

WORDS
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MAKING SENSE OF EXPERIENCE THROUGH STORY AND ART

“The subject of pain is the business I am in. To give meaning and shape to frustration and suffering...” Through a lifetime of making, the artist Louise Bourgeois explored memories and emotions, trauma and stories, transforming them into visual metaphors that others might also identify with.

Across time, artists and writers have employed the creative process as a means to examine, express and even purge emotions related to their experience—to the embodied human experience. Audiences have engaged with artists’ creations for the same reasons. Artists and audiences alike do not think our way through emotion, we feel it—creativity is a way in to difficult experience.

In 2002, I was in an armed robbery in a travel agency in Nairobi, Kenya. A group of men in business suits with guns and getaway cars demanded the employees and I retreat to a small back office. I remember the quality of light in the room, the closeness and colour of the gunman’s suit as he lifted my bag from across my chest and asked me to lie face down on the ground. I watched my hand bounce uncontrollably against the floor, desperate not to draw attention to myself, but unable to command my body.

A year later I was living in Washington, DC, when I signed up for a short-story fiction writing course. Although not yet an artist, I felt compelled even then to do something creative with the trauma that still resided within me. I wrote from the perspective of another, recalling and editing and rewriting the events in descriptive detail and an engaging tone. Over the weeks, this creative act became a healing one, as if along with the words, the repeated action of my hand moving across the paper somehow shook loose the hold those events had on me. The creative writing process seemed to allow my body to release trapped emotions, to shape the narrative of my experience.

Stories give voice to a disoriented or changed body and mind. Storytelling—in

writing or visually—is a creative act that allows us to both enter into our inner experience and step outside the immediacy of it as we place it in a larger context. But a story also needs an audience, and by bringing others into their experience, the storyteller is inviting listeners to explore their own emotions as they identify with the narrative or imagery. It is a process of attention for both the teller and the listener, the artist and the viewer, a means of making sense of our inner experience and the wider world.

Many artists use trauma and grief as catalysts for creativity. They often unfold as a sequence: an initial outrage followed by an awareness of sadness or pain that ebbs and flows over months or years. Over time, those experiences may be best expressed through a paintbrush or a camera’s lens, a poem or imaginative prose, in music or on stage. Private emotions can be processed through the creation of publicly shared artwork. Individual expression generates empathetic bonds, deepening our understanding of the human experience and embodying our collective experience.

I’ve long been captivated by Bourgeois’ emotion-rich art. She draws us into her inner world through autobiographical work like the *Cells* installation series, created over nearly two decades beginning in 1989 (when she was eighty years old). In over sixty *Cells*, Bourgeois examines the senses, memory, anxiety—a range of emotions manifest as metaphor in unique, often claustrophobic spaces crafted from salvaged material, found objects, and sculptural pieces. “The *Cells* represent different types of pain,” she states, “the physical, the emotional and psychological, and the mental and intellectual. When does the emotional become physical? When does the physical become emotional: It’s a circle going around and around.”

The Louise Bourgeois Artist Room in the Tate Modern’s new Switch House extension rather appropriately has the warm hue of a womb as I step into it, the

pinks and reds of soft hung body sculptures and prints diffuse the atmosphere around other starker work. All the work calls for my attention, but I am here to see the *Cells*. *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)* and *Cell XIV (Portrait)* are large steel cages demanding their own space among the selection of other works. These are the only *Cells* I have seen in person, and although I am obliged to stand outside them, I immediately feel the urge to crack open the gate and enter in—or to release whatever is contained.

Cell XIV (Portrait) holds a three-headed fabric sculpture, a physical portrait of confusion or hysteria, certainly one of pain. The complex nature of human experience and emotion, stitched up in bright red fabric and trapped in an unsympathetic cage. At approximately two square metres, *Cell (Eyes and Mirrors)* is the larger of the two works, but conveys a more subtle though equally powerful pain. Enclosed within its iron rod, mesh and framed glass cube, two large orbs—eyes—rest in a block of limestone, surrounded by rounded mirrors positioned at different heights and angles. The installation encourages self-criticism, curator Marie-Laure Bernadac writes in her 2007 monograph *Louise Bourgeois*. It is devoted to the need to see oneself, accept oneself. “The mirror for me,” Bourgeois says, “is not a symbol of vanity, the mirror is the courage to look yourself in the face.” I play at catching glimpses of myself in the mirrors as I circle the cell; in the reflection, I am the one caged in.

Meaning making is not limited to direct personal experience. Pablo Picasso’s 1937 anti-war painting *Guernica* is a stark visual response to news reports of the horrific bombing of a small town in Northern Spain. In the space of three and a half hours, *Guernica* was reduced to rubble and 1600 people, one-third of the population, were wounded or killed. With no strategic military value, this was an act of terror. The story struck something deep within Picasso; he was compelled to create work engaging the events and his reaction to them.

I had the chance to see *Guernica* a few years ago at the Reina Sofia modern art museum in Madrid. The 3.5-metre-high-by-7.8-metre-wide painting engulfed me as I greeted it—it is difficult to take in at once. Its monochromatic black, white, and grey palette sets a somber tone; I have a sense that the atrocities pictured within might be too much to engage in full colour. Picasso created this image in a flurry of activity over five weeks—a physical response channeling his emotional one. His despair and rage are encapsulated within the distorted bodies, faces, and limbs that cross the canvas, and some 45 studies that preceded it as he developed a visual narrative that is still universally understood. The painting is timeless—it captures something beyond those events, is as relevant today as it was then. We identify the violence that preludes suffering; identify with the rage called forth in response to despair; recognize the unambiguous destructive nature of war.

Similarly, contemporary artist Richard Mosse’s exhibition *Incoming* (at Barbican Curve in London until 23 April) asks audiences to take a look at a dramatic event unfolding around them, blurring the lines between art and documentary. A 52-minute video installation, created in collaboration with composer Ben Frost and cinematographer Trevor Tweeten, bears witness to the harrowing refugee crisis evolving across Europe and beyond. The monochromatic film was shot from a distance, often at night, on a military thermal surveillance camera classed as a weapon and capable of detecting body heat over 30 km away—a device normally used by governments for border control and battlefield awareness.

As I entered the exhibition space, deep synthetic sounds drew me down a dark hallway to join a dimly lit crowd lounging on the floor before three eight-metre-wide screens. A metallic thermal blanket fluttered on the screen in front of me. White ghostly faces appeared and disappeared. Migrants—or refugees?—piled onto a truck, were rescued from boats. Children played in a reception

centre. We peered into Calais' "jungle." We felt the incessant movement of the vast, demanding ocean.

Mosse's creative and sometimes disorienting visual and auditory narrative pushed me to let go of thought and rely on my senses. My eyes moved between screens. My ears took in field recordings among the dramatic soundtrack. It took a commitment to understand what I was seeing and hearing. The footage was simultaneously oddly familiar and disturbingly otherworldly. Although at moments difficult to watch, the film was deeply moving, and I walked away at the end of that brief hour feeling increased empathy and deeper understanding for the plight of refugees and migrants—and condemnation for governments' responses and inactions.

But not all instances where we confront ourselves through art must be done in public, and the written word provides a quiet outlet away from a shared experience and perhaps finds us at our most open. I first picked up artist Marion Coutts's Wellcome Book Prize-winning memoir *The Iceberg* when it was released in 2015. In this emotive, deeply personal work, she records the eighteen months leading up to her husband's death from a fatal brain tumor. I've since reread it. I'm spellbound by its raw honesty and beautiful use of language.

"Something has happened," she writes. "A piece of news. We have had a diagnosis that has the status of an event. The news makes a rupture with what went before: clean, complete and total. We learn something. We are mortal. You might say you know this but you don't. The news falls neatly between one moment and another. You would not think there was a gap for such a thing. You would not think there was room."

Coutts is a visual artist, and perhaps this contributes to her ability to manipulate language to visually convey the truth of a universal trauma we will all face—watching

the death of a loved one even as we dare to survive. She lays bare the complexity of her experience, with no judgement, and we inhabit it with her. Engaging her creative work enables us to engage our own emotions and experiences too.

Bourgeois, Picasso, Mosse, and Coutts have all created work that communicates our embodied human experience, that deepens understanding and creates connection and compassion for one another. I hope I can accomplish a little of this in my own work. For me, the shift away from creating art simply for art's sake came as a revelation after my father's unexpected death ten years ago. I had a sudden drive to create art as a forum for people to share and learn and feel. This is the gift my father's death gave me; grief was my catalyst.

I've spent the past several years interrogating a personal experience, documenting my physical and emotional journey with a BRCA-gene mutation—the preventative removal of my ovaries and the removal and reconstruction of my breasts to decrease the high likelihood I would develop certain cancers. I've been collaborating with a photographer throughout this medical process—and in the artist studio—and reworking my experience through stitching over photos. Sketching and drawing my emotional state over time. Examining my experience through creative writing. Engaging other artists' work. Developing a language to eventually share this experience in a way that others might identify themselves within my experience as medical advances continue to shape our lives. Embodying my experience through art.

Creativity has been my process to make sense of a modern medical dilemma. The work is still in progress—as am I.



Still frame from *Incoming*, 2015–2016. Three screen video installation by Richard Mosse in collaboration with Trevor Tweeten and Ben Frost. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, and carlier | gebauer, Berlin.