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Brianna McLean

brianna.mclean@umontana.edu

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Brianna McLean

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Professor MaryAnn Bonjorni

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Anxiety Through Art

"Once I was beset by anxiety but I pushed the fear away by studying the sky, determining when the moon would come out and where the sun would appear in the morning," said artist Louise Bourgeois, and nothing describes the process of quelling anxiety more poignantly. Anxiety has been portrayed many times throughout the history of art, either through aesthetic choices or content. Bourgeois, Salvador Dalí, and Francisco Goya have all contributed significantly to "anxious art," as their personal histories and backgrounds lend them unique perspectives to this issue. They may have experienced child abuse, severe insecurities, or the ravages of war. It is important to know where exactly they received their inspirations, as those events or ordeals, though often negative, are the fuel to the genius. These anxieties are expressed in both overt and covert ways. Bourgeois, Dalí, and Goya, though enormously different in every way, each used their angsts to embody these common feelings in the human psyche through art.

Louise Bourgeois remains a pinnacle of dark, apprehensive art even after her death, and her work reflects the trauma she experienced in childhood. She was born in Paris in 1911 to a cheating, abusive father and a mother who looked the other way; her birth was not a happy affair, as her father thought anything other than a boy was a

disappointment. Her youth was characterized strongly by her father's affair with her governess, who also lived in their home. This affair has become a myth within the art world, as Bourgeois's work was always highly personal, making obvious allusions to her father's philandering right under their noses (Robinson 19). Furthermore, when her father was sent into World War I, her mother ruthlessly dragged Bourgeois and siblings after him across the country, "infecting Louise with an anxiety from which she never wholly recovered" (Davies). Her father was a powerful, turbulent force in Bourgeois's life whom she despised greatly, and she specifically referenced him in pieces like *The Destruction of the Father*. This piece is a tumultuous, terrifying display that mimics both a dinner table and a bed, with rounded, fleshy forms that are abstracted body parts. The installation glows with red, nauseating light, and there is an overwhelming sense that the viewer looks at the remnants of a sacrifice, the bulbous forms surrounding the table-bed acting as placeholders for the sacrificers. Bourgeois described the piece as if she herself really perpetrated the event:

[The father] is unbearably dominating although probably he does not realize it himself. A kind of resentment grows and one day my brother and I decided, 'the time has come!' We grabbed him, laid him on the table and with our knives dissected him. We took him apart and dismembered him, we cut off his penis. And he became food. We ate him up... he was liquidated the same way he liquidated the children. (Huntsman 247)

Her description in the first person, as well as the reference to castration, made *The Destruction* an intimate survey of Bourgeois's personal life. The anxiety and anger she felt towards her father surfaced in full force. Her cynical, troubled outlook carried into her entire collection of works; it permeated every piece of work she ever made, flooding her viewers with intense dread and apprehension. Bourgeois's influence on art was undeniable, and her courage in putting her whole soul into her work, even the most private and painful aspects, made her a force to be reckoned with.

We now look to Spain, where Salvador Dalí stood out from the crowd of surrealists of the mid 1900s as another anxious artist, making work that was catalyzed from his own personal history and upbringing. There is much controversy concerning Dalí's personality: was he an egomaniac, or was he secretly fighting deep insecurities? This can be explained by looking at Dalí's childhood, and particularly, his namesake. He was born in 1904, taking the same name as his dead brother, and his resemblance to this other Salvador was uncanny. Dalí, aided by the scrutiny of his judgmental father, was plagued by the constant comparison to his dead brother. He once stated, "When my father looked at me, he was seeing my double as much as myself... My soul twisted in rage and pain, [. . .] and tried to reach the other who was no more" (Ades 57). His home life set the stage for the crippling anxiety and death obsession Dalí spoke of later in his work. Much like Bourgeois did with *The Destruction*, he painted a piece nearly dedicated to a person in his life who greatly affected him, which was called *Portrait of My Dead Brother*. The painting features an ominous portrait of a boy who is presumably supposed to be the first Salvador and Dalí combined. Composed in pointillism with dark

and light cherries falling from the sky, the face is brooding, as men with spears prod at the vision menacingly ("Portrait...Brother"). Dalí uses his brother's image as a form of supernatural horror, hanging from thin air like a spectre that cannot be dispelled. It can be deduced from this piece of work that Dalí was nearly traumatized by the brother he never knew, and his fear of losing his own self by taking the place of another becomes extremely apparent. One could easily dismiss Dalí's anxiety as a morbid form of sibling rivalry, but *Portrait* indicates something much darker and more sinister. In his memoirs, he comments on the fear he felt whenever he entered his parent's room and looked at his brother's veiled portrait, causing him to "[visualize] this ideal brother in the state of a final decay during the whole night while [he] was lying in [his] bed. [He] could only fall asleep if [he] was thinking about my own death. [He] felt as if [he] were lying in a coffin" (Kováry). In the perpetual mirroring of Dalí with his dead brother through childhood, Dalí was forced to contemplate his own mortality when he was still only a child. He attempted to cover up and overcompensate for his anxieties and insecurities about his brother through his outlandish, conceited behavior, but his struggle is plain through works like *Portrait*. He was able to channel the terror associated with his brother into an incredible art career that made him the most prominent surrealist of all time.

Stepping back about a hundred years, the last old master reigned, and he was one of the first to reflect his anxiety in his work: Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes, or simply, Goya. He is typically considered from two vastly different points in his life, those being before and after the illness that led to his deafness in 1792. He was a classic court painter before 1792, creating prototypical portraits and trivial genre scenes, but

after, his work started to echo his worries for his country of Spain during the Napoleonic Wars. Gradually, he began to witness the horrors of humanity at war, and this dug deep under his skin and into his paint brush. *Los Caprichos*, a series of eighty prints he made in 1797, were his first overt critique of his society, but *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (The Disasters of War) was his true launching pad into anxiety-inducing art. This set of 82 prints was created from 1810 to 1820, over the course of a long and agonizing French invasion (Penketh). The content, especially for the time, was sickening. Figures lie dead atop mounds of their fallen brethren. Victims are strung up in trees with limbs and heads dismembered. Women stab at soldiers and children cry. Goya spares no one in his disgust for the depravity of violence, and he depicts war in a revolutionary way for a time in art filled with heroic, bloodless battles. He is ruthless and unflinching, portraying the anxiety of the Peninsular War as accurately as he possibly could. The print medium for these terrible scenes accentuates the chaos, disquiet, and brutality, leaving no room for soft blending or color. They are black, gray, white, and sharp with helter-skelter lines and textures. The captions Goya writes beneath the prints are particularly cutting, such as “Bury them and keep quiet” and “There is no one to help them” (Sooke). Goya, a spectator to some of the most gruesome events in Spanish history, made these prints in secret, as he still maintained his position in the court during the invasion, and thus would have been in grave danger if he released such controversial works. He remained essentially immobilized during this period, taking the protection that his status afforded him. His prints are so accusatory that the viewer feels guilty to be an accessory to such crimes, much the way Goya felt to be an inactive participant in the war. After he painted

the apocalyptic *Black Paintings* directly on the walls of his house in Madrid, he relocated to France where he died in 1828 (Brown 5). From this survey of his life, we can deduce that Goya's work about war was a plain translation of his own foreboding. He took a risk in depicting these events during such political turmoil, and because of this, he is arguably the first modern artist.

Overall, anxiety is a controlling force to any who experience it. Bourgeois, Dalí, and Goya are certainly not the only people in the world to extort their personal strifes in order to find deeper meaning, both in art and in life. It is not an easy feat to convey the overwhelming feeling that things are not right through the unspoken medium of sculpture, paint, and print. And it is perhaps more difficult to make others understand something that only the creator can uniquely experience. Regardless of how well these artists have communicated their fear, stress, and panic, there is still an aspect of their work that we, as viewers and outsiders, can never completely discern. Anxiety has no reason or rationale, and as one of Goya's most famous pieces plainly says, "*El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (The sleep of reason produces monsters)."

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