

# The vocabulary of chairs

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When Katherine Hattam read my family drama in *Poppy*, she gave me a small, beautiful collage with three sister chairs and the body of the mother laid out on the dissecting table of a folding chair; the chairs were painted bold black over flesh pink, over pages of text torn from the book, over jagged-edged scraps from London maps, and snippets of photos.

As I live with several Hattams on my walls, I have become familiar with the shapes and colours and meanings of her chairs, and ten years later they still surprise me. I have watched the movement of the spaces between them expand and contract from an early assertion of one chair against another in the deadly drama of the family, to the chairs in this exhibition that stand boldly as themselves. In one register you could say it's as if each has found its place, its own story and association. In another it's as if their nature as chairs, their *chairness*, is asserting itself over the human drama they have been witness to, until they step out of the frame and onto the floor: chairs and their component parts painted in white undercoat like the early stacked wooden sculptures of Louise Bourgeois.

Katherine Hattam has been looking at Louise Bourgeois again. So have I. She's an artist with particular resonance for women whose work is grappling with the imponderabilities of working from, and with, her own interiority.

'Modern art,' Louise Bourgeois says, 'is about this painful situation of having no absolutely definite way of expressing yourself... it is about the hurt of not being able to express yourself properly, to express your intimate relations, your unconscious, to trust the world enough to express yourself directly in it. ... It is about the difficult of being a self.'

The drive behind Katherine Hattam's art has long been the search for an idiom of the self that is neither too definite nor indefinite, that acknowledges the impossibility of expression but does not surrender to it. Anyone who has followed her work, as I have, will know what I mean by the vocabulary of her chairs.

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The motif of the chair appeared early in Katherine Hattam's work as a way of enacting a private and largely interior drama: the wing-backed father chair, the round-backed

mother chair, the upright Krimper chair Katherine did her homework in, the rivalrous sister chairs. In the late 1990s Hattam produced 'The Return of the Repressed', a series in various media – oils, gouache and pastel, etchings – which made a bow to psychoanalysis with its title. Chairs were pushed against each other, heavy in blue and black, dark reds; they jostled for position in the claustrophobic environment of the Victorian house of her childhood. Behind the private imagery of ornate bannisters and newel posts, lay the power of her artist father, and the masculine names of the artists who surrounded her as a child. She grew up in the shadow of modernist figures who, for the artist daughter, were both real, very real, and also symbolic. 'A woman has no place as an artist.' Louise Bourgeois says, 'until she proves over and over that she won't be eliminated.'

The history of women as artists can be written, and often is, as a chronicle of elimination and resistance; the more challenging question is what women do next. Even as Hattam's chairs asserted themselves against the men of her youth, and her own loved father, there were signs of what was to come. In an etching from the 1999 series 'In My Father's House', the Krimper chair floats free with only the top of the newel post visible against a background borrowed from Grace Cossington Smith's *The Sock Knitter*, connecting her to a different lineage, a different inheritance, and a different future.

The chairs in this exhibition are the work of a woman who knows the private and familial shape of the battle not to be eliminated and is moving into the next phase of her work. The wing-backed chair reappears but all that remains of the father's house is the vent high on the wall where air can come in; there are signs of integration as the chair is seen more from the perspective of form than family. In *Blue Armchair* (2001), painted over an 1980s work, the gouache bleeds red from the antimacassar and drips along the base of the painting. In *In My Mother's House* (2001) the two parent chairs float in a wash of strong rich red, their forms melting into the background, studies in form and colour. There is a sense of resolution in these paintings. The chairs haven't changed, but Hattam's idea of them, her perspective and viewing angle, have.

But most of the chairs in this exhibition are from the kitchen. *The Yellow Kitchen Chair* (2000), an etching, is placed firmly on the plain boards of the house of the present. In the large oils there is space around the chairs; the claustrophobia is gone. Electrical cords link the world of the chairs to the world of communications; and link the inhabitants of the house to each other, their feet stepping nimbly over familiar patterns on every floor.

In the vocabulary of Hattam's chairs, the autobiographical is entwined with the symbolic. No longer emblematic of the past, or no longer simply so, the chairs from this exhibition come from, and give shape to, a full and complex present. They are exhibited as her youngest child finishes school. Louise Bourgeois has said that art was a 'privilege given to her' and that she had to pursue it 'even more than the privilege of having children'. Hattam does not take this to mean she let art keep her from her children in the way men have allowed children to be kept from their art; a more pertinent resonance for her is that when a woman becomes free, or freer, to pursue *the privilege of art*, she does so with an intensity that knows what it is to be interrupted. And she incorporates that knowledge into her art. Bourgeois, as she points out, has had four decades as an artist, twice the years given to the primary task of raising children.

As Katherine Hattam's iconography of the self has become both more fluid in its meaning and more pared back in its form, the chairs have lost the closeness of attachment to an evoked individual. These kitchen chairs are not identified with fixed positions in the family. Some come forward, others recede; ringing the changes, they move between standing alone and standing together; there is no hierarchy. Hattam's sure-footed drawing lets them stand more and more for themselves until they step out of the frame and onto the floor: found objects, sculptures, solid as chairs, yet cut in ways that make them unusable as chairs, their sizes deceptive, chairness without utility, chairs removed from personality and the particularity of personal bodies. Freed from the canvas, they say something about their own materiality, as well as about the dysfunctional tendencies of families. 'When you go from painting to (sculpture),' Louise Bourgeois has said, 'it means you have an aggressive thought. ... I became a sculptor because it allowed me to express ... what I was embarrassed to express before.'

While Hattam's chairs have loosened their connection to particular individuals, they have retained their association with the body, the bodies that sit on them, use them, paint them, cut them. It's almost as if the chairs become the body, or stand in for the body, the *bodyness* of bodies. Paint drips across the chairs, marking them them as fluids and flowings and dripping mark the body; flecks of pastel mark the chairs as life marks us. They are breathing, living chairs, their painted surface taut and agile; they are chairs that embody the experience of the woman as artist and mother. To quote Louise Bourgeois again: 'Content is a concern with the human body, its aspect, its changes, its transformations, what it needs, wants and feels ... All these states of being, perceiving and doing are expressed by processes

that are familiar to us and that have to do with the treatment of materials, pouring, flowing, dripping, oozing out, setting, hardening, coagulating, thawing, expanding, contracting. ...'

The chair is a pliable metaphor for the woman as artist. The kitchen chair in its straight-forwardness belies the charge of feeling that comes with the domestic, the snares and pleasures of family life. Its hard surfaces know its chips, its drips. It is a vertical image for the horizontal experience of psychoanalysis, that most mysterious of processes that deals in the daily and the ordinary, yet changes our interior world in profound and inexpressible ways. Many of the works in this exhibition are painted over old work, a ground of past experience out of which retrievals and reconstructions are possible, an echo of the past reconfigured with new paint dripping down their still visible edge, flecks of pastel, colours full of light. In some a single light bulb hangs, a point of illumination, one that owes more to Jasper Johns and Philip Guston than to Louise Bourgeois. It's as if the artist is paring her private iconography down to its essentials. A vocabulary of chairs.

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**Author's note** Quotations from Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father: Reconstruction of the Father: Writing and Interviews, 1923-1997*, (ed. Marie-Laure Bernadac & Hans-Ulrich Obrist), Violette editions, London, pp 166-7, 97, 164, 76  
The quotation about moving from painting to sculpture comes from Joan Acocella, 'The Spider's Web: Louise Bourgeois and her art', *New Yorker*, 4 February 2002