

Louise Bourgeois, or the ladder to the void

Glòria Picazo

Llèida

What most drew my attention to this obituary, which Txuspo Poyo dedicated at one point to Louise Bourgeois, was the crisscrossing of ladders which invaded the entire page of the newspaper where the news of her death had appeared. And such a significant and at the same time symbolic architectural element has taken me back in time to think about images which live in my memory, like a fragment of an icon in the monastery of Tekla, in the Syrian town of Malula. The ascension of souls to heaven using an enormous ladder shows how some of them are moved aside from their ascension by possessed angels painted in black. Unfortunately, this is an image which could acquire new readings, since some months ago that town was caught in the crossfire between the Jihadist forces and those of the Syrian army. Perhaps this icon may have now disappeared, since the fighting has destroyed much of the architectural and artistic heritage of Malula.

Another inevitable image for me, from the point of view of the history of art, is the ladders which Joan Miró painted in the 20s. Let us think about that “Dog barking at the moon” (1926), in which a ladder, as enormous as that of the aforementioned icon, takes up the left part of the painting. To my astonishment, when I was preparing this text I found out that Joan Miró and Louise Bourgeois had met in New York in 1947 and that she herself confessed some time later with rather pejorative words that their meeting had been pleasant but that his “playful style” had not influenced her work at all since “my work is much more aggressive”.

“behind every act of violence there is sexual frustration”

The mutual interest in the ladder, as a symbol of that vertical movement, which goes up, which joins the world of the tangible to that of the intangible, branches out in both cases into two different ways of dealing with its symbolism. For Joan Miró the ladder is the link between natural elements, between the earth and the sky, its wider base is anchored into the ground, supporting the night sky and, in short, as he himself said, it is a night “escape ladder”.

However, for Louise Bourgeois, her rooms with a central staircase do not try to lead us anywhere, as she herself wrote: “when you reach the top of the stairs there is nothing there, but still to succeed (to exist) you must proceed, even if this means starting completely anew”. In her case they are “stairs which lead to the void”.

Two different but perhaps not so distant ways of seeing in the ladder that symbol which encourages one to keep living, from the retreat, from the Mironian inner evasion or from exteriorization, from an extremely straightforward commitment to disclosing emotions and fears, which Louise Bourgeois very often and in a rather obsessive manner focused in the figure of her father, a father who, according to her, “never belonged to the house”. Hence, undoubtedly, Txuspo Poyo’s words in her obituary: mater-ializing the father. The artist confessed on numerous occasions that in 1938 she left her native France behind to settle in New York after marrying the art historian Robert Goldwater so as to free herself from the paternal figure. Her sculptures and drawings often reflected that rebellion against her father, caused by what she considered a treacherous attitude towards both her mother as well as the whole family. A feeling of malaise which permeated all her work and which extended to other aspects such as violence and, since she considered that “behind every act of violence there is sexual frustration”, her personal and artistic attitude also made her deserving of being considered one of the pioneers in adopting a radically feminist attitude in contemporary art.