AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Emily Sullivan, Assistant Curator of Contemporary International Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, where she is working on the largest exhibition dedicated to Louise Bourgeois ever in Australia. So why don't we start with, who is Louise Bourgeois?

ES: Louise was viewed as this kind of fierce art grandmother to many generations of artists from around the world, and I think the key thing that many local and contemporary artists today keep on saying to me is that Louise is the artist who went all the way. She wasn't afraid to say the unsayable, especially when it came to topics such as the body or womanhood or her great subject or topic, particularly later on in life, which was motherhood.

AT: When we're talking about the style of an artist, I'm always curious about, what is the distinctive element or elements that tells you this is a Louise Bourgeois?

ES: I love the story that when people were viewing her shows in the ‘80s, they'd walk into the room and think that it was a group show because there was just so much variety in materials and forms. She would be working in wood and bronze, but found materials as well. When minimalism was all the rage in the ‘60s, she was returning to that great classical medium of marble, but there are key forms that you can identify with Louise's work. Of course, the beautiful spiders, the looming figures of the spiders come to be synonymous with Louise, the psychological structures known as the cells, which she made in the ‘80s and ‘90s, and then later on in life, of course, the figurative fabric sculptures that she made from her own clothes that she'd stored over a lifetime. But I think the thing I keep on coming back to with Louise is the kind of quality or reaction. It's about the feeling you get when you see her work. I think that's probably the thing that, the connecting thread through her work, her earliest works from the ‘40s to those textile works that she made right up until the end of her life at the age of 98.

AT: All right, now you mentioned spiders, which I don't know if I'm the only one whose attention got caught on that one a bit. Can you tell me about *Mamon*?

ES: Yeah, so we are fortunate enough to have the iconic sculpture *Mamon* in our forecourt, out in front of the Art Gallery's South Building. The spider was always an ode to Louise's mother, but the *Mamon* is a nine-meter tall sculpture, and it's a looming figure. It's a fierce protecting figure. It says so much about the nature of motherhood, connected to the history of Louise's parents as tapestry restorers. Her mother was a repairer and a weaver, and I think Louise loved a metaphor, and that image of the spider is something that draws from its own body to create, to build its own home. When you knock into a spider's web, it just goes about reweaving it again. There's a patience there. You know, she described the spider as soothing and patient and reliable - words that I wouldn't use to describe spiders, but you know, she drew that connection. And so *Mamon* really is the figure that loomed in her mind as a kind of psychological figure as well. There's a great quote by the film director Jane Campion, who's written in our book for the exhibition, and she says that the image of the vast female spider plays with the fear of women, of their supposed unpredictability, and their lack of rationality and desire to entrap. And I love

that image because it says so much about, you know, the desire to care for, to protect, but also this not letting go of the mother.

ATL So this is more of a *Charlotte's Web* spider than, say, a JRR Tolkien spider.

ES: Yes, although I think we are going to have a few cosplay-minded people attending at the gallery. There are a few spiders in the show. So you have the *Mamon* figure outside. You have a more maternal spider that kind of sits within the oeuvre of her cells. So it has kind of tapestry elements, more autobiographical elements attached to it. And we describe it as a more maternal spider. There's something slightly more welcoming and safe about the cell that sits within its eight legs. There's also a spider called the Crouching Spider, which you'll find down in the dark corners of the tank downstairs. The exhibition is split across two spaces, and those spaces start to play out the kind of dualities in Louise's work. And you see that with a lot of the forms where you might see one particular form in one material upstairs, and it might, you know, years later be reworked in a different material downstairs.

AT: Okay, now we have to talk about the tank real quick in this context, because I was fortunate enough to see what I believe was the first exhibition in this massive underground, I believe it was an oil bunker, essentially, that has recently been renovated and used as an art space. And when I went there, it had very creepy lighting, giant kind of terrifying-in-the-dark sculptures. It was very intimidating as a space. So when you tell me that you've put spiders down there, I have questions about the lighting this time around.

ES: Yeah, we are definitely playing with lighting and shadow in really interesting ways with Louise's sculptures. I guess that's the key thing to say, you know, Louise was a sculptor of many materials and various scales, and it really seemed like the perfect place to discover her works and to have a more intimate experience with her works as well. So upstairs in the space we're conceiving of is the daytime space, which is more, you know, it's white-lit and it's more of a classical move and journey through Louise's work. But in contrast downstairs, it is slightly darker. It's not as dark as the experience of Adrián Villar Rojas's inaugural commission for the tank. There are dark corners, there are moments of bright lights, moments of sound kind of reaching a fever pitch. And you know, there is a spider kind of looming in the corner. But there is a lot of warmth in the tank. At the heart of the space is a beautiful and iconic work called The Arch of Hysteria, which is a bronze figurative work in a gold patina. And there's a beautiful warmth kind of glow that extends, I think, from that work right to the edges. The spider isn't going to jump out at you. You can see it from afar, you can see it from across the room. And it looks quite, quite beautiful, the legs extending from the sea of columns that are in the tank. And you can see the columns, you can see the patina of the tank, which you couldn't see, you know, with the inaugural commission with Adrián's sculptures downstairs. And I really like that we've made that conscious choice to show the works in the context of the oil tank. You know, one artist described the space as a kind of archive of the 20th century. And in that sense, you know, it's a perfect pairing, I think, of Louise's works. She often used found materials. And they do feel, you know, rather at home down there. So I'm hoping it's not going to be the scary experience you're,

you're fearing.

AT: As long as you're prepared for the spiders, just know they're there. They're not going to hurt you.

ES: Forewarning, yes.

AT: Now, when we're talking about the fact that she did so many things, like she's worked in so many media and she's addressed so many topics. And you also referred to her as the grandmother figure. She did have an incredibly long career, like she lived to be almost 100. And she was still producing work like in her 90s. So I guess what changed over time, in terms of the evolution of her processes or the ideas that she was playing with?

ES: Yeah, so much changed over time in terms of her environment and the dynamics of the home. You know, Louise was a wife to an art historian. She was a mother of three boys. So she was always making in the context of keeping a home and running a home as well. But that was particularly challenging, I think, in the early ‘40s when she, you know, basically arrived from Paris and in such a short amount of time was an artist, a mother, a partner in a new place. But as with all artists, you know, the work kind of changed and responded, and was relative to the kinds of environments that she was in. So in her first time, you know, she's kind of working away on the rooftop, making these kind of tall and slender, figurative works known as the personages. They're like totem-like sculptures that you'll encounter in one of the early rooms in the section called Day. And these works are all about, you know, her feelings of homesickness. And with Louise, it's good to think of homesickness, not just in terms of her sentiments towards home France, but homesickness as a kind of universal feeling of kind of not feeling at one with the body and the mind. And these works express that really, really beautifully. I think the other interesting thing to say is that, you know, Louise's major exhibition, a major retrospective at MoMA didn't come until 1982. You know, this was 40 years after she started making. It was 10 years after a group of artists and curators, women artists and curators began campaigning to MoMA and writing to MoMA to say, you know, “we really support and suggest and recommend that you present a large scale exhibition of Louise's work.” So that came in 1982. And you know, a lot of artists kind of would have rested after that, or they would have kind of pivoted into making more kind of commercially viable art, but not Louise. It was, you know, a turning point for her. And then she started working more at scale with, you know, different kinds of materials. She also started, she moved into an old garment factory that became her studio in the beginning of the ‘80s. So that was another key thing that helped her build and work at scale. And then, you know, the final, the big final shift, I would say, came, you know, much later in life in the mid ‘90s, when she kind of went to, you know, her closets in her home and pulled down all of her old clothes of a lifetime, you know, clothes and fabrics that she hadn't used or touched, things that were in her wedding trousseau, and started to organize them by color, cut them up, special pieces were left whole. And then she would create new, new works from them, kind of figurative works. She made many fabric books. That was a moment again, where she was working with at a scale relative to kind of what her body could manage, you know, this is a

moment where she was, you know, leaving the house much less regularly and working kind of at the scale of her work desk in front of her. So the works and the materials changed a lot over time. I would say the themes and the ideas that she was expressing, I would say largely, you know, they were there from the beginning. And she was still exploring them right up until the end of her life, you know, the title of the exhibition, Has the Day Invaded the Night or Has the Night Invaded the Day? is, you know, a lovely hint at the kind of searching in Louise's work, the searching to find kind of a peace or a kind of a catharsis from the act of making for Louise, that making was, it was always a very active thing. She was always dealing with emotions of the present, even though she was often referring to her memories, she wasn't reflecting in a kind of passive way, but in a very active way to try and work through her emotions. And we see that with those early works, the personages, and you see it with the later, you know, figurative textiles that deal with themes of motherhood.

AT: So as mentioned earlier, Has the Day Invaded the Night or Has the Night Invaded the Day? is the largest exhibition of her work in Australia, but it's also one of the most extensive dedicated to a woman artist, full stop, ever presented in Australia. And you've got more than 150 works. So what was the thinking behind doing such a large-scale presentation for one artist and why her?

ES: So these major kind of summer exhibition slots are usually reserved for the great male modern artists, and that's great and important. But Louise is a different kind of master, and I think something that our new building, which we only opened 12 months ago, Sydney Modern, affords us was, you know, the opportunity to present Louise's work into very contrasting spaces and present large-scale works. There's a work downstairs called *Twosome*, which is quite a typical of Louise, and it's kind of large-scale mechanised work where one tank kind of trundles in and out of another larger tank. You know, these kinds of works we would never have been able to display in our original building. So we're excited the opportunity to present those larger works, but also the breadth of work. You know, you see a range of these kind of key bodies of work, like the personages, like the cells, like the textiles, large suites of works on paper. So it was about the depth of work, the variety of materials, and importantly, two very different ways of experiencing Louise's work, you know, understanding the, hearing that curatorial voice upstairs in day, walking through some more chronologically, and then descending downstairs to the tank where it's very much self-guided. You might hear Louise's voice coming to you from the corner of the tank. You might hear some singing, the lights will move slightly. You're kind of pushed around by your own intuition, by sound, and I think that's really important with Louise's work, having that more intimate and personal encounter.

AT: And you mentioned that she was part of the feminist reclaiming of women artists that we saw in the 1970s and '80s.

ES: She never identified with the word feminist, and I think she just didn't like to put herself into that category. But it's undeniable that she, you know, she impacted the whole generation of women and generations of women, and you know, the feminist artists of the '70s were

campaigning hard for representation of Louise. But she drew a line between herself and the great kind of feminist anarchist Louise Michel of the 19th century, and I always find that interesting. Her father's name was Louis, and we understand that she was called Louise. She was kind of the son that the father never had at that moment in life, but she always drew that connection between Louise Michel, so she's very conscious of those, I think those dialogues around female representation. She also described her mother as a great feminist. Josephine was the woman who ran the workshop at the family's tapestry restoration atelier. It was a workshop made entirely of women. Josephine supported Louise's studies, this line where she once said, you know, “you shall not touch the needle.” I think she wanted a different kind of future for her daughter. And I think, you know, those kind of foundational kind of experiences and the viewing and working with women in the workshop, they can't be undersung. And it's something that I think a lot of artists still connect with, Louise's work as someone who delved so deep or perhaps deeper than anyone into female subjectivity. I think it's what keeps her work so relevant. What I love about Louise in particular is that she's a character of light and dark. She was this fierce art grandmother, but she was also this character who was prickly, you know, her contemporaries described her as wicked. They said “she could frighten me.” She liked making trouble. And I love that. You see that in the work. You see all of those sides that warmth, that softness, but then that, that defensive side that I think is, is there in all of us. It's actually summed up in a beautiful work in the show called *Breasts and Blade* where there's this fantastic kind of bronze side of the work with, you know, multiple breasts. It's, you know, wonderful kind of curvature of the kind of landscape forms. When you come around the backside and there's a bronze kind of knife that just kind of juts out, you know, ready, ready to attack as, as an if needed. And it's a lovely image, I think,
for the, the many sides that we all have.

AT: Louise Bourgeois: Has the Day Invaded the Night or Has the Night Invaded the Day? is on at the Art Gallery of New South Wales through 28 April 2024. Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember - well-behaved women rarely make history.