

The Courtauld

Press Release
18th March 2025

ABSTRACT EROTIC: LOUISE BOURGEOIS, EVA HESSE, ALICE ADAMS

Major new exhibition opens at The Courtauld Gallery 20 June 2025

Press images are available here: <https://tinyurl.com/2h5zmab9>

Abstract Erotic: Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Alice Adams is the first exhibition to bring together sculpture by three pioneering artists of the 20th century who, during the 1960s, produced startling new bodies of work offering an idiosyncratic and eccentric reimagining of sculptural form.

Exploring unconventional materials, including latex, rubber, foam, fibreglass, papier mâché, netting and wire fencing, these three artists turned modern sculpture on its head. Their novel forms ranged from slick, sausage-like suspensions, to fleshy protruding mounds and tangles of woven metal cable and rubber tubing. By combining humour, abstraction and eroticism, this new work signalled a radical shift in how sculpture was made and encountered.

In 1966 the influential American art critic Lucy Lippard staged a groundbreaking group exhibition titled *Eccentric Abstraction* at the Fishbach Gallery in New York, bringing together work by eight contemporary artists working in non-traditional materials. The exhibition went on to profoundly shape the language and legacy of post-war American sculpture. Bourgeois, Hesse, and Adams, the only women in the show, were united in their commitment to producing striking, experimental sculptures that challenged prevailing ideas about modernist form and minimalist geometric order. Lippard saw something distinct in their emphasis on soft materials and bodily forms, acknowledging their status as women artists working in an art world dominated by men. As Lippard later reflected, “I can see now that I was looking for ‘feminist art’”.

The Courtauld’s major exhibition will reunite these three artists for the first time since Lippard’s important 1966 show, offering a unique opportunity to experience their remarkable work together. The exhibition will feature 30 works on loan from public and private collections, including Adams’ rarely seen, large-scale, sinuous aluminium chain-link sculpture *Big Aluminium 2* (1965 and partly remade), suspended to echo its original presentation in *Eccentric Abstraction*, as well as Bourgeois’ iconic, polished bronze *Janus Fleuri* (1968) and Hesse’s playful cluster of bulbous, weighted sacks, *Untitled or Not Yet* (1966).

Lippard coined the term ‘abstract erotic’ to disentangle the *Eccentric Abstraction* exhibition from the more overt and titillating gallery shows appearing on the art scene at that time. ‘Abstract erotic’ sculpture is not explicitly ‘sexual’ or literal but rather it appeals to a sense of touch and to the imagination. The works on display in the Courtauld exhibition will range in size from a few centimetres to three meters, and illuminate the eccentric, erotic, and abstract ways in which these artists reconfigured not just bodies, but how we experience the body in all its fantastical and surprising shapes and forms.

Although of different generations, Bourgeois, Hesse, and Adams were all making art in the 1960s, living and exhibiting in downtown Manhattan. At the time of Lippard's exhibition, Bourgeois was the most established of the three artists at the time, and by the 1970s was being lauded by a younger generation of emerging female artists. When Hesse died in May 1970, aged just 34, she had created a considerable legacy and a significant body of extraordinary work. She described it as 'absurd' in both appearance and attitude, and explained how she liked it to remain in the 'ugly zone'. Alice Adams, now in her nineties, continues to make work in her native New York. Adams was known in the 1950s and 60s as a fibre artist, before turning to more industrial materials in the mid-60s. During the 1970s her art practice took a different path as she undertook major outdoor public commissions and installations in airports, university campuses, and other urban sites. This will be the first exhibition of her work in the UK and her most substantial museum presentation.

Abstract Erotic: Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Alice Adams is grounded in the research and teaching of Professor Jo Applin, Walter H. Annenberg Professor in the History of Art, most notably her 2012 book *Eccentric Objects: Rethinking Sculpture in 1960s America*. Applin is Director of the Centre of the Art of the Americas at The Courtauld Institute of Art, and co-curated the exhibition with Dr Alexandra Gerstein, Curator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts at The Courtauld Gallery.

The exhibition is supported by the Huo Family Foundation.

To coincide with the exhibition, ***Louise Bourgeois: Drawings from the 1960s***, will be presented in the Gilbert and Ildiko Butler Drawings Gallery, co-curated by Jo Applin and Dr Ketty Gottardo, Martin Halusa Senior Curator of Works on Paper at The Courtauld Gallery. The display will present a bold group of drawings by Bourgeois, revealing the central role of drawing in her work and its influence on her sculptural practice.

The programme of displays in the Drawings Gallery is generously supported by the International Music and Art Foundation, with additional support from James Bartos. *Louise Bourgeois: Drawings from the 1960s* is also supported by the Tavolozza Foundation.

Abstract Erotic: Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Alice Adams will be accompanied by a catalogue with contributions by Lucy Lippard and leading art historians on this period, Jo Applin, Julia Bryan-Wilson, Briony Fer, and Mignon Nixon.

Tickets for the exhibition are on sale to Courtauld Friends from Tuesday 25 March, 10am. Tickets are on general sale from Thursday 27 March, 10am. Tickets include entry to *Louise Bourgeois: Drawings from the 1960s* and the permanent collection.

Abstract Erotic: Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Alice Adams
20 June – 14 September 2025
Denise Coates Exhibition Galleries, Floor 3

Louise Bourgeois: Drawings from the 1960s
20 Jun – 14 September 2025
Gilbert and Ildiko Butler Drawings Gallery, Floor 1

The Courtauld Gallery
Somerset House, Strand
London WC2R 0RN

Opening hours: 10.00 – 18.00 (last entry 17.15)

Temporary Exhibition tickets (including entry to our Permanent Collection and displays) –
Weekday tickets from £14; Weekend tickets from £16.

Friends and Under-18s go free. Other concessions available

MEDIA CONTACTS

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NOTES TO EDITORS

About The Courtauld

The Courtauld works to advance how we see and understand the visual arts, as an internationally renowned centre for the teaching and research of art history and a major public gallery. Founded by collectors and philanthropists in 1932, the organisation has been at the forefront of the study of art ever since through advanced research and conservation practice, innovative teaching, the renowned collection and inspiring exhibitions of its gallery, and engaging and accessible activities, education and events.

The Courtauld cares for one of the greatest art collections in the UK, presenting these works to the public at The Courtauld Gallery in central London, as well as through loans and partnerships. The Gallery is most famous for its iconic Impressionist and Post-Impressionist masterpieces – such as Van Gogh's Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Manet's A Bar at the Folies-Bergère. It showcases these alongside an internationally renowned collection of works from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance through to the present day.

Academically, The Courtauld faculty is the largest community of art historians and conservators in the UK, teaching and carrying out research on subjects from creativity in late Antiquity to contemporary digital artforms - with an increasingly global focus. An independent college of the University of London, The Courtauld offers a range of degree programmes from BA to PhD in the History of Art, curating and the conservation of easel and wall paintings. Its alumni are leaders and innovators in the arts, culture and business worlds, helping to shape the global agenda for the arts and creative industries.

Founded on the belief that everyone should have the opportunity to engage with art, The Courtauld works to increase understanding of the role played by art throughout history, in all societies and across all geographies – as well as being a champion for the importance of art in the present day. This could be through exhibitions offering a chance to look closely at world-famous works; events bringing art history research to new audiences; accessible and expert short courses; digital engagement, innovative school, family and community programmes; or taking a formal qualification. The Courtauld's ambition is to transform access to art history education by extending the horizons of what this is and ensuring as many people as possible can benefit from the tools to better understand the visual world around us.

The Courtauld is an exempt charity and relies on generous philanthropic support to achieve its mission of advancing the understanding of the visual arts of the past and present across the world through advanced research, innovative teaching, inspiring exhibitions, programmes and collections.

The collection cared for by The Courtauld Gallery is owned by the Samuel Courtauld Trust.

About The Huo Family Foundation

The Huo Family Foundation's mission is to support education, communities and the pursuit of knowledge. Through its donations, the Foundation hopes to improve the prospects of individuals, and to support the work of organisations seeking to ensure a safe and successful future for all society. The Foundation aims to make art more accessible to all through its support for galleries, museums and centres for the performing arts. For more information, huofamilyfoundation.org/