Chapter Two

*Threads, webs and narrative*
Her story has a thread, a scarlet thread, but she does not know where it is leading her. She is looking for something, but she does not know yet what it is. She is looking for some resolution to her journey, for some connection that will enable her to move on to the next chapter of her life. She is haunted by superimposed images, by palimpsests of memories.  

Throughout European folklore, there are repeated references to the Three Fates, mythological beings who spun destiny controlling past, present and future. Each person’s life is one of the Fate’s threads as it is spun, manipulated and severed. They were first called Moirae by the Greeks; then Parcae by the Romans; there was the Baltic goddess Laima and her two sisters, and then Germanic paganism told of the Norns. In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* they were the three witches. Eventually the role of the Fates diminished to that of fairy godmothers and “beliefs that their presence at a child’s birth bestowed curses and blessings which would weave themselves into the baby’s destiny still echo faintly in the *Sleeping Beauty* fairytale.”²

The word *moira* appears in the Greek dictionary to mean portion, so the name Moire refers to one’s portion of life or destiny. Each played a distinct role, Clotho was the spinner, selecting each person’s individual thread of life from her distaff and spinning it onto her spindle. Lachesis was the measurer, allotter or drawer of lots, she measured the thread of life with her rod, evaluating the length and validity of each person’s life thread. Atropos represented the inevitable ending

of life, her name means no turning aside she was the cutter of the thread, choosing the manner of a person’s death.  

“The spindle is often an axis mundi (a symbol of connection between sky and earth) and its whirling whorls serve a cosmogonic function. Plato, for example, had a vision of the great goddess Ananke, ‘Necessity’, spinning the universe; the sun, moon, and planets were her spindle’s whorls; sirens sang through the webs of time and fate that she wove, and souls endlessly moved through the strands on their way to and from death and rebirth.”

In Eastern philosophy there are other concepts about thread, specifically red: the colour of blood, passion and life. This red thread alludes to inseverable emotional connections between people that extend into infinity, beyond destiny, through past, present and future. A Buddhist story tells of a red thread that before birth is tied between people who are destined to be lovers. This concept is extended to signify the journeys that one undertakes to find deep connections and relationships with those people who are important in one’s life, not just lovers, but also family and friends. Time and events can bend, stretch and tangle the red thread but that thread can never be broken. The red thread is also seen as connecting, not just people, but also the places and moments of significance in one’s life. The red thread keeps one meeting with each moment of one’s existence the wonderful, the bland, the boring, the beautiful, the ugly, the sad and the painful. The journey of the red thread is one of beginning to understanding the complex, interwoven nature of existence.

Mythologies from diverse cultures around the world contain ideas about interconnecting threads weaving the universe together. Neit, the Egyptian goddess of creation; was the great weaver, who wove the earth and bore all the other deities, her hieroglyphic sign was the weaver’s shuttle. Inca mythology told of Mama Ocllo who first taught women the art of spinning thread and weaving. Several African cultures tell of spider characters that spin thread linking the spirit and human world. In many native North American cultures, such as the Pueblo and Navajo tribes, the Spider Grandmother is the creator and weaver of life, the great teacher and protector.

---

5 David Adams Leeming and Jake Page, "Goddess: Myths of the Female Divine" (Oxford University Press, 1994), 14.
“At a remote time, when there was no world and nothing else alive, Spider Woman thought out into space. She breathed, and sang, and thought, and spun a world into being out of the purple glow at the beginning. She spun a thread that stretched across the universe from east to west, and another from north to south… She formed a woman and placed her on earth, then a man. For each, she spun a bit of her own being, a web of wisdom and thought, so that women and men would be able to chant and sing and draw on Spider Woman’s very own wisdom… It was not long before the people forgot they each possessed a web of wisdom, connected by a strand to Spider Woman’s own web.”

There are similar stories about the Spider Grandmother in the Rio Grande Pueblo Indian tribes. They call her Thinking or Prophesying Woman and she often takes the form of a spider. She is said to have existed at the very beginning of time before any other living creatures. In the region now known as Mexico, local mythology tells of the Teotihuacan Spider Woman, who shares many traits of the Spider Grandmother. The Spider Grandmothers threads of connection are represented in the webs of Dream Catchers.

The influential contemporary artist, Louise Bourgeois, could suitably be called a grandmother spider woman, as her work explores connections between spiders and femininity, maternity, the imagination and weaving. Born, inconveniently, on Christmas day 1911, Bourgeois retells how her mother was "...very apologetic, and the doctor said, 'Madame Bourgeois, really you are ruining my festivity.' I was a pain in the derrière when I was born." From her first breath, Bourgeois has had to fight to assert her right to exist in the world. It has been a sustained battle, now at the age of 97, it is safe to say she is victorious, however just like the industrious spider that

---

6 Leeming and Page, "Goddess: Myths of the Female Divine", 29.
7 Ibid., 31.
8 Ellie Crystal, "Teotihuacan Spider Woman – Weaver Woman"
9 Ibid. Dream Catchers have ancient mythological origins representing the human connection to the Spider Grandmothers web, it is only when sleeping that one is able to see and explore her web as it is inaccessible to the conscious mind. Dream Catchers were traditionally made by the Ojibwe People as a protective charm hung above a child’s bed to catch bad dreams before they reach the child. These objects were not made to last a long time, reflecting the fleeting nature of childhood, dreams and spider webs.
weaves daily, Bourgeois similarly works in her studio six days every week. On the seventh day, she doesn’t rest, so much as trap smaller spiders in her web to examine and consume or reject them and their offerings.\(^\text{11}\)

\[\text{Fig. 11. Louise Bourgeois, Maman, 1999, steel and marble, 927 x 891 x 1023 cm}\]

Bourgeois’ largest work is titled *Maman*, meaning ‘Mother’. Over ten meters tall, created from steel and marble, it was first exhibited as part of Bourgeois's inaugural commission for *The Unilever Series* for Tate Modern's vast Turbine Hall in 2000.\(^\text{12}\)

“The spider, who protects her precious eggs in a steel cage-like body, provokes awe and fear, but her massive height, improbably balanced on slender legs, conveys an almost poignant vulnerability.”\(^\text{13}\) Dwarfed by the size of this piece many viewers find their arachnophobic fears unleashed, as though a giant spider was taking over the world! In a sense, the marble eggs have hatched into baby spiders, as the original *Maman* was cast into an edition of six bronzes, each with their own marble eggs. These editions can be found, almost at each of the four corners of the earth, in Spain,

\(^{11}\)“On Sunday she receives friends and any artist, preferably young, with the wit or temerity to call her up and cadge an invitation. She sees in each new generation something to nurture, to compete with and to learn from. ‘So what have you brought to show me?’ she asks the visitors imperiously. There is a quickness with which she gets their drift. But if she disapproves of the work, she pronounces it idiotic. She tells the artists to leave or sometimes reduces them to tears.” Ibid

\(^{12}\)This year, the original *Maman*, has been gifted to the Tate Modern by the artist and an anonymous benefactor

Korea, Canada and Japan. “No one who has stood beneath a Bourgeois spider is likely to forget it. They’re the most sensual creatures ever forged from metal.”

*Maman* is about Bourgeois’ relationship with her mother, who died when Bourgeois was a teenager. The mother spider, *Maman*, is towering, magnificent and awe-inspiring, as mothers often are to their small children. She is protecting her eggs, her children, but her long legs are thin and vulnerable. Will they be strong enough to support her and her children? Will they sustain her long enough to watch her children grow up? Perhaps Bourgeois saw her mother as a buffer between herself and her father, who still hates for his misogynistic views. She recalls her mother affectionately as her “best friend… she was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle”.

Most viewers interpret *Maman* differently, as an aggressive creature that “…must have just eaten its mate after copulation, as many female spiders do, as shown by the sac of fertilised eggs hanging from its abdomen high above the heads of the crowd.” It has been said that the artist is her own most successful subject, so perhaps *Maman*, also reflects a more lengthy narrative of Bourgeois’ own biography and her relationships with men. Significantly, her artistic career did not really take off until after the deaths of her husband and father in the early 1970s, freeing her from the usual expectations of passivity and domesticity; traditional feminine ideals and boundaries installed, we assume, by her own mother.

Today Bourgeois is internationally renowned as a “magnetic figure” for art critics and feminist historians, due to her personal themes and references to gender issues. Her confronting artwork allows the viewer an intimate glimpse of her personal

---

15 Iain Millar, "It Is Difficult to Be a Woman and Be Likeable" *The Art Newspaper*, no. 192 (2008). Bourgeois vividly recalls “A trick that her father would do, making a “model daughter” from an entire tangerine skin— and his disparaging comments when the skin is revealed to have a phallus made from the orange’s core—still wounds her into her nineties, reducing her to angry tears.”
16 Elaine Showalter, "Lumps, Bumps, Bulbs, Bubbles, Bulges, Slits, Turds, Coils, Craters, Wrinkles and Holes" *Tate etc* Autumn, no. 11 (2007).
17 Ibid.
19 Showalter, "Lumps, Bumps, Bulbs, Bubbles, Bulges, Slits, Turds, Coils, Craters, Wrinkles and Holes."
haunting memories and encourages me to consider, more closely, the currents of recollection in my own work. Indeed, Bourgeois is a spider grandmother to generations of artists. According to the Guerrilla Girls\textsuperscript{20}, “Whether she likes it or not, she’s our icon.”\textsuperscript{21} One assumes Bourgeois approves, she wore a gorilla mask to the inaugural opening of the Soho Guggenheim Museum in 1992, following the Guerrilla Girls’ successful campaign to include Bourgeois’ work in the initially male exhibition.

Bourgeois weaves a fine balance of attraction and repulsion throughout her work, casting her viewers under a spell, as though trapped and entangled in a web of recollections and nightmares. The vulnerability of her childhood memories have a fragile edge that adds to the hypnosis of viewers, engrossing them in these unfolding narratives, which seems to intimately expose the artist’s thoughts and fears. This intangible sense of emotional fragility is, in a sense, ephemeral\textsuperscript{22}.

Eva Hesse’s work explores a more material sense of the ephemeral, but like Bourgeois, her work is usually read in light of her historical persona. Hesse’s intriguing suspended spider-web-like sculptures are created from fragile, experimental often semi-transparent materials like latex and fibreglass. This translucency suggests imminent disappearance, but viewer is engaged in the present moment before disintegration. There is a surprising amount of tension in Hesse’s suspended, almost levitating rope pieces. Created just before Hesse’s death, these works convey an immediate sense of time pausing. The viewer is

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{untitled.png}
\caption{Eva Hesse, \textit{Untitled (Rope Piece)}, 1970, latex and filler over rope and string with metal hooks dimensions variable.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{20} The Guerrilla Girls are a contemporary group of radical feminist artists, first established in New York in 1985. Known for wearing gorilla costume masks, they promote the inclusion of women and ethnic groups in the visual arts.

\textsuperscript{21} O’Neill-Butler, “Spider Woman”

\textsuperscript{22} The origin of the word ‘ephemeral’ refers to a small semi-transparent insect that only lives for a very short period of time.
compelled to hold their breath, as the work seems to float weightlessly. It reminds me of the experience between waking and being awake, “full of doubt and dream… a peevish moment of wonderment as to where the world really lies.”

Often Hesse’s work entertains magical, almost fairytale-like associations, whilst hinting at a darker side of the unexpected in the everyday. The hard facts of Hesse’s biography are without an enchanted happy ending, but her life’s story adds greater potency to how her work is viewed. Like Bourgeois she had a difficult childhood and her mother died when she was young. There is much debate about the extent to which this, and her experiences as a Jew, immigrant, refugee and cancer victim, affected Hesse’s artistic pursuits. Hesse’s life was short; she died in 1970 at the age of 34. Working in a time when many female artists were openly dismissed, Hesse like Bourgeois, was compelled to fight considerably harder than her male contemporaries to have her work taken seriously. However, the autobiographical links between Hesse’s artworks and her life are more obscure than in Bourgeois’. Hesse’s written records about her processes exploring form and the possibilities of new experimental materials, opens one way of approaching her work. Today some forty years on, not all her pieces have survived, but for viewers aided by knowledge and hindsight, her work contains layered densities of narratives and memories.

Fig. 13. Kath Fries, Dancing with Silence, 2008, video still

---

23 Keri Hulme, The Bone People (Wellington: Picador, 1984), 44.
25 For more a detailed discussion see Griselda Pollock and Vanessa Corby, Encountering Eva Hesse (Munich: Prestel, 2006).
Hesse’s suspended, tangled, latex coated, dangling rope installations, are tactile gigantic interconnecting threads. The play of light and shadows add to the strange sense of scale and mythical nuance. In my work, *Dancing with silence*, 2008, a similar poetic moment is examined. A window-like grid of mirrors reflects the slow-motion video footage of a dried leaf filament, moving in the breeze whilst caught in the threads of a spider’s web. The viewer is invited to find multiple ways of looking at, or through, the image as it drifts across the wall and is reflected in the grided mirror panes on the floor. The arrested fleeting nature of the ephemeral; of a moment in the leaf’s naturally brief life cycle, creates an sense of impending loss. The viewer attempts to visually grasp the image’s various dreamlike intangible narratives, fragmented into further possibilities by the mirrors’ reflections. Each interpretation is like a spider web thread, as soon as one tries to hold, measure or pin it down it dissipates like dust in the breeze.

Fig. 14. Kath Fries, Dancing with silence, 2008, installation view, silent DVD projection and mirrors, approx 190 x 190 x 120 cm
References


