

Lee Bontecou : a retrospective :
[brochure] July 30-September 27, 2004
[Lilian Tone]

Author

Bontecou, Lee, 1931-

Date

2004

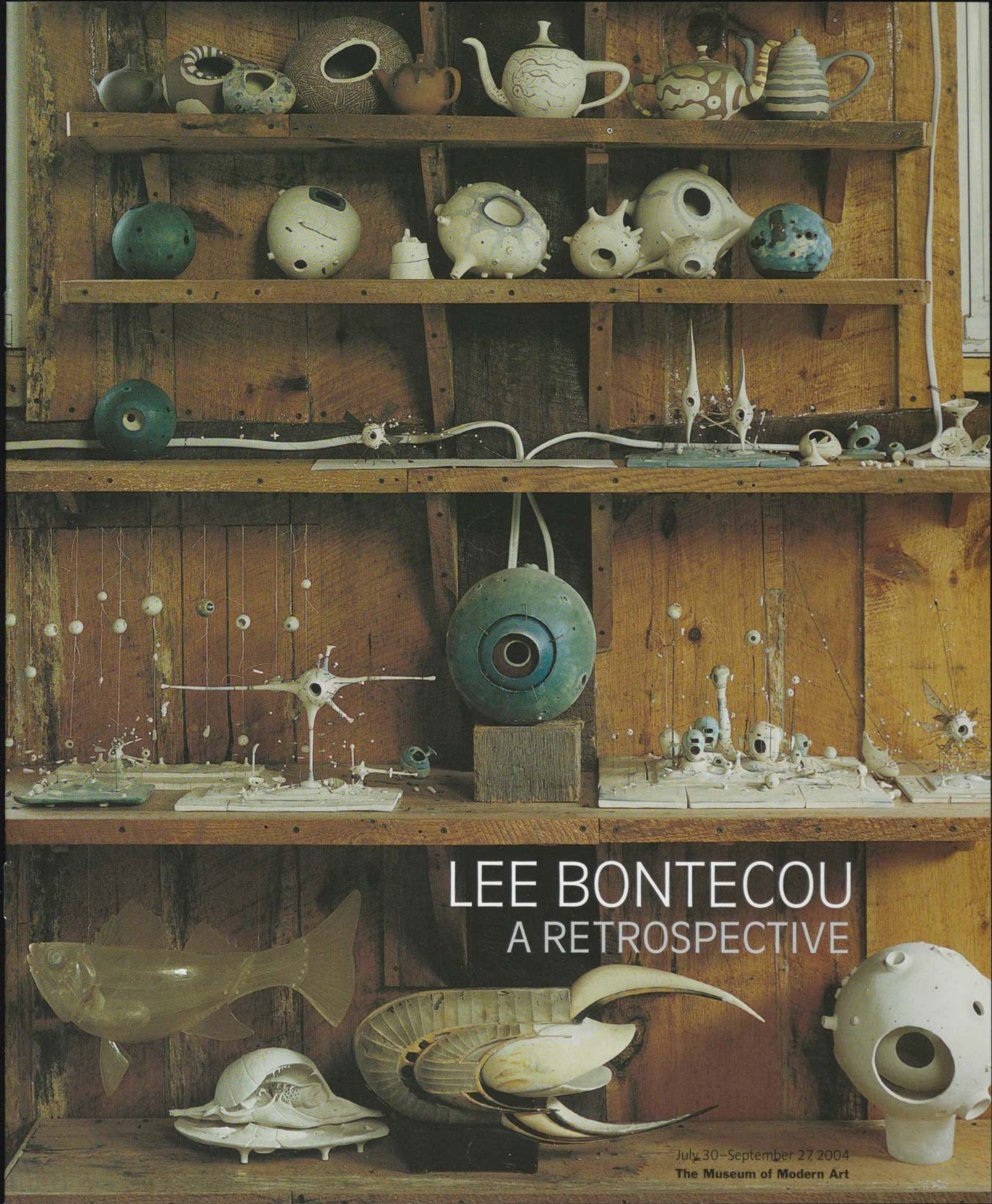
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LEE BONTECOU

A RETROSPECTIVE

July 30–September 27, 2004
The Museum of Modern Art

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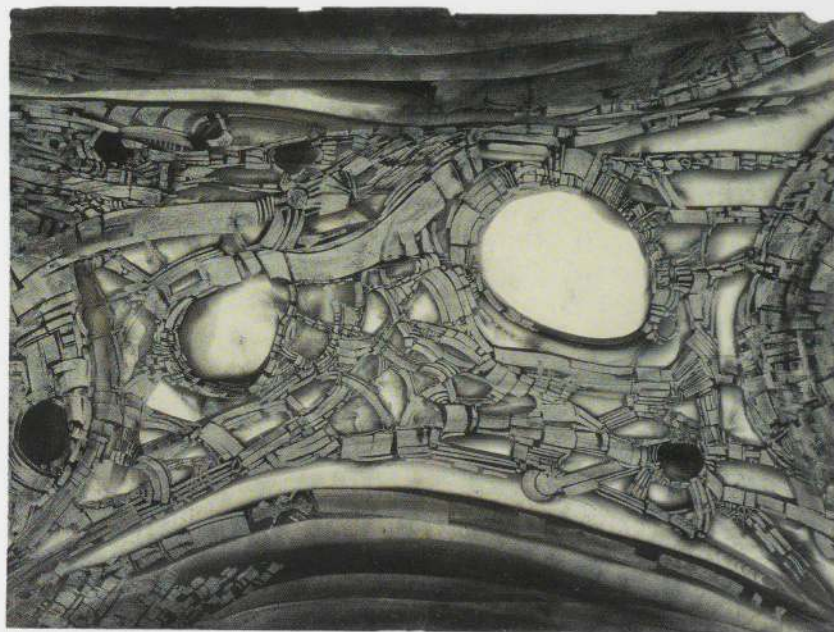


Untitled. 1957. Terra-cotta over reinforced cement, 20 x 63 x 19" (50.8 x 160 x 48.3 cm). Private collection.
Photo: © Malcolm Varon

One of the most singular artists of the second half of the twentieth-century, Lee Bontecou has created a strikingly personal body of work marked by an eccentric use of materials and processes. The first comprehensive overview of the artist's oeuvre, *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective* spans over forty years of remarkable output, presenting not only the artist's celebrated early welded-steel reliefs, but also her lesser-known, recent suspended pieces. Documenting the complexity and scope of Bontecou's oeuvre, this exhibition includes over 100 sculptures and drawings from the late 1950s through 2002. Drawn from private and public collections as well as the artist's own holdings, a number of the works featured here have rarely or never before been on view.

This exhibition offers the unique opportunity to experience Bontecou's work within the context of its own multifaceted autonomy, allowing for insight into the ways the artist's recurring motifs intertwine and mutate, appear and reappear with vigorous assertiveness and breathtaking skill. Harnessing the potency of her imagination, Bontecou evokes themes that are, on one level, quite self-referential, yet on another level allude to the wider context of human experience. The worlds that she has created invoke the continuous interplay, at once formal and philosophical, between conditions of the organic and the artificial. And although her oeuvre is firmly grounded in a keen observation of the natural world, it is her oneiric, even delirious vision that profoundly transforms what is seen into what might be.

Ingenious inventions and intricate manual work were familiar activities from Bontecou's childhood. Born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1931, the artist was raised in Westchester County, New York, spending summers in Nova Scotia, Canada, in close contact with nature. Her mother worked at a factory wiring submarine transmitters during World War II, and her father and uncle made the first all-aluminum canoe. Bontecou attended the Art Students League in New York from 1952–55, where she studied academic painting techniques and sculpture in plaster, clay, and cement with William Zorach. "I had taken the drawing class, then I took the painting. And then I thought, 'Well, I'll just go down and try sculpture.' And

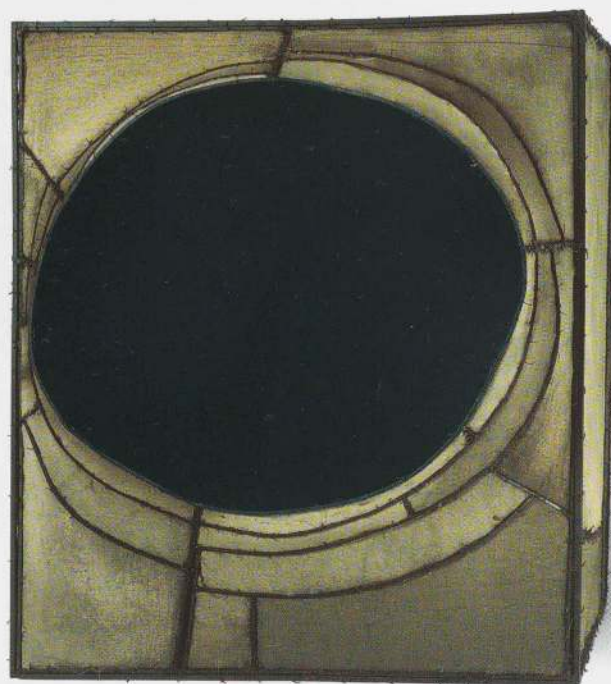


that was that. I never came up afterward."¹ She spent the summer of 1954 at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, in Maine, where she learned welding, a process that opened up a whole range of possibilities for sculptural experimentation. In 1956, a Fulbright scholarship took her to Rome, where she stayed until 1958. "I was in Italy for a while, and at this time, still experimenting. I was trying to search for my own language, my own statement, and still trying to find materials, so I experimented with terra-cotta over reinforced cement. I did a series of birds, and they were all kind of grounded."² Bontecou's sculpture from this period anticipates the archetypal structure of the various bodies of sculptural work that she would later develop: a composite three-dimensional structure comprised of multiple sections or facets that are constructed to forge an object which paradoxically alternates between synthetic wholeness and disjunctive entropy. "I lived in a terra-cotta factory and used clay. I'd lay clay over the welded metal frames, let it dry, take it off, fire it, and cement it back. It was almost like a mosaic, made in pieces. I still work in pieces. That way I can extend the surface way beyond what it will naturally do. I get involved with space."³

While in Rome, Bontecou also experimented extensively with drawings, testing innovative techniques. "One day I found that by cutting off the oxygen from my blowtorch tanks and just drawing with the acetylene, I got a beautiful black line. I started making huge soot drawings. I finally got that dark that I wanted, the black I wanted. And a kind of landscape, or a worldscape.... It just opened up a new thought."⁴

These early drawings prefigure distinctive features of future work, introducing the deep velvety black that would become evident both in her later drawings (through the use of soot) and sculpture (through the use of dull, light-absorbing fabrics). The early drawings also introduce the motif of the circular void, which, when transformed into frontal openings, would become a pervasive iconographic and structural element in her work of the following years.

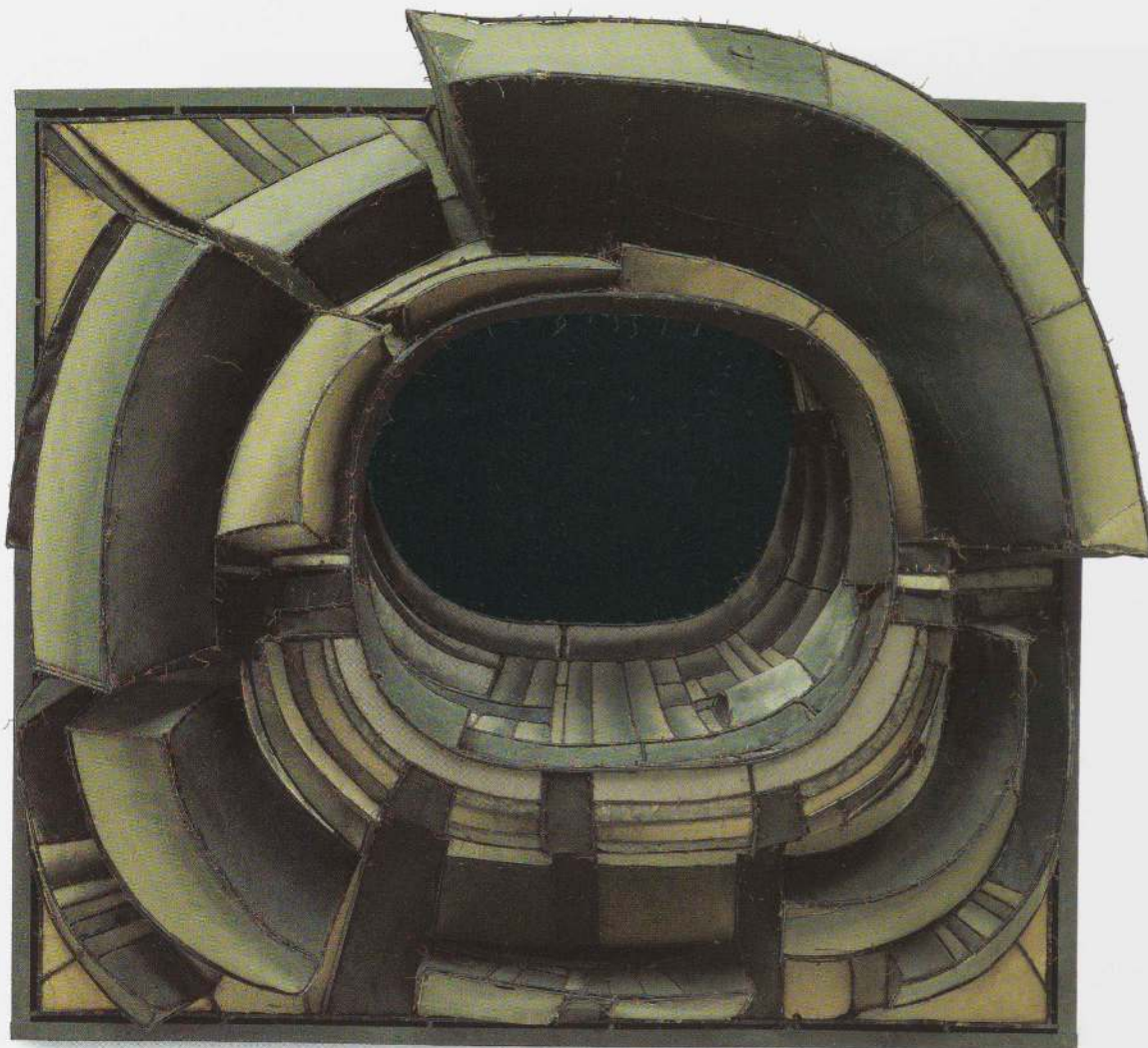
Untitled. c. 1958. Soot on paper, 30½ x 40" (77.5 x 101.6 cm). The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York



Untitled. 1959. Welded steel, canvas, and wire, 31 x 27 x 27" (78.7 x 68.6 x 68.6 cm). © Lee Bontecou/courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

Upon her return to New York, in 1958, Bontecou moved into a studio on Avenue C and Sixth Street, where her sculpture underwent a radical departure. The welded metal armatures that had been latent in her earlier terra-cotta and cement sculptures would soon emerge into the foreground, and this now visible framework became the distinctive, primary element of her work. She started welding together lightweight metal frames, to which she would secure sized pieces of canvas with wire, reinforcing the canvas with rabbit-skin glue, thereby stretching and tightening the fabric. Twisting conventions of frame and image, this new way of working offered Bontecou the possibility of incorporating a pictorial, painterly quality into spatial play. In these works, the viewer's perceptual orientation goes back and forth between the "image" and the concreteness imposed by the materiality of the sculpture.

I was after a kind of illusion. With painting you have illusion. The surface is two-dimensional, so everything that happens on it is illusionary. I love that. But it seemed you couldn't have that in stone, wood, or most welded stuff because the material was so heavy; there is no illusionary depth. But this canvas was the answer. I could push a part of this structure way, way back. I could go way deep, and the blackness played its part in that too. Or I could come up forward with lighter grays. Or even different colors.⁵

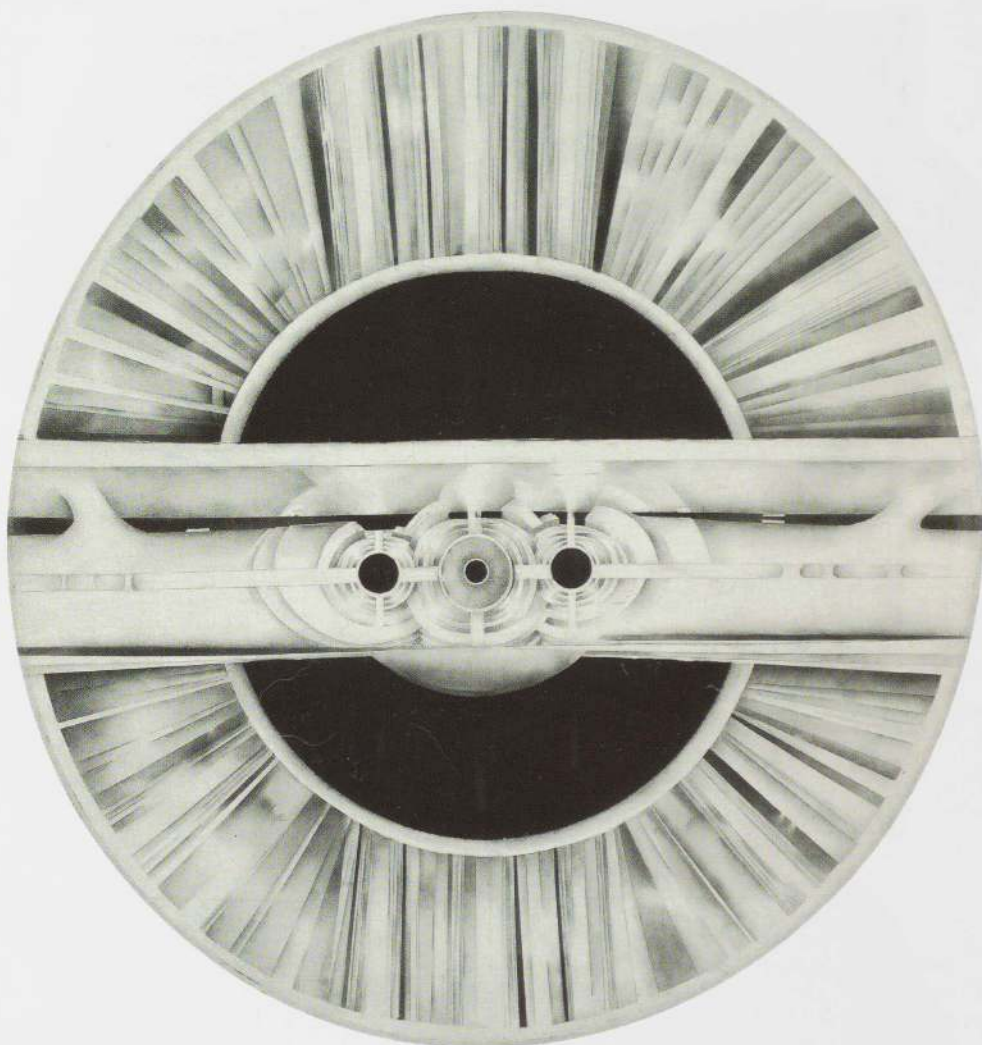


Over the following years, Bontecou's welded metal-and-canvas boxes gained in complexity, scale, and suggestiveness. Their manner of construction implies a series of concentric elements that appear simultaneously to advance and retreat in a succession of outward and inward movements, suggesting an endless exchange of absorption and expulsion. The work also increasingly incorporated a range of found materials scavenged from the street or the laundry below the artist's studio (such as heavy-duty canvas from mailbags and conveyor belts) or purchased on Canal Street (grommets, bolts, washers, spools, tarpaulins, saw blades, helmets, army-surplus items). Bontecou seemed to be attracted to these readymade utilitarian objects' rough materiality and the layers of meaning they carried. "I started finding all kinds of nice materials. Old mailbags—I found them under the mail-boxes.... I started cutting up the canvas. And I would get wonderful values with it. I could get depth that was not possible in the regular pieces of canvas. If I did it all in steel or metal, I wouldn't get the kind of illusion that you have in painting."⁶

Untitled. 1961. Welded steel, canvas, velveteen, wire, and soot, 6' 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 7' 5" x 34 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (203.8 x 226 x 88 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Kay Sage Tanguy Fund



Untitled. 1961. Welded steel, canvas, velvet, saw blades, rope, pipe fittings, soot, spools, washers, grommets, and wire, 72 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 66 x 25 $\frac{7}{16}$ " (184.5 x 167.6 x 64.6 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase (61.41). Photo: Geoffrey Clements, © 1996 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



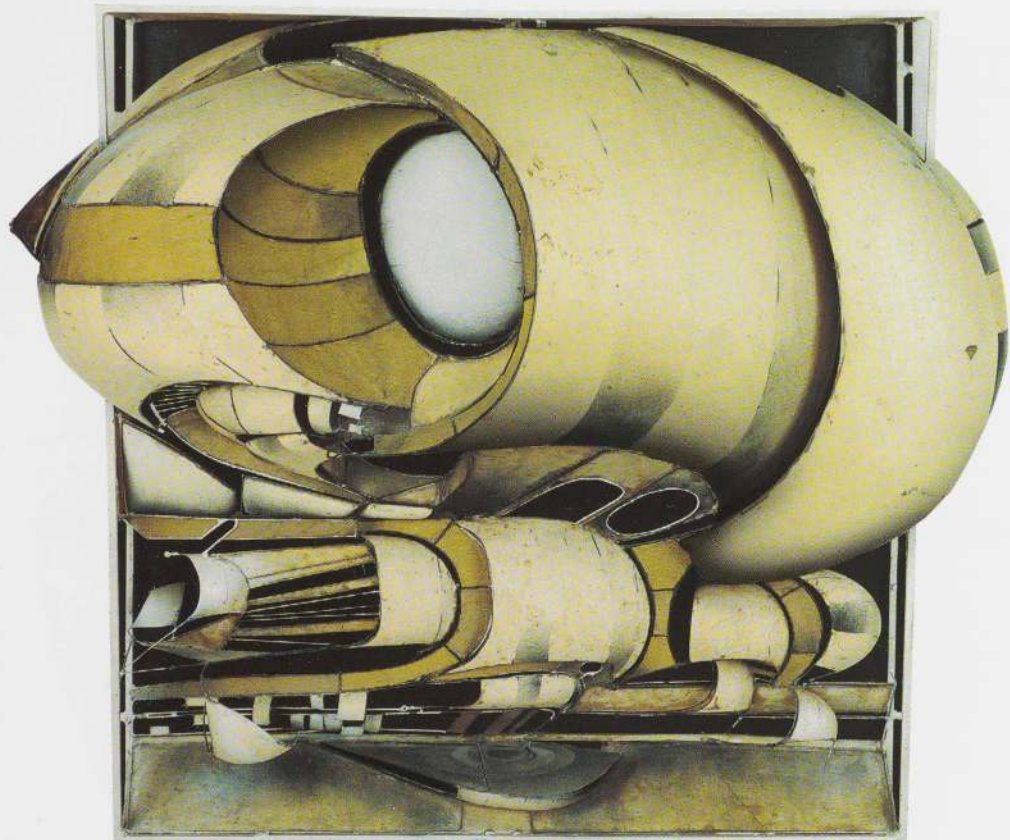
Reminiscing about this period, Bontecou notes two parallel practices in which she would alternately engage: on the one hand, she generated works that pointed to the exploration of space, reflecting a utopian perspective in relation to technological development; on the other, she created works that were predominantly black, employing visual clues that obliquely addressed recent histories of destruction and anger.

I was angry. I used to work with the United Nations program on the short-wave radio in my studio. I used it as background music, and in a way the anger became part of the process. During World War II we'd been too young. But at this time, all the feelings I had back then came to me again.

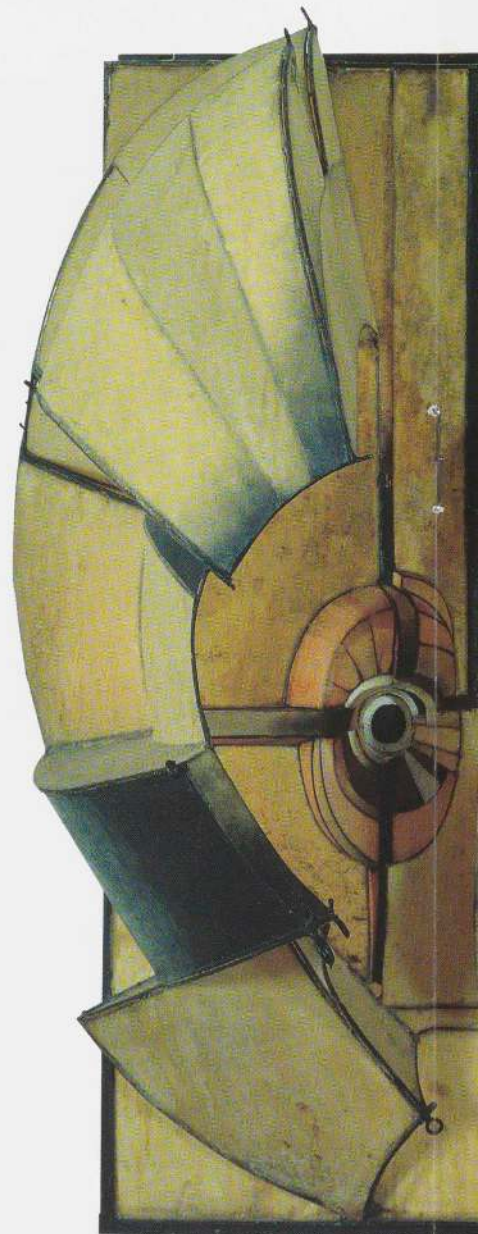
I'd have to stop and turn to more open work, work that I felt was more optimistic—where, for example, there might be just one single opening, and the space beyond it was like opening up into the heavens, going up into space. The other kind of work was like war equipment. With teeth.... It was sort of a memorial to my feelings. I never titled any of these. Once I started to, and it seemed to limit people to a certain response, so I didn't continue. I hate the feeling of being put in a pigeonhole.⁷

I had a sort of love-hate affair with prop-jets. I love the look of them, particularly the dark nose cone, which has a kind of power. The jet form harks back to insect types such as the dragonfly, and in this way it is related to nature.⁸

Untitled. 1963. Graphite and soot on muslin, 6' 9 7/8" (208 cm) diam. Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Laura P. Hall Memorial Fund. Photo: Bruce M. White

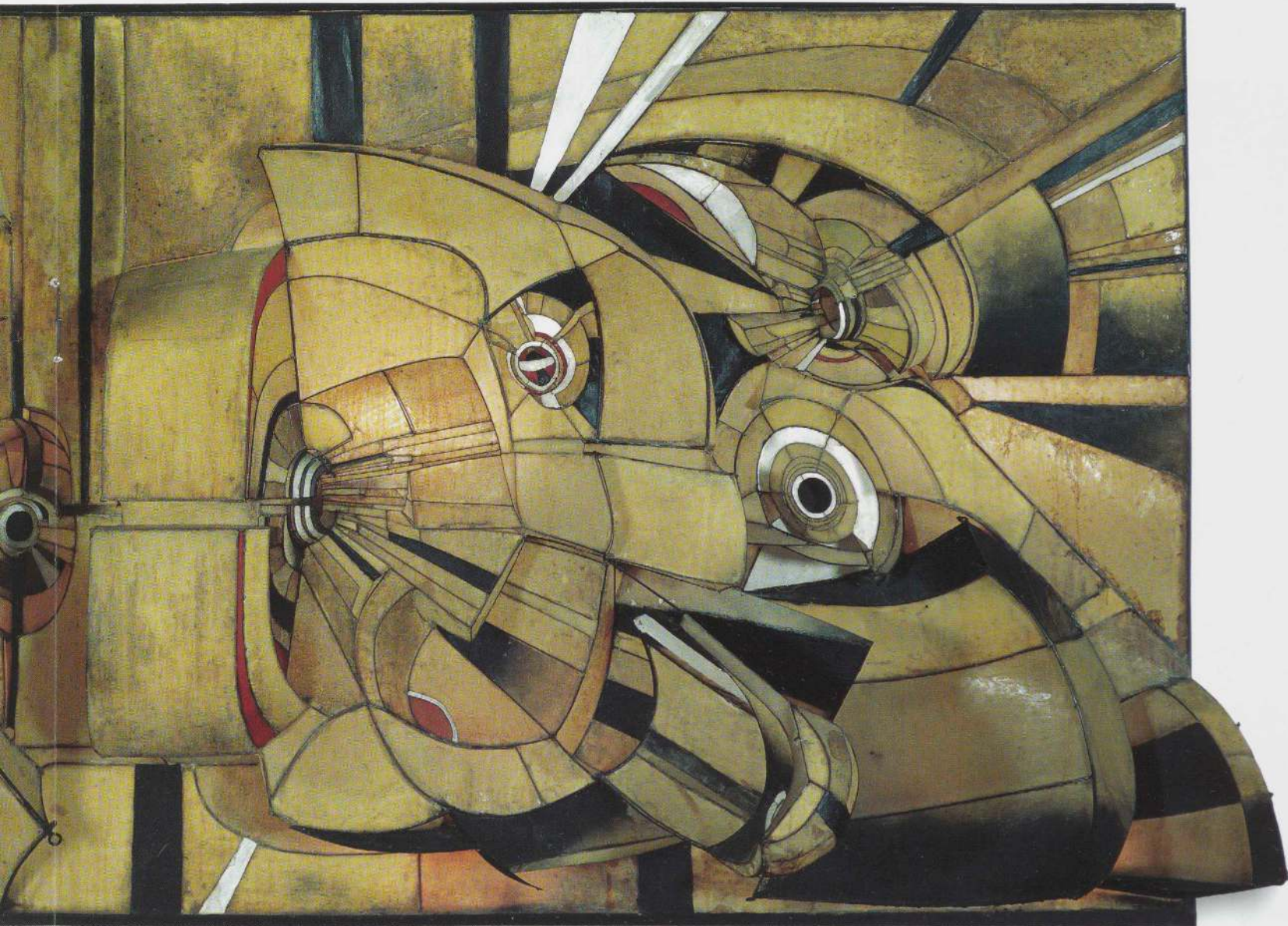


Untitled. 1966. Welded steel, canvas, chamois, epoxy, plexiglass, and wire, 33 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 33 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (84.4 x 85.1 x 36.8 cm). Collection of Sydney and Frances Lewis



Untitled. 1964. Welded steel, canvas, epoxy, velveteen, and wire, 9 x 27 x 14" (22.9 x 68.6 x 35.6 cm). Collection of Joel Wachs. Photo: Robert Lorenzson





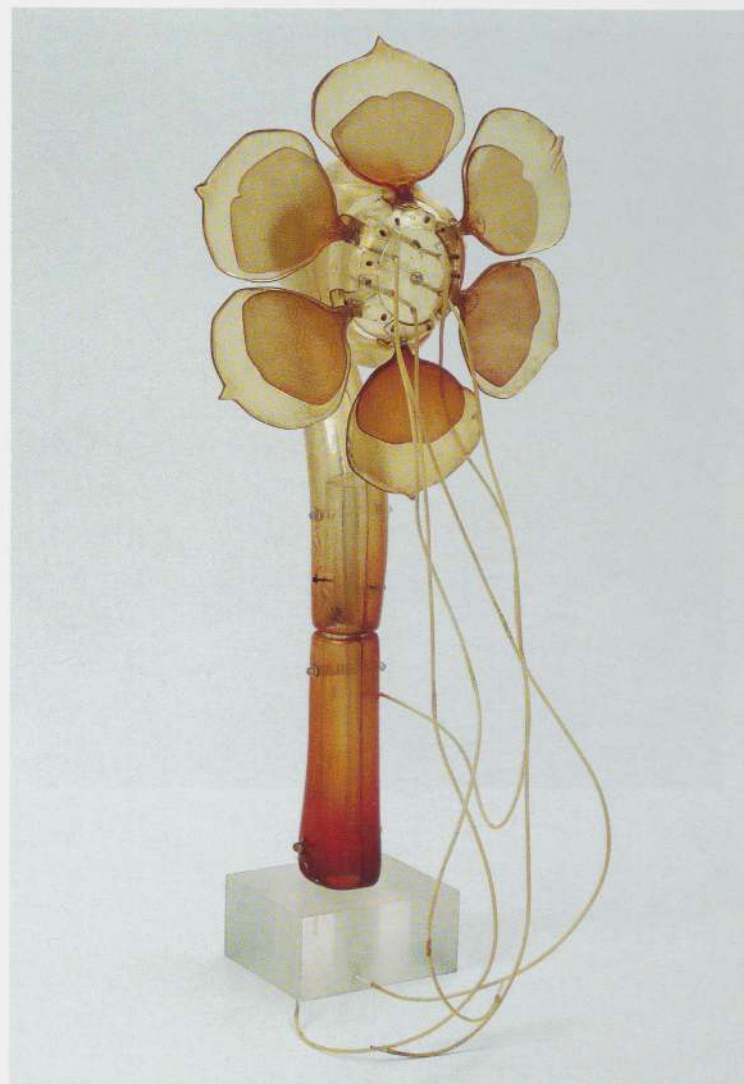
In 1963, Bontecou moved to a new studio on Wooster Street, and although still working with metal frames, she started to employ fiberglass with airplane glue, covered with several coats of sanded epoxy, as well as leather and chamois (in addition to—or in lieu of—canvas). These materials allowed her forms to gain a kind of aerodynamic character—or, as she suggested, “working with the feeling of wind and sails.”⁹ The character of Bontecou’s stitching technique—the exposed spiky wiring that had characterized her sculpture since 1959—gradually gave way to smoother, more finished, sinuous configurations, amplifying the streamlined quality of the increasingly aerodynamic structures.

Color also seemed to play an unprecedented role during this period. Ocher, amber, red, blue, and gold were added to Bontecou’s usual neutral palette of Cubist overtones. “Some had color in them. Not much. The color of the canvas. Sometimes I would even use chamois or leather. Something closer to markings rather than true color. Like an insect.”¹⁰

Untitled. 1966. Welded steel, canvas, fiberglass, epoxy, leather, wire, and light, 6' 6½" x 9' 11" x 31" (199.4 x 302.3 x 78.7 cm). Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, gift of Robert B. Mayer Family Collection (1991.85)
Photo: © Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago



Untitled. 1967. Welded steel, wood, and silk, $55\frac{1}{2} \times 22\frac{3}{8} \times 22\frac{3}{8}$ " (141 x 56.8 x 56.8 cm). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Smithsonian Institution; gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1972. Photo: Lee Stalsworth



In the late 1960s, the reciprocal balance, or synergy, between nature and fiction that had characterized Bontecou's work began to transmute into a more denotative biomorphic language that more directly evoked forms observed in biological life. Around 1967, Bontecou created a group of sculptures made of balsa wood and silk that resembled chrysalis forms. "At one point, before the summer heat, I thought that I'd get a lot of welding done. But it was so hot. So I started to make little balsa wood frames and cover them with silk and paper. It was lightweight—delicate—and a nice change."¹¹

Experimenting with a homemade vacuum-forming machine, Bontecou began to work with various plastics to create fish and flowers built by translucent layers. In contrast to the naturalism with which they were rendered, these forms verge on the grotesque as a result of disturbingly fantastic, mechano-morphic features: a fish that appears to have been consumed (or inhabited by) another fish, flowers comprised of tendrils of tubing. Although these works suggest retreat into the natural world, they simultaneously allude to the artist's concern for the degradation of the environment.

Untitled. 1968. Vacuum-formed plastic, 21 x 10 x 9" (53.3 x 25.4 x 22.9 cm).
© Lee Bontecou/courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

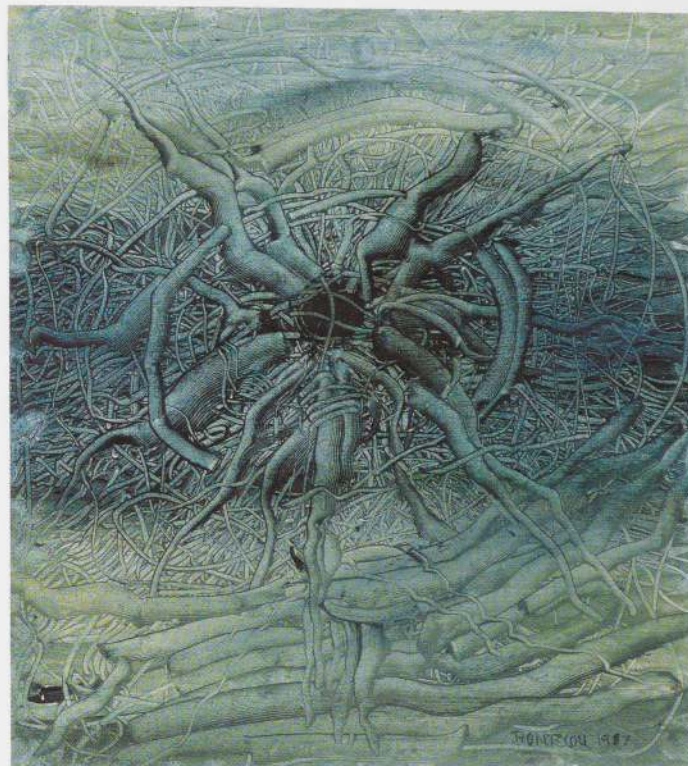


Untitled. 1969. Vacuum-formed plastic,
30 x 57 x 21" (76.2 x 144.8 x 53.3 cm).
© Lee Bontecou/courtesy of Knoedler
& Company, New York. Photo: Will
Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company,
New York

Bontecou painstakingly carved smaller pieces from large Styrofoam logs acquired from an airplane factory. "They had logs that were about eight feet high. And you could get them in different gauges, different densities. That stuff was so hard, it was like marble."¹² These carvings would then be placed in the bed of the vacuum-forming machine, and the resulting plastic shells would be assembled into larger configurations. "I made the fish. I cut it in half and laid one-half on the bed of the vacuum former. And the heated plastic would come down and suck around it. It was like instant sculpture."¹³

The material condition of translucency achieved in these works not only made visible the internal elements and the layered structures but also exposed the bolts and gaps of the assembly process. Beyond literal form and materiality, the object appears to unveil itself, becoming a self-referential symbol for Bontecou's intricate assemblage method.

Bontecou's exhibition of vacuum-formed plastic works took place in 1971, her fourth one-person show at Leo Castelli Gallery. This was to be her last solo exhibition in New York for almost thirty years. In this same period, she joined the faculty of Brooklyn College's Department of Art, where she taught until her retirement in 1991. During this time, Bontecou commuted regularly from several locations within New York State—The Hamptons, Rockland County—as well as from her farm in central Pennsylvania.



In 1972, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago organized a midcareer retrospective of Bontecou's sculpture and drawings. Three years later, Wesleyan University, in Middletown, Connecticut, presented an extensive survey of the artist's drawings and prints. From her early experiments with soot to various other techniques and supports, Bontecou never ceased to draw. She conceives of most of her works on paper as working drawings wherein one can observe the meticulous development of motifs through repetitive, seemingly free-associative variations and also practical solutions to the design of future sculptures. "Drawing helped for just pleasure, but also for engineering. You can solve an awful lot of problems with drawing.... I can't stress drawing enough. It can get your imagination moving, and you can work from your inner world rather than always the external world."¹⁴

Toward the end of the 1970s, Bontecou went back to working with clay. She subsequently produced a series of intricate and fragile sculptures consisting of irregular spherical parts interconnected by wire, with adjoining diaphanous sail-like planes made of wire mesh, evocative of eyes and celestial bodies. When suspended, these basic structures allowed the artist to work on a greater range of scales, and to produce enhanced spatial complexity. With each addition of wire and beads extending the sculptures further into

Untitled. 1987. Printer's ink on primed plastic paper, 11½ x 10 ¾" (29.2 x 26.4 cm). Private collection, New York

Untitled. 1997. Graphite on paper, 22½ x 30" (57.2 x 76.2 cm). Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles

Untitled. 1977. Clay, 17 x 16 x 10" (42.3 x 40.6 x 25.4 cm). © Lee Bontecou/courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

Opposite: Untitled. c. 1980–98. Welded steel, porcelain, wire mesh, canvas, and wire, 7 x 8 x 6' (213.4 x 243.8 x 182.9 cm). © Lee Bontecou/courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York



space, Bontecou achieves a remarkable effect: the scattering of structural elements within a cosmological system of gravity-defying levitation, as if one of her earlier welded-metal-and-canvas pieces had exploded.

I always wanted to move away from the wall, so I began hanging the works. I started small, combining porcelain, different clays, and screen wire. The process was getting closer to drawing, which is so free. And it can go on endlessly. A lot of ships. A sense of wind. I've been trying to use small beadlike elements for connectors, and again I have a nice feeling about wanting to go on finding endless ways of manipulating this material. I made holes in the little beads so I could put wire in, so as to extend things this way or that. I have a kind of freedom while I'm working. I try to find a way of making a silence, a kind of quiet. I feel that I'm getting a little bit closer when I look at them at night. There's a stillness.¹⁵

But I've just kept working, really, the way I did before. Partly through dreams, even day-dreams, partly through imagination. I used to go to museums a lot, the Museum of Natural History, and the Met. And galleries, some. But I'd still rather take from what's around me. On the street, or on the seashore. Like when you walk down the beach and the shadow hits the sand. The ripple of sand is hit by the light, and there you have your darks and lights.¹⁶

Lilian Tone

Assistant Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture



- ¹ Lee Bontecou, quoted in Eleanor C. Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 381–382.
- ² Bontecou, lecture at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, summer 1988. The Skowhegan Lecture Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
- ³ Bontecou, quoted in Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, 383.
- ⁴ Bontecou, lecture at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.
- ⁵ Bontecou, quoted in Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, 384.
- ⁶ Bontecou, lecture at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.
- ⁷ Bontecou, quoted in Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, 384.
- ⁸ Bontecou, lecture at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Bontecou, interview with the author, April 22, 2004.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Bontecou, quoted in Munro, *Originals: American Women Artists*, 386.



Untitled. 1989. Colored pencil on paper, 20 x 28" (50.8 x 71.1 cm). Collection of Eileen Harris-Norton, Santa Monica.
Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

Cover: View of Bontecou's Pennsylvania studio, 2003. Photo: Will Brown, courtesy of Knoedler & Company, New York

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A Conversation between Lee Bontecou and Mona Hadler is made possible by Anna Marie and Robert F. Shapiro.

THE FOLLOWING PROGRAMS WILL BE HELD IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE EXHIBITION *LEE BONTECOU: A RETROSPECTIVE*

GALLERY TALKS

Patricia Cronin: Monday, September 20, 5:30 P.M.

Dore Ashton: Thursday, September 23, 5:30 P.M.

MoMA QNS

33 Street at Queens Boulevard, Long Island City

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN LEE BONTECOU AND MONA HADLER

Tuesday, September 21, 6:30 P.M.

The Graduate Center at the City University of New York

365 Fifth Avenue at 34 Street, 9th floor

A Conversation between Lee Bontecou and Mona Hadler is a collaboration between The Museum of Modern Art and Continuing Education & Public Programs at The Graduate Center at the City University of New York.

Tickets are \$10, \$8 for members, \$5 for students with current ID, and can be purchased in person at the MoMA QNS Lobby Ticketing Desk, 33 Street at Queens Boulevard, and at the Visitor Center (open daily 10:00 A.M.–2:00 P.M. and 3:00–5:30 P.M.) at the MoMA Design Store, 44 West 53 Street, in Manhattan. There is no phone registration for Gallery Talks, and space is limited. To purchase or reserve tickets for *A Conversation between Lee Bontecou and Mona Hadler* through the box office at The Graduate Center, please call (212) 817-8215 or e-mail continuinged@gc.cuny.edu. Remaining tickets will be available at the door on the evening of the program.



projects 82 mark dion

rescue archaeology:
a project for
the museum of modern art

The Museum of Modern Art

November 20, 2004–March 14, 2005

In 1932, three years after its founding in 1929 by Lillie P. Bliss, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, and Mary Quinn Sullivan, The Museum of Modern Art moved from its rented galleries in the Heckscher Building on Fifth Avenue to 11 West 53rd Street, a limestone townhouse owned by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. To house its ever expanding collection, the Museum's first permanent building, designed in the International Style by Philip L. Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone, went up on this site in 1939. The previous year, two townhouses to the immediate north, on West 54th Street, had been demolished to provide the land for the Museum's sculpture garden. Of these, the one at 4 West 54th Street—a four-story brownstone with a two-story carriage house and a central garden—had belonged to John D. Rockefeller, Sr. At the time of its demolition, three of its Victorian-style rooms were disassembled and donated to The Museum of the City of New York while a Moorish room was given to the Brooklyn Museum. The other, at 10 West 54th Street, had belonged to Abby and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Designed by William Welles Bosworth, the nine-story building contained a gallery for modern art on the seventh floor and displays of earlier European paintings, statuary, and Chinese porcelains throughout.



Since the inauguration of the sculpture garden, in 1939, the foundations of these dwellings have remained largely undisturbed, despite the Museum's subsequent renovations and growth. In 2000, in preparation for the Museum's most extensive rebuilding project yet, the garden was temporarily disassembled and the land was excavated to a depth of fifteen feet. In October of that year, artist Mark Dion performed a series of archaeological digs, recovering a pillar and fragments of the limestone foundation from the nine-story townhouse. A month later he scavenged again in the garden, as well as in the hollowed-out brownstones adjoining the Museum to the west and in the newly demolished Dorset Hotel. His findings included historical artifacts such as cornices, moldings, shards of ceramic and glass, sections of fireplace mantels, wallpaper pieces, and bricks from distinct phases of the Museum's expansion, as well as more recent ephemera, including the remains of Bruce Nauman's *Audio-Visual Underground Chamber* (1972–74), which was installed in the garden as part of the artist's 1995 retrospective. The digs confirmed that sub-surface deposits not associated with the Rockefeller family's period of residence were also extant. This was not surprising, since the garden had served as the construction site for a number of projects over the years, from Buckminster Fuller's *Dymaxion Deployment Unit* (1942) and Marcel Breuer's *Demonstration House* (1949) to Rirkrit Tiravanija's child-sized glass pavilion (1997) and Piotr Ukełski's dance floor (2000).

Dion has conducted a number of archaeological projects over the last decade: he dredged a Venetian canal for *Raiding Neptune's Vault: A Voyage to the Bottom of the Canals and Lagoon of Venice* (1997–98); combed the banks of the River Thames on the sides of both the old Tate (Millbank) and the new (Bankside) for *Tate Thames Dig* (1999); and investigated his own cultural backyard, Massachusetts, for *New England Digs* (2001). In each case his work was divided into three phases: the actual dig; the cleaning and cataloguing of the finds; and the display of artifacts in treasure cabinets. Unlike bona fide archaeological digs, Dion's excavations have no real scientific value. Instead, his approach to gathering, ordering, and displaying

is designed to probe the underlying taxonomic systems of museums and the narratives that their collections construct. What is an important artifact? Who determines the context in which it is displayed? How is it used to tell a story? These are some of the questions raised by Dion's work. Drawing on 1970s aesthetics such as, on the one hand, Robert Smithson's dialectical rapport between "sites" and "non-sites," and on the other, Marcel Broodthaers's fictional museum displays, Dion underscores the fact that the story told by a collection is only a partial one. His questioning is thus part of a process of opening art up to a broader field of critical debate.

Rescue Archaeology: A Project for The Museum of Modern Art is among Dion's most focused ventures, being intricately linked to the founding and history of the Museum. Yet despite its documentary makeup, the project is infused with an element of fantasy. A series of six fireplace mantels, for instance, salvaged from the brownstones adjacent to the Museum and fully restored by the artist, are intended to refer to the living room of Abby and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., renowned for its warmth and intimacy. A custom-made cabinet presents objects cleaned and classified not by scientific criteria but by the artist's logic; visitors are invited to peruse its contents and appreciate its odd organizational paradigms. Finally, a functional laboratory and a group of photographs recording Dion's behind-the-scenes archaeological "performance," as he calls it, reveal an interest in experimentation and process that balances his investment in the finished product. It is fitting that an artist who acts as both performer and archaeologist should link the site of production with that of display, making the material remains buried beneath the Museum's garden and in its environs the subject of his study. Conceiving an installation about the Museum's foundations within its new building, Dion ascertains a direct link between the house of modernism and the world around it.

Roxana Marcoci
Assistant Curator
Department of Photography



Mark Dion. *Rescue Archaeology: A Project for The Museum of Modern Art*. 2000–2004. Cover and this page, left and top: Dion digging in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden at The Museum of Modern Art, October 2000. Photos: Roxana Marcoci. Above: cleaning an artifact from the dig in Dion's laboratory in Beach Lake, Pa., 2004. Photo: Mark Dion. Opposite: artifacts from the dig. Photos, top: Mark Dion, bottom: Bob Braine. Last page: artifacts from the dig. Photos: Bob Braine



Interview with David Rockefeller, Chairman Emeritus of The Museum of Modern Art, April 8, 2004

By Mark Dion and Roxana Marcoci

Roxana Marcoci: In October 2000, when The Museum of Modern Art had converted the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden into a staging area for the construction of its new building, we invited Mark to perform a series of archaeological excavations.

David Rockefeller: I see. You were actually here at the time the garden was dismantled.

Mark Dion: The process of archaeology I employed in this excavation was not precise or measured, but rather was a kind of rescue archaeology. The site was already disrupted, the context of stratification lost. I would like to ask you a few questions about your experience of the childhood house, which is a somewhat similar approach to the history of this place. We cannot assemble a detailed reconstruction of the space from the artifacts found, nor can we from memory, but I am trying to get a sense of the structure from fragments of material culture as well as fragments of experience.

RM: Could you share some of your memories of what it was like growing up in the townhouse at 10 West 54th Street?

DR: The house had nine floors. On the rooftop there was a protective wire. The floor was tiled. One could ride a tricycle around. As a child I would be sent out to get air and exercise on the roof. Grandfather's house was next door at 4 West and between them there was an open space that had a concrete floor laid with curved edges so it could be flooded with water. At one point we used it as a skating rink.

MD: Do you have any particular recollection of colors when you think of the house?

DR: It was limestone color.

MD: What about the interiors? I almost would like to think impressionistically in terms of the old house. What was it like growing up there? I have just so few things to go on and I am very curious about imagining the layout of the house and the use of space.

DR: Maybe it would be helpful if I gave you a sense of what happened on different floors. The entrance hall had a staircase with rather low marble steps. On the westerly side was Mother's sitting room, where she had the famous Chinese figure that is now at Kykuit [the Rockefeller estate in the Hudson Valley]. Across the foyer was Father's study. On the second floor there were sixteenth-century Polonaise rugs made in Iran—beautiful Persian rugs from royal families in Poland, which are now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Also on the second floor there was a large drawing room, a very formal room used for special functions, where my sister was married. Father had all around the room a number of K'ang Hsi porcelains that stood on big stands and also quite good eighteenth-century French furniture and Isfahan rugs.

MD: You would certainly not have wanted to take your tricycle in that room.

DR: No, that would not have been encouraged. But that room was used rather infrequently. Next to it was the music room with the pipe organ. The organ had three levels of keys. Mr. Archard Gibson was the organist. He was kind to young people and I used to enjoy sitting on the

bench beside him, watching him play. I enjoyed watching his feet. This room had some marvelous Italian paintings—works by Duccio (of which very few are left in the world), Botticelli, and Piero della Francesca. The collection also included a full-length portrait of Lady Dysart by Sir Thomas Lawrence. The dining room was at the opposite end. It too was a formal room and had Chinese porcelains all around. On the third floor at the northern end were the library, my parents' bedroom, and their dressing rooms, with a bathroom in-between. The rooms of my brothers Nelson and John and my sister Abby were on the fourth floor. Those of my two other brothers Laurance and Winthrop were on the fifth floor. My room too was on the fifth floor looking south over the city.

RM: What was in your room?

DR: I had a number of watercolors by Arthur Davies. Mother put them in my room as a child and I always liked them and so when I got married she gave them to me and I still have them. The modern art gallery was on the seventh floor at the southern end. Donald Deskey designed the furniture.

MD: It must have been such an amazing space to negotiate as a child.

DR: That's true. It was a wonderful way for us to learn about art.

RM: If there was an object you would have liked to see uncovered during the diggings that Mark made, what would it have been?

DR: Any pieces would probably be too small—I don't think it likely that there would have been objects, because all the valuable sculptures or furnishings would have been removed. Maybe some fireplaces survived.

MD: We recovered a number of fireplaces from the adjacent brownstones. We certainly found a lot of limestone and some marble. We have some very distinctive green tile that we recovered, a little bit of flooring. Very little wood fragments survived, a bit of molding.



DR: This is not surprising. Certainly the ground floor as I recall it was largely marble. If you went straight across from 54th Street in the direction of 53rd Street there was a door that led into the housekeeper's office. The secretaries ate there. When I was young and the family had guests I would eat with the housekeepers in the dining room. The household was on the sixth floor. At some point there was a squash court on one of the top floors. Also, every Saturday we would go over the weekly accounts with Father in his

study. He asked us to keep a record of everything we received and spent. If there was a discrepancy between the two, we would note that as "unaccounted for."

MD: Maybe that's what I'll find when I start sifting through the material, an unaccounted nickel or dime. If your records are excellent we could still go back and balance the books.

RM: You have grown up amidst works of art from different periods and geographical areas. In addition, you are a passionate collector of beetles. What does collecting mean to you?

DR: I guess it gave me an interest in a great number of things, from works of art to biological works of nature.

MD: Do you have a favorite family of beetles?

DR: Probably the longhorns, they are the most colorful.

MD: Yes, the harlequin beetles.

RM: When did you start collecting them?

DR: I started collecting them when I was ten, and that would have been in 1925.

RM: The Museum of Modern Art was cofounded by your mother in 1929. In 1948 you took her seat on the Museum's Board of Trustees. What was your mother's role in shaping your understanding of modern art?

DR: She played a very important role because she loved beauty in general, whether it was in nature or manmade. My own interest in both certainly began with her.

RM: The concept of museums has changed in the last seventy-five years. As Chairman Emeritus and Life Trustee of MoMA, how do you see the new museum, and what role do you think it should play in the twenty-first century?

DR: The Museum's original basic concept—that of showing the best works of art being done by contemporary artists all over the world—still constitutes its objective today. It is a very broad objective.

MD: We have on one side the Museum's responsibility of showing and preserving modern works and on the other that of promoting contemporary works. The modern period is no longer contemporary. The distance between Monet



and the contemporary generation is now significant. In other words, the Museum now has two roles.

DR: That's true, and obviously it becomes more difficult because so much has been done in terms of acquisitions. The Museum owns so much that even with the doubling of space we will probably not be able to show more than 10 percent of its collection at any one time. The collection needs to be in constant rotation.

MD: That was certainly the founding spirit of the Museum—pushing ideas, bringing about and supporting challenging art, making it available to the public.

DR: And that continues to be its major interest, along with maintaining the collection of masterworks of the modern movement.

biography

Mark Dion was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and lives in Beach Lake, Pennsylvania.

selected exhibitions

Mark Dion's work has been featured in a wide range of solo and group exhibitions around the world. His recent shows include the São Paulo Bienal (2004); *Universal Collection*, at the Historisches Museum, Frankfurt (2004); *The Ichthyosaurus, the Magpie, and Other Marvels of the Natural World*, at the Musée Gassendi and the Réserve Géologique de Haute Provence, Digne, and the Centro Sperimentale per le Arti Contemporanee, Caraglio (2003); *Full House*, at the The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Conn., where it won the Ninth Annual Larry Aldrich Foundation Award (2003); *Mark Dion: Encyclomania*, at the Villa Merkel, Esslingen, the Kunstverein Hannover, and the Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn (2002); *Microcosmographia*, at the University of Tokyo Museum (2002); *Urban Wildlife Observation Unit* (a project of the Public Art Fund), Madison Square Park, New York (2002); *New England Digs*, at the Fuller Museum of Art, Brockton, Mass., the David Wynton Bell Art Gallery, Brown University, Providence, R.I., and the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth (2001); *Ecologies*, The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago (2000); the Carnegie International 99/00, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pa. (1999); *Tate Thames Dig*, Tate Gallery of Modern Art, London (1999); and the Nordic Pavilion, 47th Venice Biennale (1997).

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