

A Brief History of Abstract Art

Non-objective art is not an invention of the 20th century — humans have made non-objective art since they first drew pictures in the dirt. In the Islamic religion the depiction of humans is not allowed, and consequently the Islamic culture developed a high standard of decorative arts. Calligraphy is also a form of non-figurative art. Abstract designs have also existed in Western culture in many contexts. However, Abstract art is distinct from pattern-making in design, since it draws on the distinction between decorative art and fine art, in which a painting is an object of thoughtful contemplation in its own right.

Constructivism (1915) and De Stijl (1917) were parallel movements which took abstraction into the three dimensions of sculpture and architecture. The Constructivists believed that the artist's work was a revolutionary activity, to express the aspirations of the people, using machine production, graphic and photographic means of communication. Some of the American Abstract expressionists are purely abstract and include: Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Hans Hofmann although they were at times inspired by myth, figuration, architecture, and nature. Op Art (1962) and Minimalism (1965) were two recent idioms. It is, at present, possible that an artist's work is seen as an individual entity rather than part of a movement.

Lee Bontecou

Lee Bontecou is an artist who had steadfastly refused to have her production categorized. Throughout her career, she has objected to interpretations critics have made of her work. This position continues today -- and in fact a controversy has arisen regarding the catalogue for this current show.

The catalogue includes an essay by former Museum of Modern Art curator Robert Storr, which has apparently upset the artist's husband, William Giles. With the support of the artist, Giles has sent out an e-mail to members of the press chastising Storr for his attempt to contextualize the work, which cites influences that Bontecou and her husband dispute. Storr apparently had the audacity to come to his own conclusions.

At any rate, Bontecou's biography is intriguing and enigmatic. Her early success came in 1960, with her first solo show at Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, a sensation that catapulted her to the top rung of contemporary artists (and made her the only woman of her generation to be represented by the gallery). She was included in many important group exhibitions.

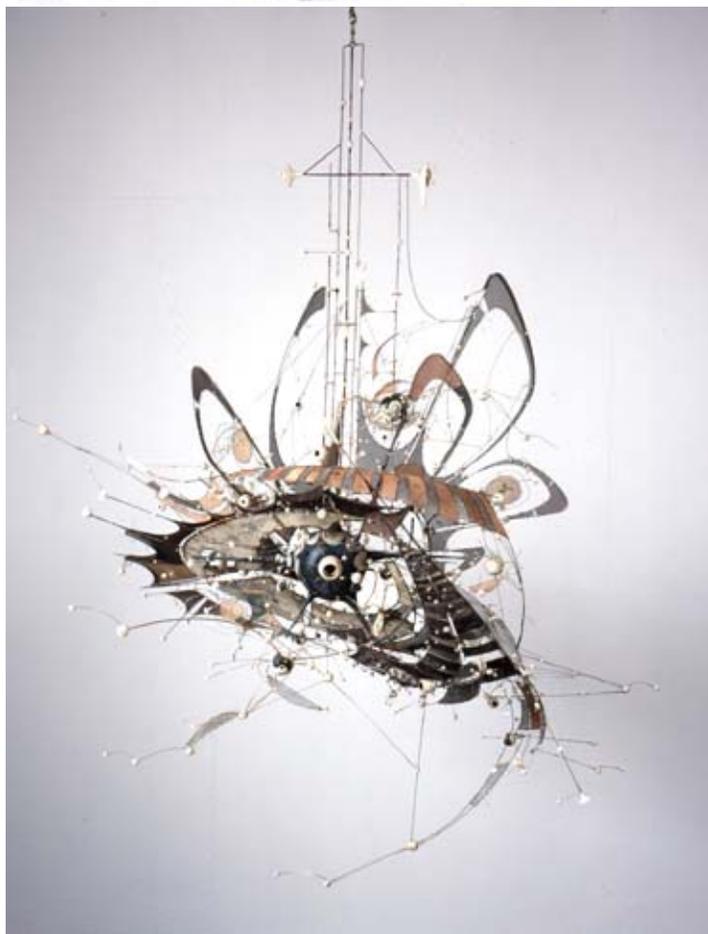
Bontecou's public career ended with a final show at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1971 and a 1972 mid-career retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Surprisingly, at the height of her celebrity, Bontecou departed from the public stage. Subsequently, and for the past 30 years, she has worked in privacy at the studio adjacent to her home in rural Pennsylvania, where she lived with her husband, raised their daughter and cared for her aging father. She declined or ignored invitations to exhibit her work. She did, however, teach art at Brooklyn College throughout the 1970s and '80's, a position she kept under the radar until her retirement in 1991.

Much of the credit for Bontecou's return is due to the persistent efforts and passion of this exhibition's curator, Elizabeth Smith. In 1993, Smith, who was at the time a curator at Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, was able to convince Bontecou to cooperate with an exhibition of her early work, entitled "Lee Bontecou: Sculpture and Drawings of the 1960s," which traveled to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City and the Parrish Museum in Southampton, N.Y.

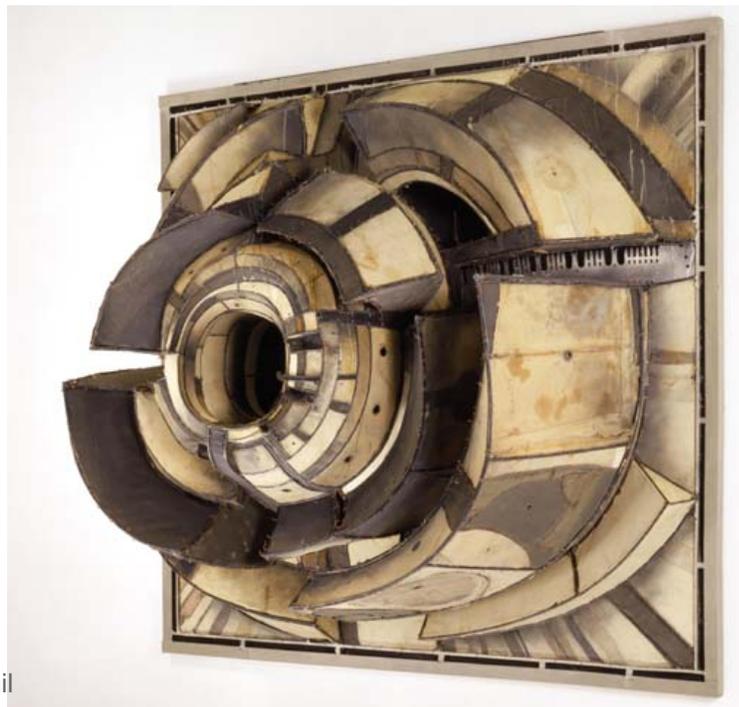
In 1995, Daniel Weinberg mounted a show of early drawings in his San Francisco gallery, and mounted another drawing show when he moved his gallery to Los Angeles in 2001. That show, which presented drawings dating from 1962 through 1998, was the public's first glimpse of Bontecou's later work. It marked Bontecou's reentrance into the art market, and was a triumph. Since then she has been represented by Knoedler Gallery in New York. Elizabeth Smith was able to persuade Bontecou to end her exile, and cooperate with this exhibition.



Untitled
1997
graphite on paper, 22 x 30 in.
Collection of the artist, courtesy
of Knoedler & Co., New York



Untitled
1998 (begun in 1980s)
welded steel, porcelain, wire mesh, canvas and wire, 7 x 8
x 6 ft.
Collection of the artist, courtesy of Knoedler & Co., New
York



Untitled
1962
welded steel and canvas, 68 x 72 x 30 in.
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of D. & J. de Menil



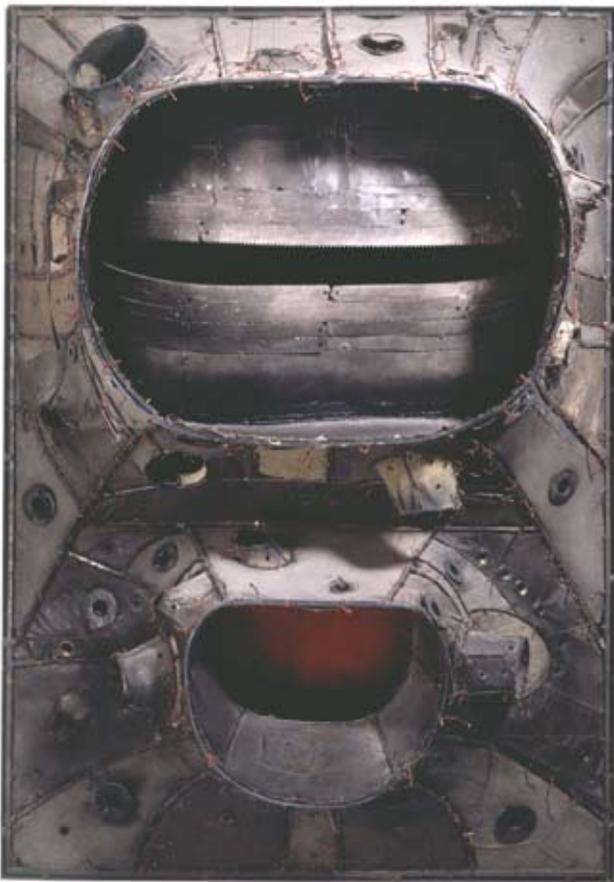
Lee Bontecou

Untitled

1966

graphite and soot on paper, 19
3/4 x 27 1/8 in.

Museum of Art, Rhode Island
School of Design, Providence
Albert Pilavin Memorial
Collection of Twentieth-Century
American Art



Untitled

1961

welded steel, canvas, wire, and velvet, 56 x 39 1/2 x 21 1/8 in.
Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; gift of the T.B.
Walker Foundation, 1966



Untitled

1961

graphite on paper, 22 5/8 x 28 3/4 in.
Menil Collection, Houston