

*Femme Maison: Louise Bourgeois,  
the Norlyst Gallery, and Feminist Surrealism  
in America, 1943–1947*

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The little-known Norlyst Gallery created an important context for the promotion of surrealist women artists in the United States. Unlike most other galleries in the 1940s, the Norlyst was owned and operated by artists—Elenore Lust and Jimmy Ernst—who endowed the enterprise with an experimental vision and agenda. From its opening in March 1943 to its last show in May 1949, the Norlyst combined social consciousness with European avant-garde art and the American fantastic. This essay, the first history of the Norlyst, is structured in three sections: an introduction to the protagonists of the Norlyst, an overview of its exhibition program, and an analysis of its exhibition of surrealist women artists in America, with Louise Bourgeois discussed as a case study of how the Norlyst distinguished itself from other New York galleries of the time, especially Peggy Guggenheim’s *Art of This Century*.

The Norlyst and Bourgeois exemplified some of the characteristics of the second wave of surrealism in the United States, during and after World War II, with its mood of existential gravity and new thinking that the amplification of women’s voices could counteract masculine militarism. As André Breton wrote in *Arcane 17*:

“This crisis is so acute that I can see only one solution: the time has come to value the ideas of women at the expense of those of men, the failure of which is revealing itself so tumultuously today. It is up to artists, in particular—if only as a protest against this scandalous state of affairs—to ensure that all that stands out in the feminine system of the world predominates over that of the masculine system.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 André Breton, *Arcane 17* (Paris: Union Générale, 1965), p. 62 (translation mine).

Embodying this mandate, the Norlyst supported little-known contemporary women artists, many of them working in the mode of surrealism. By reconstructing the activities of the Norlyst, we can trace its impact on the expansion of surrealism in America and its convergences with feminist positions in contemporary art.

### Origins of the Norlyst Gallery and its place in surrealist New York of the 1940s

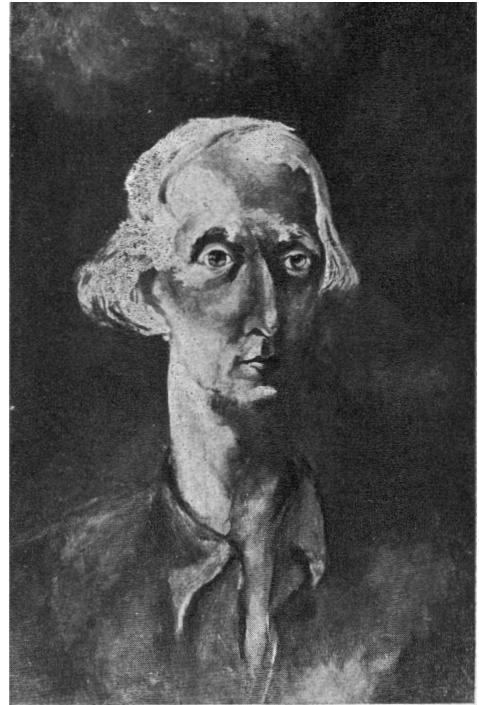
Elenore Lust and the Norlyst Gallery rarely appear in histories of the movement or the period.<sup>2</sup> Lust is referred to as a “girl” in Peggy Guggenheim’s memoir, and “Elenor” in Jimmy Ernst’s memoir.<sup>3</sup> The indexes of both books omit her entirely. What we do know about her biography is sourced in several dozen personal documents and newspaper clippings in her archive.<sup>4</sup> Lust, born in Indiana in 1909 and raised in Chicago, was brought up in an artistic household—her mother being an artist and friend of Louise Nevelson—and went on to pursue a career in the arts, earning a BA from New York University in 1935. She continued her artistic training at the Art Students League, studying under Russian-born cubist Morris Kantor and Vaclav Vytlačil, who was one of the first American followers of Hans Hofmann. According to her résumé, Lust exposed herself to a range of influences, studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw on a fellowship from the New York-based Kosciuszko Foundation in 1938, and with Arshile Gorky in New York and Diego Rivera in Mexico. Contemporary sources describe her as unconventional and irreverent. In one anecdote, she enrolled her large sheepdog in the Art Students League because it was not allowed to accompany her.<sup>5</sup> By the early 1940s Lust had earned a modest reputation as a decorative muralist and sharp-eyed portraitist. Painting in a whimsical style with elongated lines recalling the work of Marie Laurencin, Lust’s subjects ranged from landscapes to artists and children. She played an active role in the National Association of Women Artists (NAWA), which advocated for gender equality, and won several commissions and prizes. Lust injected a psychoanalytical strain of thought to

2 The only notable discussion of the Norlyst Gallery appears in Martica Sawin, *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

3 Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century. Confessions of an Art Addict* (New York: Anchor Books, 1980), p. 223; Jimmy Ernst, *A Not-So-Still Life. A Memoir* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), p. 231.

4 Most of the information presented here derives from the Elenore Lust papers held in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, and the memoir of Jimmy Ernst, and is corroborated with other archival and published sources when possible.

5 Ernst, *A Not-So-Still Life* (note 3), p. 231.



113 Elenore Lust, *Portrait of Max Ernst*,  
ca. 1942, Washington, DC, National  
Museum of Women in the Arts,  
reproduced in *The Art Digest*,  
December 15, 1943, p. 23.

NAWA when she presented a talk titled “The Unconscious, Color and Forms in Painting.”<sup>6</sup> Still, she aspired to make a larger impact on art and society.

The life of Lust’s collaborator and lover, Jimmy Ernst, is more well known because of his own career as a painter, and his famous father. Ernst was born in Cologne in 1920, the son of artist Max Ernst and art historian and journalist Luise Straus. He emigrated to the United States in 1938 and later became part of a welcoming committee of sorts for the surrealists who began arriving in New York after the fall of France. His father’s then wife Peggy Guggenheim hired Jimmy to be her secretary to assist in cataloguing her collection and planning for her gallery Art of This Century. At this point Ernst was still quite young, in his early twenties, with interests in publishing, design, and painting. Despite working at the center of the New York art world, he wanted to leave the “family business” and forge his own creative legacy.<sup>7</sup>

The lives of Elenore Lust and Jimmy Ernst intersected in the spring of 1942, when Max Ernst became infatuated with Lust. Peggy Guggenheim must have been annoyed, and wrote an unflattering portrayal of

6 Annual Exhibition of the National Association of Women Artists, American Fine Arts Galleries, New York, April 1943.

7 Ernst, *A Not-So-Still Life* (note 3), p. 229.

Lust in her memoir: “A very wild and crazy girl, who was either perpetually drunk or under the effects of Benzedrine. She was very funny, quite pretty, and full of life; but she was terribly American, and at that time seemed to be nearly off her head.”<sup>8</sup> It’s unclear how they met or how long the affair lasted, but Lust did manage to paint an extraordinary portrait of Ernst (fig. 113), which might have been the pretext for their involvement. According to Jimmy, Max claimed she was the best portrait painter in America, and invited her to work in a nearby studio in Wellfleet on Cape Cod, Massachusetts.<sup>9</sup> The oil on canvas captures the magnetic artist’s angular features and riveting gaze, seeming to illustrate Guggenheim’s observation that when Max was excited about a woman “his eyes would nearly pop out of his head with desire.”<sup>10</sup> The relationship seems to have ended by the time that Peggy joined Max in Cape Cod, and in an oedipal twist, by the end of the summer Jimmy became Elenore’s lover.

Lust also painted Jimmy’s portrait with an “assertive” row of street-lights that he especially liked, perhaps as a metaphor for a new path of illumination.<sup>11</sup> That year Jimmy moved into Elenore’s apartment on Central Park South and set up a painting studio.<sup>12</sup> Theirs was a mutually beneficial relationship. He gained personal independence with her support, and she acquired contacts to elite artists through his connections. They were passionate about the liberating qualities of surrealism, but both seem to have felt, in Ernst’s words, “not important enough” to be considered part of the movement’s inner circle.<sup>13</sup> Lust had recently divorced her stockbroker husband and had some means at her disposal. And Ernst had time on his hands after he quit *Art of This Century* in January 1943. According to Ernst, it was because of the emotional strain from the breakup of Guggenheim and his father, who had fallen in love with Dorothea Tanning.<sup>14</sup> According to Guggenheim, Ernst quit during the jurying for the gallery’s “Exhibition by 31 Women,” apparently out of concern that Lust’s submission would be rejected.<sup>15</sup> Soon after, she took matters into her own hands and opened a gallery to create opportunities for unknown artists.

8 Guggenheim, *Out of This Century* (note 3), p. 223.

9 Ernst, *A Not-So-Still Life* (note 3), p. 230.

10 Guggenheim, *Out of This Century* (note 3), p. 223.

11 Lust’s portrait of Jimmy Ernst was shown in the 1943 Annual Exhibition of the National Association of Women Artists, New York, and singled out for praise in *Art Digest*. See M.R. [Maude K. Riley], “Women Artists Hold 51st Annual Exhibition,” *Art Digest*, April 15, 1943, p. 12. Lust included both portraits in her solo show at the Norlyst Gallery in December 1943. See “Elenore Lust on Her Own,” *Art Digest*, December 15, 1943, p. 34.

12 Ernst, *A Not-So-Still Life* (note 3), p. 238.

13 Ernst, p. 234.

14 Ernst, p. 238.

15 Guggenheim, *Out of This Century* (note 3), p. 233.

In early 1943, Lust rented a rundown first-floor loft on a commercial block at 59 West Fifty-Sixth Street in midtown Manhattan. Ernst installed and repaired a good deal of the storage racks, lighting, and walls, and the young American artist Charles Seliger helped with the painting. The name of the gallery, Norlyst—an abbreviation of Elenore Lust's own name—was one that she used to sign her paintings, such as her portrait of Max Ernst, and asserted her identity as the owner, though the gallery was commonly associated with her much younger partner with a famous name. According to Ernst, the do-it-yourself Norlyst aimed to be financially sustainable by borrowing work by well-established artists and selling affordable work by emerging artists.<sup>16</sup> There are scant extant sales records however, so it is impossible to determine whether this business model succeeded. The Norlyst aimed to be a less rarefied and more community-oriented version of Art of This Century, combining its forward-thinking aesthetics and provocative installations with the values of access, education, and social justice. Yet, unlike Guggenheim's gallery, which segregated abstraction and surrealism in separate galleries, the Norlyst mixed styles and media in surprising juxtapositions, including exhibitions of photography and other forms of visual and vernacular culture.

Lust and Ernst's own varied professional experiences fostered the Norlyst's open-minded program. At the same time that she ran the gallery, Lust worked as an art educator, creating an art therapy program in the psychiatric department of Mount Sinai Hospital and teaching art at the Brooklyn Museum Art School and the progressive Elisabeth Irwin High School (a.k.a. The Little Red School House). The gallery exhibited art by children, including a show of childhood drawings by Philip Evergood and another of paintings by six-year-old Michael Conrad that was written up in the *New Yorker*.<sup>17</sup> The Norlyst also hosted didactic shows arranged by the Council Against Intolerance in America.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile Ernst worked for Warner Brothers as an assistant in the advertising department, and used images from a Norlyst exhibition of post-World War I German rearmament posters to promote the Hollywood film *Hotel Berlin*. The Norlyst played to a wartime audience eager for entertainment by exhibiting popular culture, such as actress Paula Laurence's wire caricatures, George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat*, and Crockett Johnson's *Barnaby* cartoons from the left-wing daily

16 Ernst, *A Not-So-Still Life* (note 3), p. 240.

17 Leslie Norris and John McCarten, "Young Master," *New Yorker*, November 8, 1947, pp. 26–27.

18 The first in the series of shows, "The Negro in American Life," was held at Art of This Century in 1944. Subsequent exhibitions at the Norlyst included "The Jew in American Life" (October 1945) and "Tolerance Can Be Taught" (January 1947).



114 Photographer unknown, left to right: Frederick Kiesler, Paula Laurence, Jimmy Ernst, unknown, Elenore Lust, and Crockett Johnson at the Norlyst Gallery, ca. 1943. Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art.

newspaper *PM* (fig. 114). The Norlyst also presented live art, such as jazz jams and Joseph Cornell’s “Film Soirée”—a screening of his collection of trickfilms and nickelodeon shorts.<sup>19</sup> Lust and Ernst looked beyond the realm of fine art to exhibit a wide range of visual and material culture.

Where does the Norlyst fit in to the history of surrealist art in America? An answer could begin with its midtown location. The Norlyst was several blocks from the commercial gallery district of East Fifty-Seventh Street, yet strategically positioned within a lively nexus of surrealist New York. André Breton’s studio apartment was a few doors down, at number 45.<sup>20</sup> Chez Larré, a popular French restaurant where Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, and David Hare planned *VVV*, and Breton met Elisa Claro, was located across the street at number 50. To join the creative ferment of these nearby interactions, Lust and Ernst attempted a splash for the Norlyst’s first show, “Adventures in Perspective.” They ran ads in the *New York Times*, *View*, *Cue*, and other

19 Polly Koch and Ecke Bonk, *Joseph Cornell/Marcel Duchamp ... in resonance* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 1999), p. 288.

20 Breton moved into this apartment around October 1942 after he and Jacqueline Lamba separated. He remained there until around June 1945. Thanks to Fabrice Flahutez for clarifying this chronology.



publications, some bearing the cheeky tagline, “We know what’s going on, do you?”<sup>21</sup> The press release insisted that the gallery was “unprejudiced” and open to “free art expression.”<sup>22</sup> The show included early public displays of paintings in the style of surrealism by future abstract expressionists, including Mark Rothko’s *Oedipus*, Adolph Gottlieb’s *The Embrace*, and William Baziotès’s *Leonardo da Vinci’s Butterfly*. There were also *objet trouvé* constructions like Joseph Cornell’s *Soap Bubble Set* and Louise Nevelson’s *Napoleon*. Following this show, the Norlyst became a hangout for Americans on the fringes of surrealism and presented a handful of notable solo painting exhibitions by émigrés and American surrealist artists, including Jimmy Ernst, Boris Margo, and Gabor Peterdi, who were at odds with, or not fully embraced by, the surrealist movement. Lust also threw parties in her apartment, where Nevelson recalled running into Mondrian.<sup>23</sup>

One time that the Norlyst borrowed work from a major surrealist, it gained a public relations coup while confirming its renegade status. Ernst convinced Los Angeles-based Man Ray to hold a small show at the Norlyst, abetted by Duchamp who encouragingly wrote, “[The] gallery is in a very good location and very popular with the small collector.”<sup>24</sup> Man Ray agreed, and the Norlyst placed its largest-ever ad in *View*, with the text “Recent Drawings, Photographs, Watercolors by Man Ray,” accompanied by a small image of the artist’s photograph *Self-Portrait with Half Beard* (1943).<sup>25</sup> But, in the end, apparently for spatial reasons, Man Ray’s watercolors and drawings were installed in the smaller room, and his photographs and rayograms appeared in the main room alongside work by six other artists—Erwin Blumenfeld, Joseph Breitenbach, Alan Fontaine, David Hare, George Platt Lynes, and Rolf Tietgens—in a group show of experimental photography titled “Captured Light.”<sup>26</sup> Lust attempted to reassure Man Ray that it was still his show, because “these other men are definitely derived from your

21 *VVV*, no. 2–3 (March 1943), p. 142.

22 “New Art Gallery to Open in New York City,” press release, March 1943, Elenore Lust papers (note 4).

23 Louise Nevelson, *Daums + Dusks* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976), p. 90.

24 Francis M. Naumann and Hector Obalk, eds., *Affect/Marcel: The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 237.

25 The advertisement appeared in *View*, no. 3/4 (December 1943), p. 138. The photograph had been reproduced in an earlier issue with the second part of his irreverent essay “Photography Is Not Art,” *View*, no. 3/3 (October 1943), pp. 77–78, 97.

26 The show opened in December 1943. The second “Captured Light” exhibition opened in June 1944 and presented an expanded field of twenty photographers that included Carlotta Corpron and Ruth Bernhard, paired with contemporary paintings. The third “Captured Light” opened in January 1945 and presented experimental work and documentary images from the Photography department of the American Women’s Voluntary Services. Lust later opened a dedicated photography gallery space, one of the first in New York City. Indian filmmaker D. R. D. Wadia received a notable early show in this space.

work.”<sup>27</sup> But the argument fell short. Some months later, Man Ray wrote dealer Julien Levy, “[I]t was the nicest piece of sabotage I have ever suffered.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, an estimated 1,000 people visited during the two-week run.<sup>29</sup> Such impudent moves confirmed perceptions of the Norlyst as a scrappy operation that was no competition at all for the major New York galleries dealing with surrealist artists.<sup>30</sup>

### Support for women artists

Perhaps the most significant legacy of the Norlyst was its promotion of women artists. Its opening show “Adventures in Perspective” affirmed this commitment, with twelve women among the fifty artists. Over its six-year run, the Norlyst presented solo shows by at least forty-nine women like Louise Nevelson, Louise Bourgeois, Jacqueline Lamba, and Lotte Jacobi, and included many more in group exhibitions. These artists worked in diverse movements and styles, among them surrealism, abstraction, social realism, and folk art, and media like textiles and photography. To clarify the profile of the women artists supported by the Norlyst, it is useful to consider the eight artists to have shown in both the Norlyst and one of the two all-women shows at Art of This Century: Virginia Admiral, Louise Bourgeois, Ronnie Elliott, Fannie Hillsmith, Jacqueline Lamba, Anna Neagoe, Louise Nevelson, and Janet Sobel. While they were peripheral figures in Art of This Century, the Norlyst gave solo shows to six of them. These artists created work stimulated by the mythopoetic and automatist tools of surrealism yet remained outside the market for surrealist art in America. Most were artists like Lust herself, who reacted to surrealism in their own way, rejecting its literary, allusive quality and seeking a more abstract visual structure. The Norlyst specialized in giving women their first solo shows and boosting their professional and commercial prospects. Exhibitions by Nevelson and Lamba, in particular, demonstrate how the Norlyst furnished an alternative space for the commingling of surrealist and feminist sensibilities.

Long interested in esoteric art and mystical thought, Nevelson tuned into a new consciousness then infiltrating New York in the early 1940s.

27 Letter from Elenore Lust to Man Ray, January 12, 1944. Man Ray letters and album, Getty Research Institute, Santa Monica, California. Thanks to Martin Schieder for sharing a copy of this letter.

28 Letter from Man Ray to Julien Levy, October 4, 1944. Julien Levy Gallery records, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Thanks to Miriam Cady for providing a scan of this document.

29 Bruce Downs, “Exhibit of the Month. Captured Light: Experimental Photography,” *Popular Photography*, September 1944, pp. 32–33, 95–97.

30 Julien Levy called it a “bargain basement.” Ernst, *A Not-So-Still Life* (note 3), p. 242.





115 Photographer unknown, view of the exhibition “C\*I\*R\*C\*U\*S” at the Norlyst Gallery, 1943. Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art.

“It was almost like you were breathing the air of surrealism,” she said.<sup>31</sup> Nevelson became a connoisseur of the bizarre and disregarded, famously discovering an ornately decorated shoeshine stand and informing Museum of Modern Art director Alfred H. Barr Jr., who borrowed it for a festive Christmas display in the lobby, justifying its inclusion as a surrealist object.<sup>32</sup> Around the same time, Nevelson began to construct surrealist found-wood assemblages. Her dealer, Karl Nierendorf, disliked their rough facture, however, calling the works “refugees from a lumberyard.”<sup>33</sup> Of a different mind, Lust and Ernst included one of them in their opening exhibition and a month later presented Nevelson’s first exhibition of found-wood assemblages. Titled “C\*I\*R\*C\*U\*S,” the environmental installation included Nevelson’s figures, vintage French and American circus posters, sand and marbles on the floor, and recorded band music (fig. 115).<sup>34</sup> A sculpture of a clown presided over

31 Nevelson, *Dawns + Dusks* (note 23), p. 88.

32 A photograph and excerpt from MoMA’s press release appeared in *VVV*, no. 2–3 (February 1943), pp. 84, 90.

33 Ernst, *A Not-So-Still Life* (note 3), p. 242.

34 “Circus,” press release, April 1943. Elenore Lust papers (note 4). The posters were borrowed from the Levi Berman collection, which was later donated, in 1964, to the now defunct Washington Gallery of Modern Art. See, for example, Edward Alden Jewell, “Art World Victim of

the group of sculptures representing animals, trapeze artists, and other big top denizens. Visitors were encouraged to interact with the pieces, which had movable parts, audio components, and flashing light bulb eyes, ostensibly for therapeutic and educational purposes. Nevelson's display of disparate objects and materials, arranged to jar new psychic connections, may have been inspired by the "First Papers of Surrealism" exhibition at the Whitelaw Reid Mansion, or the kinetic gallery in *Art of This Century*. Though no works sold, the project confirmed Nevelson's interest in the visual, non-narrative aspects of surrealism, and she worked with greater formal concision on a new series of abstract wood constructions, which Nierendorf presented the next year.

Like Nevelson, who had divorced in 1941 after a long separation from her husband Charles Nevelson, Jacqueline Lamba strove to emerge from a failing marriage, in her case, to Breton. She had studied at the *École de l'Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs* and the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* in Paris and established an artistic reputation through her involvement in several major international surrealist shows. They had arrived in America in July 1941 and Lamba, who was fluent in English, expanded her social circle in New York. Her growing confidence allegedly irritated Breton, and they separated in fall 1942.<sup>35</sup> During her decade in America, Lamba began to paint larger canvases in a biomorphic style, presenting this new work in *Art of This Century's* opening show and "31 Women." But it was the Norlyst that mounted Lamba's first solo exhibition, in April 1944. According to her friend Isabelle Waldberg, Lamba was excited by the opportunity and determined to speak in her own voice, even if "women do not have a chance in life."<sup>36</sup> In advance of the exhibition, a full-page photo of Lamba ran in *VVV*, presenting her as an autonomous artist and a pioneer of the subjective abstract imagery that became the basis of abstract expressionism.<sup>37</sup> The opening was crowded, as the surrealists celebrated the public accomplishments of an overlooked one of their own. Included in the exhibition were eleven oil paintings, among them the ethereal abstractions *In Spite of Everything Spring* (fig. 116) and *Behind the Sun*. She also showed a pastel and four drawings, one of which was sold to Julien Levy.<sup>38</sup> In a statement published in the brochure, she espoused a controlled use of automatism to

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Circus Fever," *New York Times* (April 23, 1943), p. 13.

35 Salomon Grimberg, ed., *Jacqueline Lamba: In Spite of Everything, Spring*, exh. cat., East Hampton, Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center (New York: Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, 2001), pp. 20, 91.

36 Letter from Isabelle Waldberg to Patrick Waldberg, March 15, 1944, in Grimberg, *Jacqueline Lamba* (note 35), p. 23.

37 *VVV*, no. 4 (February 1944), p. 17.

38 Invoice from the Norlyst Art Gallery, April 26, 1944. Julien Levy Gallery records (note 28).



116 Jacqueline Lamba, *In Spite of Everything, Spring*, 1942, oil on canvas, 114 × 154.4 cm. Private collection.

attain formal coherence: “It is necessary to eliminate with increasing severity everything which does not aim at the *direct* realization of this emotion and at its *objectifications*.”<sup>39</sup>

#### Case study: Louise Bourgeois

Over the course of 1945 the climate around surrealism began to change in New York. *VVV* ceased publication and *View* became a general-interest cultural magazine. Germany surrendered in May and the émigrés began returning to Europe. That summer Jimmy Ernst and Elenore Lust ended their relationship. He moved out and she took sole responsibility for the Norlyst, repositioning the gallery as a locus for artists melding automatism and abstraction, an emerging style also promoted by influential new gallerists Betty Parsons and Samuel Kootz. In late 1945 and early 1946, Lust placed ads in three issues of *View* that announced the Norlyst as a source of surrealist and “sur-abstract”

<sup>39</sup> Jacqueline Lamba, trans. Lionel Abel, in Elenore Lust, ed., *Jacqueline Lamba*, exh. cat., New York, Norlyst Gallery (New York: Norlyst Gallery, 1944). See Elenore Lust papers (note 4).

paintings by Jimmy Ernst, Anna Neagoe, and Nemesio Antunez.<sup>40</sup> The Norlyst increasingly presented solo shows of female artists who worked in Stanley William Hayter's print workshop Atelier 17, and explored the techniques of surrealism and imagery in abstract, biomorphic, and mythical patterns. It was at this time that Lust began to present the art of Louise Bourgeois.

A review of Bourgeois's career in the 1930s and 1940s confirms her stylistic evolution that bridged the psychological underpinnings of surrealist art and the symbolism of the American environment. Bourgeois was born in France in 1911 and studied math and art at the Sorbonne. Starting in 1933 she apprenticed in various ateliers, and in 1936 took a job managing painter Yves Brayer's studio and moved into an apartment at 31 rue de Seine. Coincidentally, Breton opened the Galerie Gradiva on the ground floor of the same building the next year. Bourgeois was too shy to approach any of the surrealists coming and going, but she paid close attention and stored up impressions and resentments.<sup>41</sup> After moving out of the building she maintained a keen interest in surrealism. In early 1938 the "Exposition internationale du surréalisme," with its central hall of disquieting mannequins at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts, must have made an impact on Bourgeois, and she discussed it with Brayer weeks later.<sup>42</sup> She disdained the "theatricality" of the surrealists and other artists who wanted to be fashionable, critiquing surrealism as dealing only with "literary problems" and not "plastic problems."<sup>43</sup> Bourgeois preferred the discipline and structure of Picasso.<sup>44</sup>

That spring she also began to purchase prints and drawings at auction, selling them in a space within her father's tapestry shop on boulevard Saint-Germain. There she first met American art historian Robert Goldwater. Bourgeois described their courtship: "In between conversations about surrealism and the latest trends, we got married."<sup>45</sup> In October 1938, Bourgeois sailed to the United States to meet Goldwater, who had already returned for the start of the fall semester at New York University, where he was then an instructor. In New York and their summer residence in Easton, Connecticut, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, they socialized with many surrealists and other modernists,

40 *View*, no. 5/5 (December 1945), p. 18; *View*, no. 5/6 (January 1946), p. 18; and *View*, no. 6/2–3 (March–April 1946), p. 49.

41 Robert Storr, *Intimate Geometries. The Art and Life of Louise Bourgeois* (London: Monacelli Press, 2016), p. 74.

42 Letter from Louise Bourgeois to Colette Richarme, March 7, 1938, in Louise Bourgeois, *Louise Bourgeois. Destruction of the Father Reconstruction of the Father. Writings and Interviews 1923–1997*, Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist, eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), p. 27.

43 Letter from Bourgeois to Richarme, August 6, 1939. See Bourgeois, *Louise Bourgeois* (note 42), p. 35.

44 Louise Bourgeois, diary note, March 6, 1939. See Bourgeois (note 42), p. 40.

45 Letter from Bourgeois to Richarme, September 1938. See Bourgeois (note 42), p. 30.



especially Masson, Duchamp, and Breton. She admired their ideas, and some of them supported her projects, but still she did not personally like many of her artistic elders.<sup>46</sup> Despite her previous preference for cubist structures, she nevertheless began to adopt surrealism's literary quality in her work in New York, as she started mining her personal experiences and memories for subject matter and imagery.

The mid-1940s was a productive period for Bourgeois. She continued her work in painting while initiating ambitious multi-element projects in printmaking and sculpture. She began to exhibit drawings, prints, and paintings in museum group shows and competitions in New York. In seeking gallery support, Bourgeois seems to have first found it with the Norlyst. Based on her diaries, Bourgeois and Lust began meeting in August 1944.<sup>47</sup> In September Bourgeois sent the painting *Natural History* to the Norlyst for a group exhibition.<sup>48</sup> This was an important transitional work, both stylistically and professionally. The compartments for pictographs of birds, trees, and plants are a taxonomical means to structure memories of a summer of childcare, gardening, and property management. In December, the Washington, DC, dealer David Porter viewed *Natural History* at the Norlyst and included it in his signal exhibition "Personal Statement: Painting Prophecy 1950."<sup>49</sup> Lust tried to help Bourgeois in other ways, offering professional advice and suggesting that she seek out Betty Parsons, even though Lust already had some of her work in inventory.<sup>50</sup> Bourgeois began to show with more established dealers, but remained in contact with Lust, participating in at least one group show while attending openings and other events at the gallery.<sup>51</sup> The Norlyst's vibrant, open spirit perhaps encouraged Bourgeois to mount two important early exhibitions that articulated the psychological themes that would preoccupy her during her long career.

Bourgeois installed "Documents France 1940–1944: Art-Literature-Press of the French Underground" at the Norlyst one month after V-E

46 For example, after meeting with Breton several times in April and May 1944 she became frustrated with his unreliability—a personal judgment. See, especially, the diary note of May 16, 1944, Louise Bourgeois Archive, the Easton Foundation, New York (hereafter cited as Easton Foundation). Thanks to Maggie Wright for making these diaries available for study.

47 Bourgeois and Lust may have met in the early 1940s at the Art Students League, where they both studied under Vaclav Vytlačil.

48 The title and dates of the exhibition are presently unknown. "I see Red–*Nat. History* at Norlyst Gallery—" Bourgeois, loose sheet, September 26, 1944 (LB-1156), Easton Foundation (note 46). See also Bourgeois, *Louise Bourgeois* (note 42), p. 41.

49 Dairy notes, December 5 and 7, 1944. Easton Foundation (note 46).

50 Diary note, February 3, 1945, Easton Foundation (note 46).

51 Based on notes in Bourgeois's diaries of 1944 through 1947, Easton Foundation (note 46). In September 1947, she participated in the Norlyst's group show "Seaboard & Midland Moderns," featuring New York and Midwestern artists, which traveled to several regional universities. "Seaboard & Midland Moderns," press release. Elenore Lust papers (note 4).

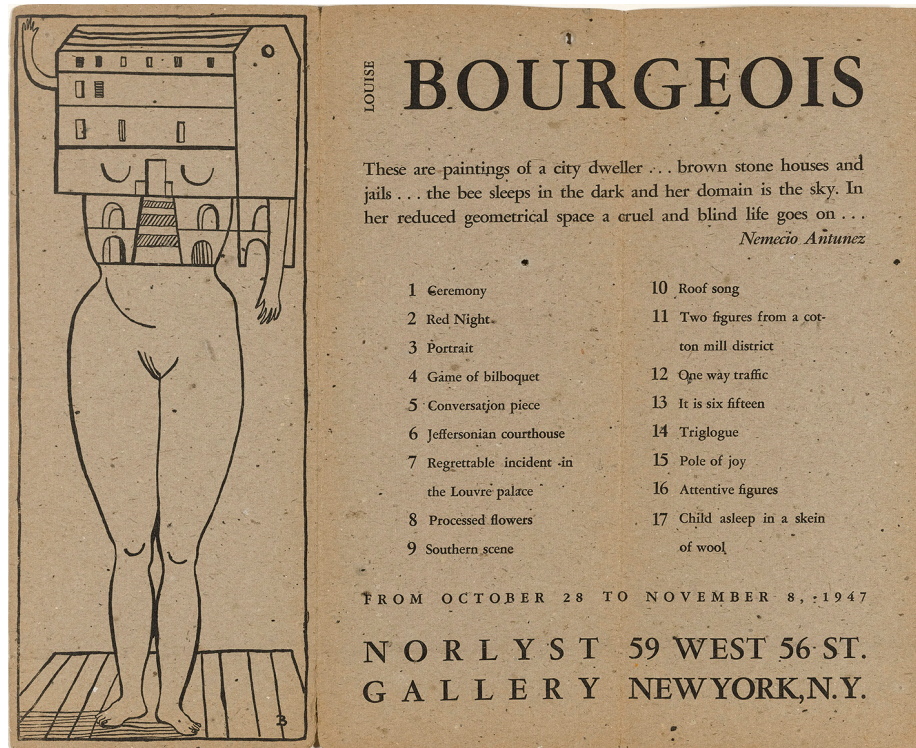
(Victory in Europe) Day. She used her bibliographic skills, as well as personal connections with French and American scholars and archivists, along with Duchamp and Pierre Matisse, to borrow materials from a previous exhibition at Columbia University's Maison Française and add to it from other collections to create a personal tribute to the Resistance. The show honored the intellectuals, poets, and painters who remained in France, fighting a war both internally and externally. It included paintings by Bonnard and Picasso, and publications by Paul Éluard, Louis Aragon, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gertrude Stein, and the Midnight Press. Such materially diverse and politically-charged displays were by now familiar at the Norlyst, which served as something of a community center for cultural activists. The exhibition marked the end of a difficult period for the artist, who had been agonizingly disconnected from her family and friends for six years. In fall 1946 Bourgeois began working at Atelier 17, then in Greenwich Village, and became part of a group of printmakers like Nemesio Antunez, Fannie Hillsmith, and Gabor Peterdi, with whom she felt some commonality and also showed at the Norlyst.<sup>52</sup>

With the anxieties of the war over, Bourgeois accepted her adopted surroundings. Her prints and paintings become full of architectural and totemic forms and images, anthropomorphic amalgams of buildings and bodies that visualize her experiences as an artist, mother, and immigrant. She wrote, "Even though I am French, I cannot think of one of these pictures being painted in France. Every one of these pictures is American, from New York. I love this city, its clear-cut look, its sky, its buildings, and its scientific, cruel, romantic quality."<sup>53</sup> In October 1947, the Norlyst gave Bourgeois a solo show of such paintings. The seventeen landscapes and portraits depicted diverse subjects, portraying fantastic human forms and mechanical and architectural imagery. Not all the titles listed in the brochure have been matched with known paintings, so the following is a series of short descriptions of some of the paintings from the exhibition that were subsequently published. *Regrettable Incident in the Louvre Palace* reminds us of its martial origin, making the building look like a prison camp. *Roof Song* is a self-portrait characterization on the top of her New York apartment building, where she began to experiment with wood sculpture. *One Way Traffic* is more organically formed, and relates to her drawings of the time, with topographic waves and shifts between interiority and exteriority. *It Is Six Fifteen* could refer to her early morning routine of childcare duties. The totemic figure, a fusion of plant and human, presides over an enclosed,

52 Thanks to Christine Weyl for providing information about the locations of and participants in Atelier 17 in New York.

53 Diary note, March 18, 1947, Easton Foundation (note 46).





117 Announcement for an exhibition of paintings by Louise Bourgeois at the Norlyst Gallery, New York, 1947, featuring *Femme Maison*, 1947, line block. New York, The Museum of Modern Art Archives.

claustrophobic space. *Red Night* has a dreamlike quality of a reclining figure drifting on a bed in space. *Red Room* relates to the sculptures she was just beginning at the time, which are precarious, forms carved from wood that exist in fragile relationship to each other. The printed announcement included a poetic quotation by Antunez that describes the urban alienation visualized in the grotesque fusions of the female body and domestic architecture, which seem to echo the artist's ideas about her work.<sup>54</sup>

The announcement was illustrated by Bourgeois's drawing of a female nude with a house in place of a head (fig. 117). The image, which she also made as a painting, is known today as *Femme Maison*, one of an eponymous series that includes four other paintings from 1946–47. Each of the *Femme Maison* paintings conveys a different mood. One has the poise of

<sup>54</sup> Antunez's brief text is an apt verbalization: "These are paintings of a city dweller . . . brown stone houses and jails . . . the bee sleeps in the dark and her domain is the sky. In her reduced geometrical space a cruel and blind life goes on," in *Louise Bourgeois: From October 28 to November 8, 1947* (New York: Norlyst Gallery, 1947). She wrote the phrase "These are the paintings of a city dweller" in a diary note, October 14, 1947, Easton Foundation (note 46).

classical symmetry. Another suggests a rural dialogue. And a third depicts the stress of urban life. There is a strong association between these paintings and the Norlyst show. Contemporary critical observations noted several paintings with images of hybridized female nudes and architectural renderings, which indicates that one or more paintings from the *Femme Maison* series were included in the show. A reviewer in *ARTnews* wrote, “A whole family of females proves their domesticity by having houses for heads.”<sup>55</sup> A newspaper critic wrote that Bourgeois’s “favorite house symbol” recalled “Dalí’s bureaus superimposed on nudes.”<sup>56</sup> These reviews interpret the hybrid paintings as related to both surrealism and femininity. However, no work with the title *Femme Maison* appears anywhere on the announcement. A mystery surrounds these paintings. If they were displayed in the Norlyst, when and why did Bourgeois alter their titles?<sup>57</sup> Was *Femme Maison* a private term that Bourgeois used at the time, or was it invented and applied retroactively? These questions have not yet been fully researched or resolved.<sup>58</sup>

The artist’s own interpretations of the work seem to be consistent. On the back of one of her copies of the Norlyst announcement, she inscribed a note, writing that she was ignored, unheard, and unseen.<sup>59</sup> Years after their production, Bourgeois publicly stated that these images were self-portraits<sup>60</sup> that expressed her timidity at the time, as an artist who felt discriminated against because of her sex.<sup>61</sup> She did not have the “poise or objectivity” to speak up and defend herself. She fled and hid away.<sup>62</sup> The *Femme Maison* figures represent women who used the tools and materials of domestic labor and the structures of domestic space for self-expression and emotional control. The paintings also seem to be informed by a critique of the surrealist mode of distorting female bodies for erotic and decorative purposes. Other female artists in the

55 *ARTnews*, no. 46/9 (November 1947), p. 42.

56 *New York Sun*, October 31, 1947. Elenore Lust papers (note 4).

57 The earliest published reference to a painting titled *Femme Maison* that I have found is in Lucy Lippard, *From the Center. Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976). The credit line is “Femme/Maison—To Carletto.”

58 The *Femme Maison* (private collection) with red background may originally have been titled *Conversation Piece*, based on an archival photograph labeled as such in Bourgeois’s hand. The one with the pink background (Collection Louise Bourgeois Trust) may have been titled *Attentive Figure*, based on the label of an archival slide, however, given the imagery of the “house” element in the painting, it seems likely that it could have been *Jeffersonian Courthouse*. Thanks to Maggie Wright for this information.

59 Bourgeois text, undated, ca. 1947 (LB-0689), Easton Foundation (note 46).

60 “Interview. Paolo Herkenhoff in Conversation with Louise Bourgeois,” in Robert Storr, Paolo Herkenhoff, and Allan Schwartzman, eds., *Louise Bourgeois* (London/New York: Phaidon Press: 2003), p. 24.

61 Donald B. Kuspit, *Bourgeois. An Interview with Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 38.

62 Eleanor C. Munro, *Originals. American Women Artists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 163.

1930s and 1940s also explored the motif of the hybrid woman-house to resist surrealism's sexist rhetoric, creating intimate works that examined the vulnerable yet creative condition of women in the home. Claude Cahun photographed herself resting in a cupboard—a refuge or confinement. Sonia Sekula published a poem and drawing on the theme of the womb and the home in *VVV*.

Some three decades later, women artists and critics rediscovered the paintings and drawings in Bourgeois's *Femme Maison* series, transforming them into icons of American feminist art. Lucy Lippard placed the drawing from the Norlyst brochure on the cover of her landmark book of feminist criticism, *From the Center* (1976). Finally finding an audience that understood the formal and poetic significance of her visual metaphors, Bourgeois used the name *Femme Maison* for the title of a show at the Renaissance Society, Chicago, in 1981 and of new sculptures in the 1980s and 1990s, unique fabric works in the 2000s, and printed editions in 1984 and 1990. Any interpretation of Bourgeois's oeuvre hinges on an analysis of these images and this theme, which conveys the social pressures, not innate sexual characteristics, linking women to the home. These paintings provided an analytical, existentialist dimension to the American surrealism of the 1940s and an essential link between the queer avant-garde of Claude Cahun and the institutional feminism of Judy Chicago.

After Bourgeois's painting exhibition, Elenore Lust continued to present solo shows by surrealist-influenced women artists, including Pennerton West (November 1947), Ronnie Elliott (November 1947), Esphyr Slobodkina (May 1948), Lotte Jacobi (October 1948), and Quita Brodhead (April 1949), before closing the gallery in May 1949. By that time abstract expressionism had emerged as the dominant style and a younger generation of New York artists started opening new cooperative galleries. Lust must have been ready for a major personal change. She quit her job at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, bought a decommissioned military jeep, sailed to Europe, and drove from France to South Africa. She lived in Cape Town and taught in a few secondary schools until 1956, when she returned to New York and earned a master's degree in art education from New York University. Lust then relocated to southern New Jersey to teach high school art in several suburban school districts until she retired in 1979. Though she donated her papers to the Archives of American Art in 1988 and 1991, Lust's obituary in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* made no mention of the Norlyst Gallery and her contributions to the careers of some of the most significant American artists of the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>63</sup>

63 S. Joseph Hagenmayer, "Elenore Lust. World Traveler, Painter, Teacher," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 24, 1997, p. 95.

Perhaps it could be said that the Norlyst, as the creative endeavor of a woman seeking her independence, was a manifestation of a *Femme Maison*. Like Bourgeois's images, the anti-elitist Norlyst was a hybrid creature. It was European and American. Male and female. Abstract and representative. High and low. With a sharp sensitivity toward the visual culture of racial, ethnic, and sexual difference, the Norlyst blended disparate iconographies and social settings into a new entity that provided a platform for both progressive change and an expanded definition of art. The significance of the Norlyst was as much sociological as stylistic. In this regard, its major influence was to serve as one of the rare venues in New York City to support young women artists who responded to surrealism while remaining independent of any official group or movement, thus fostering significant bodies of work that would be retrospectively considered landmarks of feminist art.<sup>64</sup>

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64 See for example Ann Gibson, "Louise Bourgeois's Retroactive Politics of Gender," *Art Journal*, no. 53/4 (Winter 1994), pp. 44-47.