

Louise Bourgeois — *Still Life.*





Fig. 1: Louise Bourgeois, *Still Life*, 1963, Wood, Plaster, Paint. 29.8 x 50.2 x 48.3 cm, RISD Museum.



Fig. 2: Louise Bourgeois: *Cell (Choisy)*, 1990-93, Collection Glenstone. Photo: Maximilian Geuter © The Easton Foundation / VEGAP, Madrid

Louise Bourgeois — *Still Life*. Catalogue Entry.

Written By **Siya Kumar**

Title	Still Life
Artist	Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010)
Date	1963
Nationality	French - American
Size	29.8 x 50.2 x 48.3 cm (11 3/4 x 19 3/4 x 19 inches)
Material	Wood, plaster and paint
Room Location	Large Metcalf Gallery
Credit	Museum Works of Art Fund
Acquisition Number	66.163

[Description of *Still Life* by Louise Bourgeois.](#)

Still Life (1963) (Fig. 1) is a thought-provoking sculpture crafted by Louise Bourgeois from wood, plaster, and paint. Measuring 29.8 x 50.2 x 48.3 cm (11 3/4 x 19 3/4 x 19 inches), the work features a surrealist composition of a bowl of fruit perched atop a breadbox, with two loaves of bread placed before it. Bourgeois abstracts the familiar still life arrangement by removing the traditional formal elements of shape, color, and texture.

The forms of the fruit, bread, bowl, and breadbox are pared-down and rounded, suggesting organic objects yet not defining their exact nature. The bowl, with its unique, nest-like shape reminiscent of a pelvic bone, sets the stage for the arrangement. The fruits inside the bowl are simple oblong spheres, while the bread is represented by deformed

hemispheres. The objects become recognisable through their relationships with one another, as the interaction between the simple forms and their placement evoke the iconic imagery associated with a bowl of fruit.

The elements are arranged in a stable triangular composition, a geometric configuration that creates a sense of order, harmony and stillness within the piece. A square slab underneath the “still life” grounds the sculpture, serving as a potential representation of a table or counter upon which the scene takes place. This creates a visually comforting and architectural structure, grounding the viewer in the familiar context of a domestic scene.

Additionally, Bourgeois employs texture to distinguish and juxtapose the character of each element, with the fruit, bread, and breadbox appearing smooth and soft, while the bowl they surround is notably rough. This contrast creates a tension between roughness and softness, yet the entire sculpture maintains a matte, chalky surface quality reminiscent of plaster - creating unity within the structure.

Bourgeois employs a similar duality in her use of color. While most of the sculpture, including the bread, breadbox, bowl, and a majority of the fruits, is rendered in a warm shade of white, two pieces of fruit are boldly depicted in black. This interplay of color contributes to a sense of suspended disbelief, challenging the viewer to question the boundaries between reality and abstraction. This also serves as a point of tension and creates a sense of rot and time in the otherwise stagnant composition.

[Provenance: Where Has *Still Life* Been?](#)

Art and Design from 1900 to Now. — RISD Museum, Providence, RI.

Jun 04, 2022 – Aug 04, 2024

Better Still: Looking at Still Life in the Museum Collection. — RISD Museum, Providence, RI.
Feb 06, 2004 – May 02, 2004

The New York School: Aaron Siskind in Context. — RISD Museum, Providence, RI.
Nov 07, 2003 – Jan 25, 2004

[About Louise Bourgeois](#)

Louis Bourgeois (1911 - 2010), a French-American visual artist whose work encompasses many mediums. She is most celebrated for her sculptures, such as her iconic pieces *Spiders* and *Cells* (Fig. 2), however her vast body of work also includes prints, illustrated books, paintings, textiles, installations and performance¹ — using every medium at her disposal. She makes use of fabric, ink, drypoint and raw materials - a motif which permeates all of her work.

Bourgeois’ work is intellectual and expressive - making her one of the most influential and acclaimed artists of the past century. Her work resists categorisation, and is associated with Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, post-Minimalism, and 1970s-era feminist art.²

Bourgeois’ work consistently explored and reconfigured ideas surrounding domesticity, motherhood, psychic pain, and sexuality.

[Context of 1963 for Louise Bourgeois \(The time during which ‘*Still Life*’ was crafted\):](#)

Her career is characterised by periods of extreme productivity,³ each being stylistically distinct from one another. These periods are intersected by quiet periods wherein she creates little to no art.

¹ Wye, Deborah. *Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait: Prints, Books, and the Creative Process*. Foreword by Glenn D. Lowry. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017, p. 09

² Rales, Emily Wei, and Ali Nemerov, eds. *Louise Bourgeois: To Unravel a Torment*. Washington: Glenstone Museum, 2017, p. 07

³ Rales, Emily Wei, and Ali Nemerov, eds. *Louise Bourgeois: To Unravel a Torment*. Washington: Glenstone Museum, 2017, p. 07



Installation view of *Lou/se Bourgeois: Recent Sculpture*, Stable Gallery, New York, 1964 (artworks © Louise Bourgeois; photograph by Rudolph Burkhard!)

Bourgeois turned to sculpture around 1947, and gave up painting and printmaking around 1950. Her first sculptures are totem-like, abstracted wood figures.⁴

Her father died in Paris in 1951, prompting a period of intense psychoanalysis wherein she creates a body of thousands of loose leaf written documents. During this time, she presented and created very little new work.⁵

Still Life is a part of the period of pieces that she created following this hiatus. This group of sculptures included traditional materials such as plaster, wood, bronze and marble, while also

including more experimental materials such as latex and resin, which could be poured. In “To Unravel a Torment,” Rales notes that this allowed Bourgeois to develop an “abstract yet visceral” sculptural vocabulary which consisted of round, bulbous forms evoking breasts, genitalia, and cell division.⁶ These sculptures mark her return to art-making and was presented in her first solo exhibition after many years at Stable Gallery, New York in 1964.⁷

Upon learning of Bourgeois’ timeline, it is clear that she makes art to understand, control, and express herself through the discovery and exploration of specific imagery. This sculpture acts as a way for Bourgeois to grapple with the death of her father

and the psychoanalysis that she ingrained herself into after his death.

Still Life is an example of Bourgeois’ exploration of gender, sex and anatomy - and her understanding of masculinity. The obscured organic forms of the fruit and bread imply femininity and breasts, while the phallic bowl resembles a pelvic bone. She nests femininity within the container of masculinity - perhaps referencing the structure of patriarchy and the way masculinity has constructed the boundaries of domestic, familial and social structures. In 1982 she writes, “There are rules of the game. You cannot have people breaking them right and left. In a family, a minimum of conformity is expected.”⁸

⁴ Wye, Deborah. *Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait: Prints, Books, and the Creative Process*. Foreword by Glenn D. Lowry. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017, p. 222

⁵ Wye, Deborah. *Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait: Prints, Books, and the Creative Process*. Foreword by Glenn D. Lowry. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017, p. 223

⁶ Rales, Emily Wei, and Ali Nemerov, eds. *Louise Bourgeois: To Unravel a Torment*. Washington: Glenstone Museum, 2017, p. 08

⁷ Wye, Deborah. *Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait: Prints, Books, and the Creative Process*. Foreword by Glenn D. Lowry. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017, p. 223

⁸ Louise Bourgeois, *Child Abuse: A Project by Louise Bourgeois*, 1982, 45, *Artforum*, New York.

The symbolism of fruit and bread is multilayered and complex. These objects are often associated with domesticity, sustenance, the human body, consumption, and the traditional roles of women in the home. There is a certain humour in the perversion of this iconic image. By choosing to depict them in a modernist sculpture, Bourgeois invites the viewer to consider the ways in which societal expectations shape our understanding of femininity and domesticity. The fruit and bread can be seen as symbols of sustenance and fertility, while the arrangement of the objects suggests a sense of balance and harmony. The artwork's simplicity and intimacy invite the viewer to reflect on their own experiences of home and nourishment. Additionally, the symbol of a still life has strong ties to the art world - and therefore seems to critique the glass ceiling faced by women artists.

"Still Life" invites comparison with other iconic works such as "Torso, Self Portrait" (1963-64), both of which reveal Bourgeois' unique approach to addressing the human form, femininity, and the complexities of identity.

She references the fixed-ness of domestic norms through architectural and gridded structures. In using geometrical structures to stabilise *Still Life*, Bourgeois questions the comfort of preexisting social structures. She also references the fixed nature of patriarchal norms. The rotting fruit trapped in the still scene suggest the destruction that exists within it, and the slow-burn pain women are subjected to.

While Bourgeois critiques domestic norms, she explains that she finds comfort in the formulaic nature of architectural spaces. In her writing, she notes that "As the architectural consciousness of the shape mounts, the psychological consciousness of fear diminishes."⁹ This implies that Bourgeois uses geometry as a means to find stability and comfort. This is further explained when she writes "There is

nothing I enjoy more than a demonstration by a + b." "It makes me feel safe."¹⁰

In conclusion, Louise Bourgeois' *Still Life* (1963) masterfully abstracts the traditional still life arrangement, using simplified organic forms and contrasting textures to evoke complex ideas about femininity, domesticity, and societal structures. Through her innovative use of materials and geometric compositions, Bourgeois invites viewers to question the boundaries between reality and abstraction, and to reflect on the psychological and social constructs that shape our understanding of identity and gender roles. By blending personal symbolism with universal themes, *Still Life* stands as a testament to Bourgeois' profound ability to intertwine intellectual inquiry with expressive artistry, making it a significant work in her illustrious career.

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Bourgeois, loose sheet, c. 1950: LB-0430

⁹ Bourgeois, in conversation with Jerry Gorovoy, 1999, as cited in Gorovoy and Danielle Tilkin, *Louise Bourgeois: Memory and Architecture*. Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 1999.

¹⁰ Bourgeois, loose sheet, c. 1950: LB-0430

