print, 20" x 16". Copyright ©1982. Robert Mapplethorpe Estate.](image-url)
has acquired language enters into a world of conventions that she has had no role in shaping.  
Although Bourgeois in the Femmes-Maisons shows the loss of control and sense of anxiety that such a situation causes in a woman, she later explores ways in which sexual difference becomes blurred.

In sculptures of the early 1970s, Bourgeois merged the sexes into forms representing both male and female genitalia. *Fragile Goddess* (c. 1970; Private Collection), a small sculpture of self-hardening clay, represents both an erect penis and a round fertility goddess. Although each entity shares the same parts, tension is present. It is an aggressive-looking work, but it also appears quite fragile, particularly at the base of the penis/neck where there are cracks in the clay. Bourgeois also searches for a resolution of sexual difference. In *Tranni Episode* (c. 1971-72; Private Collection), a hydrocal and latex work, she rests soft penis/breast forms on top of one another. The calm, flaccid appearance of the work implies a sense of comfort, if not harmony, between the ambiguous shapes. Discussing this sculpture in a 1975 interview, Bourgeois spoke of the merging of opposites and “the problem of survival, having to do with identification with one or the other; with merging and adopting the differences of the father.” In an earlier interview she stated, “We are all vulnerable in some way and we are all male-female.”

Bourgeois’s use of gender ambiguity may be not only a denunciation of phallocentric language and patriarchal society but also of Lacan’s own definition of the feminine in psychoanalysis. Lacan’s theories of absolute sexual difference are based on an inequality of the sexes that begins with the castration complex. Yet he embarked on his own psychoanalytical work by studying women hysterics, as did Freud, and applied the results to male subjects. Lacan never considers the implications of his theories for women; instead he assumes, as did Freud, “We are all vulnerable in some way and we are all male-female.”

Bourgeois, in her black, furry coat, becomes a vagina that engulfs the penis. Her devilish, even lewd, expression as she tickles the head of the penis leaves little doubt that she is in control. The image has been interpreted as one of castration; however, it can also be seen as one of protectiveness. Indeed, her figure contains the sculpture itself, as if she were protecting it from outside forces. In this photograph Mapthethorpe shows Bourgeois as a mature artist who, though she may not have resolved issues of sexual difference and problems of communication, has gone far beyond Lacan and most feminists by searching for integration of the sexes rather than separation.

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**NOTES**

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8. Both Bourgeois and Lacan were part of these circles in France. Bourgeois also knew many Surrealists in New York City during and immediately after the war. However, there is no evidence indicating that Lacan was in New York in the 1940s. Bourgeois is evasive on this issue.
17. Author’s telephone interview with Louise Bourgeois, October 1989.
18. Robert Pincus-Witten claims that Bourgeois did, indeed, have friendships with Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, but he does not substantiate this statement; see *Bourgeois Truth* (New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 1982), n.p.
19. Ibid.
20. Pels, “Search for Gravity,” 51. Interestingly, Bourgeois’s recollections of the period still seem ambivalent. To Pels she revealed memories of not being grounded, but she has told other authors, specifically Deborah Wye, that her studies at the Art Students League in the 1940s provided stability; see Wye, Bourgeois, 15.


23. Wye, Louise Bourgeois, 19, and pl. 48. See this catalogue for other works done before 1982, discussed but not illustrated here.


25. Bourgeois returned to a variation of the Femme-Maison theme in the early 1980s. Femme-Maison ‘81 (Private Collection) is a large (49 x 47 x 49½") sculpture carved of black marble. Long cylindrical forms cluster around a cliff upon which stands a rectilinear building with a gable roof. A 1983 white marble (25 x 19½ x 23”) Femme-Maison (Robert Miller Gallery, New York) shows a small building perched atop a mountain of carved drapery. Both sculptures portray the house not as a place that traps women but as an inviting shelter, protected by flexible penile forms or voluptuous drapery. The smooth solidity and volume of the marble contrast with the flatness and fragility of the paintings and offer a stability that the young Bourgeois found impossible to attain.


27. Ibid., 38.

28. Storrs notes a parallel between Bourgeois and Bachelard and suggests it as an area for further study, see “Gender and Possession,” 137.


30. Eagleton, Literary Theory, 169.


32. Eagleton, Literary Theory, 188-90.


38. Ibid., 167.

39. Ibid., 168.


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