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**Shifting Ground:
Nature and Artifice**



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reviews



WASHINGTON, DC
Louise Bourgeois
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

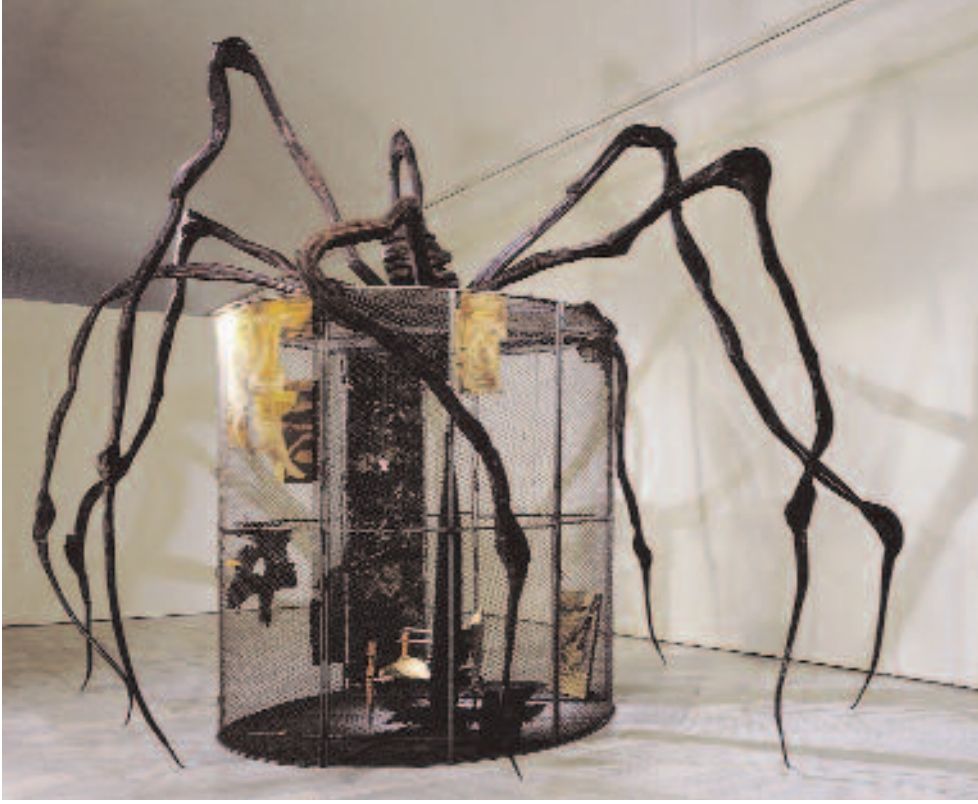
Putting *Crouching Spider* outside the entrance was a stroke of genius for the Hirshhorn. Not only did the monumental sculpture offer a perfect preview of Louise Bourgeois's 60-year survey, it was also an instant magnet. Children chased each other and posed around its spiny legs to no end. Once inside, viewers faced a fiercely personal view of art as extension of the psyche, an aesthetic practice that Bourgeois helped to popularize. We watch as she mines her childhood

to resolve issues about herself and her relationship to others. In the process, some of the darkest and most complex existential states, including fear, anger, joy, and self-doubt, are exposed and materialized into works memorable for their unabashed honesty and visceral ambivalence. As we follow the interplay between fragment and whole, past and present, we become

Above: Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (Twelve Oval Mirrors)*, 1998. Steel, wood, and mirrors, 228.5 x 243.8 x 335.2 cm.

Right: Louise Bourgeois, *Three Horizontals*, 1998. Fabric and steel, 34.6 x 182.8 x 91.4 cm.





Above: Louise Bourgeois, *Spider*, 1997. Steel, tapestry, wood, glass, fabric, rubber, money, gold, and bone, 445 x 665.4 x 518 cm. Right: Louise Bourgeois, *Cell (Choisy)*, 1990–93. Marble, metal, and glass, 306 x 170 x 241.5 cm.

voyeurs: we feel the oscillations of her life, her challenge to (often) male power figures, and her convulsive bouts of freedom.

Already in the first gallery, the suspended, polished bronze *Arch of Hysteria* (1993) commanded attention. Slick and sinewy, the headless male figure asserts Bourgeois's anti-Freudian view that hysteria can affect both sexes as a source of pleasure and pain. Equally troubling is the headless *Couple IV* (1997), installed in the last gallery, in which two figures sheathed in black cloth copulate missionary-style inside a Victorian vitrine. Off-putting yet sexy, the lace-up prosthetic reflects vulnerability and survival, as well as Bourgeois's shock over World War I disabled veterans. Black, the color of "mourning" and "resented authority," in her own words, reinforces the allusion to her father's longstanding affair with her nanny, Sadie.

In the intervening galleries, a mercurial array of works recounted



Bourgeois's avid curiosity and ceaseless experimentation. A group of wooden, Surrealist-looking *Personages* (late 1940s/1950s) underscores her interest in interactive environments and her uncanny knack

for transformation, though she denies allegiance to this or any other 20th-century art movement. In this series, she anthropomorphizes architectural elements to conjure the loved ones left behind when she

moved to New York. The carved and assembled totems also evoke attenuated needles and knives, motifs that become regulars in her repertory. This concern for fragility and precarious balance appears again in the salmon-colored *Blind Leading the Blind* (1947–49). Here, a double row of tapered planks steadied by a lintel-like structure explores modularity well before Minimalism.

The stiffness of the wooden sculptures loosens in cast latex, plaster, and plastic works from the 1960s. *Torso*, *Self Portrait* (1963–64), *Soft Landscape II* (1965), and *Le Regard* (1966) synthesize topography and the body (vegetal, animal, and human) into abstract masses of seemingly indeterminate boundaries. From this period onwards, a kindred sensuality infuses many of her marble and bronze works, mediums traditionally associated with male artists. Some, like *Germinal* (1963) and *Nature Study* (1984–94), counter with fecundity, while others, such as *Filette* (1968) and the Janus sculptures (1968), meld vaginal and phallic elements.

Bourgeois's first installation, the dark, smoldering-red *Destruction of the Father* (1974), makes a fantasy meal of the family patriarch. A breakthrough of self-actualization, the claustrophobic tableau includes rounded protuberances whose theatrics read as a bit hokey in contrast to more convincing sculptures like the bulbous *Cumul I* (1969). In this work, the mounds bracket a table decked with organic shapes, some of which resemble flesh and bones. The latter recur in *Untitled* (1996), where a coquettish black dress and underwear hang from bones on a metal stand like so many pieces of meat. Once worn by Bourgeois, these garments become surrogates in a bittersweet *vanitas*.

The sense of spectacle culminates in the monumental *Cells* from the 1990s. In *Spider* (1997), a pregnant arachnid squats protectively over a

wire-mesh cage with tapestry remnants patched onto its walls. Inside, a lone, tapestry-covered chair complements dangling bottles of Shalimar, Bourgeois's favorite perfume. Over and over, she has stated the importance of tapestry restoration, her family business, and the spider as weaver and mother figure. *Spider* boldly integrates these two aspects. While it is often hard to discern fact from myth with Bourgeois, her vision astounds. Recognized rather late in her career, when feminists, post-feminists, and Post-Minimalists embraced her, her challenge to beauty and tradition is unrelenting, and her work feels alive and natural, no matter the distortions. Above all, it is the power of her hand—the link between mind and body and the instrument of transformation—that endures.

—Sarah Tanguy

**WASHINGTON, DC AND
HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA**
Dalya Luttwak

**Katzen Arts Center, American
University Museum and Sawhill
Gallery**

"Hidden," Dalya Luttwak's provocative show at the Katzen Arts Center, exposed the rich potential of a seemingly narrow premise—the root systems of plants. Not only did roots provide a central, ambivalent image, but they also alluded to the artist herself as we sensed her working through her past and forging a new approach to her preferred medium, welded steel. Eleven sculptures and installations, all from 2008, established an immediate dialogue between nature and the outdoor sunken plaza. While the gray concrete made a perfect foil for the works' earthen palette and organic, at times riotous, shapes, the intermittent rustle of leaves played off the ongoing roar of traffic from an invisible, nearby street.

Until quite recently, Luttwak had favored hard-edged geometry and



primary colors, making works that resembled elaborate matchstick constructions. For "Hidden," she looked to nature for inspiration. A few years ago, she experienced the full force and beauty of a root ball when a silver maple, dislodged by a tornado, landed on her car. She started collecting and comparing roots, including Kentucky bluegrass, mangrove, and basil. This research led to a series of site-specific works that exploited the high walls, ground, and entrance of the Katzen's space. Increasing the scale raised the emotional barometer, and experimenting with gravity lent movement. Far from exact studies, the final compositions were full of dynamic transformations, though they maintained the rigorous craftsmanship of her earlier sculptures.

The range of gestures was exhilarating. A ganglion gone wild, *Phyllostachys Nigra (Bamboo)* scumbled a full 33 feet across the plaza, while *Cirsium Arvense (California Thistle)* straddled an upper corner. Reaching downward, its roots created an open-ended oblong that riffed on the neutral grid of the walls. *Allium Porrum (Leek—3 stages of growth)* choreographed a dense arabesque of variously proportioned seminal roots all the way to delicate, seemingly fragile root hairs. Punctuated by bulging pods, the installation reveled in subtle nuances of Indian red, sienas, and umbers and teemed with life through an infusion of cast shadows, especially visible at night. Elsewhere, *Asparagus Officinalis (Asparagus—4 stages of growth)* suggested a rope ladder anchored at the top of the wall and dangling mysteriously in the wind like an unfinished narrative. By contrast, *Palmaceae (Palm)*

Top: Dalya Luttwak, *Poa Pratensis* and *Liatris Pycnostachya*, 2008. Steel, installation view. Left: Dalya Luttwak, installation view of "Roots: The Hidden Half in Black and White," 2010.

TOP: CLAIRE BOULEAU / BOTTOM: GARY FREEBURG

offered a resting spot for leaves inside the sculpture's root ball.

Luttwak's engagement with nature is distinguished by her work's raw sensuality and enigmatic meaning. The companion catalogue is dedicated to her parents, who left the former Czechoslovakia for the Middle East at the start of World War II, and we can read the works as a loaded metaphor for exploring familial roots and seeking new soil. She recently unveiled another body of site-responsive work at the Sawhill Gallery in "Roots: The Hidden Half in Black and White." For this show, she sought to distill the formal essence of her subject; her emotional reaction to the factory-like site was validated by her experience of the world's largest aeroponic root laboratory in Tel Aviv. Luttwak's work offers comfort in the form of enduring metal and life-sustaining roots. At the same time, it haunts us with an alternate vision—that of a post-apocalyptic prison populated by dead leaves and roots of metal trees.

—Sarah Tanguy

WILMINGTON, DELAWARE

Ron Longsdorf

Mezzanine Gallery, Delaware Division of the Arts

It is surprising that an artist as young as Ron Longsdorf looks to the past for inspiration, but the past was indeed the subject of a recent exhibition celebrating his fellowship award from the Delaware Division of the Arts. Although his subject matter is nostalgic, his materials and forms are current, providing a contrast between images and content that is both fascinating and unsettling. His constructed objects range from a front porch to a sofa, from a rocking chair to a bathroom wall. Longsdorf comments in his artist statement that he is questioning the "methods and actions" of domestic spaces and personal relationships. However, the unfolding narrative

of the exhibition was that of tragic young love.

I saw our future that day set the story. This large-scale work re-constructs the front porch of a house, including the railing, in pink polystyrene. Longsdorf lights it from behind, like part of a theatrical set.



Ron Longsdorf, *I saw our future that day*, 2008. Polystyrene, wall studs, floodlights, DMX lighting system, MAX MSP software, and motion sensor, 10 x 10 x 4 ft.

The fact that it consists of raw building materials—the manufacturer's logo repeats across the surface of the polystyrene—provides a surreal quality. This becomes the set for a play in which the main character sits on a quaint front porch planning the future with his girlfriend. The setting is a long-ago, small-town America that predates Longsdorf's birth.

Your comfort subdues the pain reveals a similar sensibility. This oversized rocking chair, again constructed out of building materials (wall studs, polystyrene, and expanding foam) has an added audio component, the artist's humming voice. The chair, though built

In *Did you mean anything you said?*, a section of a wall made out of drywall mounted on wooden studs supports a roll of toilet paper that unwinds into a paper shredder. This work wittily comments on a difficult liaison through the banal devices of toilet paper and shredder. *Further and further apart*, which also has an audio component, consists of a typical student-type sofa, inexpensive, well worn, and no doubt handed down from owner to owner, but Longsdorf divides it in two with an eight-foot-high studded wall. Fiction writers are often directed to write about what they know best. Longsdorf has also taken this advice, making autobiographical art that speaks beyond its specificity to young viewers who no doubt empathize with his personal narrative of love lost.

—J. Susan Isaacs

HUDSON AND NEW YORK, NEW YORK

John Cleater and Ana Golici
Nicole Fiacco Gallery and The Elizabeth Foundation

Serious artist-in-residence programs are a blessing to adventurous artists, none more so than those run by two big international names: Kohler, the bathroom people, and Corning, the glassware giant. Both make their considerable expertise available, not to mention furnace and workshop facilities. Kohler has been doing so for more than 30 years, with a total of 500 artists, while Corning began its program in 1996 and has hosted 60 artists from more than a dozen countries.

Though not technically a sculptor, John Cleater (his many hats include architect/set designer and multimedia installation/soundscape artist) is accustomed to working with new materials like vacuum-formed or custom-bent glass and forged steel. When he arrived at Kohler for his Arts/Industry residency, he was quick to embrace the smooth sur-