

**MoMA HOSTS FINAL U.S. PRESENTATION OF LEE BONTECOU RETROSPECTIVE, FEATURING RECENT WORKS EXHIBITED FOR FIRST TIME****Last Exhibition at MoMA QNS Presents Four Decades of Sculptures and Drawings by Lee Bontecou*****Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*****July 30—September 27, 2004****MoMA QNS, The Museum of Modern Art, Queens**

NEW YORK, July 2004—The Museum of Modern Art presents *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, the most comprehensive exhibition ever assembled of the work of Lee Bontecou (American, b. 1931). The artist received early acclaim for her meticulously handcrafted wall reliefs of welded steel and canvas, which blurred the distinctions between painting and sculpture. These celebrated early works are shown alongside her more recent porcelain and wire sculptures. Evocative of celestial and natural forms, these later works are exhibited for the first time in this retrospective. The exhibition is organized by Elizabeth A. T. Smith, James W. Alsdorf Chief Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in association with Ann Philbin, Director, UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and is coordinated for The Museum of Modern Art by Lilian Tone, Assistant Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture. It will be on view at MoMA QNS, its final venue, from July 30 to September 27, 2004, after its showing at the organizing institutions in Los Angeles and Chicago.

The exhibition features 53 sculptures and 52 drawings from private and public collections as well as from the artist's own holdings. It documents the complexity and scope of Bontecou's art from the late 1950s through 2000, and includes many works from the past 30 years that have rarely or never before been publicly shown. Arranged loosely by chronology, the exhibition provides an unprecedented look at Bontecou's oeuvre within the context of its interweaving and recurring motifs, personal and universal themes, and masterful use of materials. During the past three decades, working from her studio in rural Pennsylvania, Bontecou produced a significant body of sculptures and drawings that are shown alongside seminal earlier works. Although often abstract, these works reveal Bontecou's unique artistic vocabulary of forms, from her earlier pieces featuring dark openings—suggestive of mystery, violence, nature, and the cosmos—to a pronounced ecological emphasis in her sculptures of flowers and fish, to her recent preoccupation with forms resembling celestial bodies.

As one of the leading visual artists of her generation, Bontecou created a strikingly personal body of work that was critically acclaimed during the 1960s and 1970s. One of a small number of women artists to receive broad recognition in the 1960s, Bontecou was included in the 1961 São Paulo Bienal and the 1964 Documenta III in Kassel, Germany. During this period her sculpture was presented in several important national and international group

exhibitions, including The Museum of Modern Art's *The Art of Assemblage* (1961) and *Americans 1963* (1963). Many of these works were acquired by major institutions and collectors. Five of these early pieces, now in the MoMA collection, will be presented in this retrospective.

Early Works

Bontecou's cement and terracotta sculpture of a fantastical bird created in 1957 opens the exhibition. This early work, while figurative and traditional in nature, shows a tendency toward the abstract, a balance that Bontecou has maintained throughout her career. The exhibition continues with some of Bontecou's most recognized works, created between 1959 and 1967. Primarily comprising wall-mounted, three-dimensional sculptures that juxtapose elements of machines, nature, and the human body, these works were groundbreaking in formal terms, using canvas and other fabrics stretched over welded-steel frames to enable her to create lightweight yet large-scale pieces. Bontecou consistently employs the motif of a dark circular opening in these works, a strong formal element that can be interpreted as biological or cosmological. War and violence, other themes in Bontecou's work, are directly referenced by the use of such objects and images such as helmets, airplane fuselages, and other army surplus; an untitled steel sculpture from 1959 depicts an abstracted machine gun. Drawings from this early period show increasing references to airplanes and airplane parts, as well as the wings of birds. Several soot drawings created in the late 1950s demonstrate Bontecou's pioneering use of an acetylene torch with the oxygen turned low, to create what she called "worldscapes." These drawings were evocative of outer space at a time when she was fascinated by advances in science and space exploration.

The style and intensity of Bontecou's work shifted after the birth of her daughter in the late 1960s, when she moved away from the dark tonalities and rough, aggressive character of her sculptures in canvas and steel to a gentler aesthetic defined by more naturalistic forms, including cocoons, shells, fish, and flowers. This shift is exemplified in the exhibition by several chrysalislike hanging sculptures of wood and silk created around 1967. A group of drawings from 1964/65 and 1967/68 show ballooning forms that are softer, more finished, and protective. During this period, Bontecou began to experiment with plastics, epoxy, and other synthetic materials to create molded forms. Several examples of vacuum-formed plastic flowers and fish reflect Bontecou's continued search for new materials and techniques while working with recognizable plant and animal imagery. This body of work was inspired by Bontecou's increasing preoccupation with human degradation of the natural world; her plant and animal forms are sinister and mutated—one plant even wears a gas mask.

Despite wide recognition for her work, Bontecou began to withdraw from the New York art scene in 1971. That same year, Leo Castelli presented what would become her last solo exhibition in New York for nearly thirty years. Bontecou then joined the faculty of Brooklyn College, where she taught until 1991.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, Bontecou concentrated on her teaching and her family, while also continuing to draw and experiment with more intimately scaled sculpture. Drawings completed during this time reveal a wide

range of images: fireballs, insectlike shapes, flowers, plants, eyes, and, more recently, waves, landscapes, seascapes, and birds.

Recent Works

Among the most highly anticipated works in the exhibition are those completed after Bontecou's retirement from teaching. During this time, Bontecou continued to expand a vocabulary she had first begun to explore in the late 1970s. These sculptures, completed in the 1990s after years of meticulous handwork, include both large- and small-scale works that reflect the artist's fascination with celestial forms. Bontecou employs round porcelain pieces carefully connected by welded light metals and twisted wires. In contrast to the rough-hewn earlier works, these extremely delicate pieces suggest an organic construction over time. These porcelain and wire sculptures are suspended from the ceiling and suggest galactic beings in flight.

Drawings have played an important role in Bontecou's oeuvre throughout her career, and those from the late 1990s resonate powerfully with ideas and images expressed in her sculpture. She depicts fantastic landscapes and creatures in colored pencil drawings on paper. Synthesizing figurative, organic, and mechanistic references, both her sculptures and drawings suggest various states of transformation between the natural and man-made, order and chaos, delicacy and ferocity.

SPONSORSHIP

The exhibition was jointly organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. The national sponsor of the exhibition is Altria Group. The national tour is made possible by The Henry Luce Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, Friedrike Merck, and Sarah-Ann and Werner H. Kramarsky. The accompanying catalogue was made possible, in part, by Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro, and The Ruth and Murray Gribin Foundation.

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PUBLICATION

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, published by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the UCLA Hammer Museum, in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc. The 212-page catalogue contains 175 full-color illustrations and is the first publication to thoroughly document Lee Bontecou's work. It includes essays by Donna De Salvo, Mona Hadler, Donald Judd, Elizabeth Smith, and Robert Storr. The catalogue is available at the MoMA Stores and online at www.momastore.org. Cloth cover: \$50.00.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

There will be a conversation with the artist and art historian Mona Hadler on Tuesday, September 21, at 6:30 p.m., and Gallery Talks with artist Patricia Cronin on September 20 and art historian Dore Ashton on September 23. For more information, please see separate press release.

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