

*Lee Bontecou: Drawn Worlds* is organized by the Menil Collection and curated by Michelle White.

This exhibition is generously supported by Louisa Stude Sarofim; The Brown Foundation, Inc.; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; The John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation; Marilyn Oshman; Agnes Gund; and the City of Houston.

## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### A Conversation

**Thursday, February 27, 7:00 p.m.**

Curator Michelle White is joined by Maura Reilly, executive director of the Linda Pace Foundation; and Veronica Roberts, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin, in a conversation about the exhibition.

### Lee Bontecou: Nature, Wonder, Horror, and Play

**Tuesday, April 1, 7:00 p.m.**

Mona Hadler, professor of art history at Brooklyn College and the Graduate School of the City University of New York, discusses Lee Bontecou's work.

## BOOK

### *Lee Bontecou: Drawn Worlds*

Michelle White, with contributions by Dore Ashton and Joan Banach

144 pages, 91 illus.; hardcover, \$50

Available at the Menil Bookstore

front cover:

Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1963. Soot and aniline dye on muslin. 38¾ x 36 inches (98.4 x 91.4 cm). Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, Gift of Katherine Komaroff Goodman. Photo courtesy of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art

All works by Lee Bontecou © Lee Bontecou 2014

## THE MENIL COLLECTION

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## Lee Bontecou Drawn Worlds

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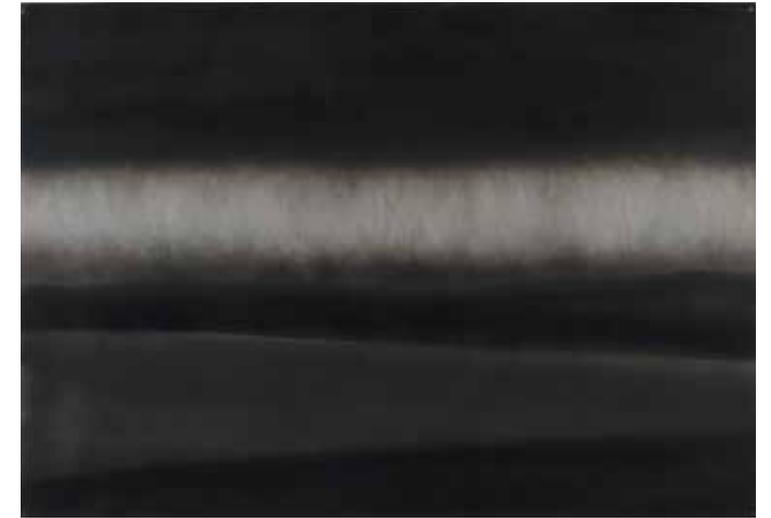
The little pencil is a magic box. . . . You can take a piece of paper and walk anywhere.

—Lee Bontecou, 2009<sup>1</sup>

American artist Lee Bontecou (b. 1931) established a significant reputation in the 1960s with her pioneering sculptures made of raw and expressionistic materials. Though best known for her three-dimensional work, drawing has always been an equally important component of her artistic practice. *Lee Bontecou: Drawn Worlds* brings together a selection of works on paper from throughout the artist's over fifty-year-long career, from early soot drawings created with a welding torch to recent works in graphite and colored pencil. Calling her drawings "worldscapes," Bontecou has produced an incredible body of work that propels us into fantastic space.

Bontecou understands drawing as a process of discovery, a place to solve problems, and a means to explore the imagination. While the artist plans and experiments on paper in anticipation of constructing her sculptural forms, there is not always a traditional progression in her process from drawing, as foundational step, to sculpture, as final outcome. She often goes back and forth between three and two dimensions, and there is not necessarily a clear point of origin for an idea or an image.<sup>2</sup> And though many of her drawings are formally intertwined with her sculptures, they ultimately stand on their own as works in and of themselves. In them, she employs, even relishes, methods unique to the medium, revealing her deeply pleasure-full and tactile approach, as well as the great care she places in the art of drafting.

The variety of drawing techniques Bontecou employs is extraordinary. She achieves slick surfaces by working on plastic or by prepping paper supports with gesso, leading to smooth passages of graphite. There are bold, repetitious, and impressionistic marks inspired by her love of drawings by Vincent van Gogh, stratified bands of hatched lines, areas of reworked surfaces where an eraser has worn down the grain of the paper's weave, and precise marks made with a thin lead tip that are matched by broad swaths of dusty blacks. In her works on black paper, light reflects off silvery pencil lines, causing them to softly appear and disappear. The artist renders some of her drawings by pushing her fingertips into chalky black, leaving feathery prints. For others, she



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1958. Soot on paper, 27 x 39 inches (68.6 x 99.1 cm). Collection of Gail and Tony Ganz, Los Angeles. Photo: Ed Glendinning

scrapes into the soot with a knife for an inverse effect, dispersing the dark pigment with the sharp blade.

One of Bontecou's most innovative approaches to material involves the use of soot. While in Rome on a Fulbright scholarship in the late 1950s, she discovered that she could use a welding torch to draw. Turning off the oxygen to an oxyacetylene torch, she deployed only an acetylene flame, which has a lower temperature and does not set paper on fire. The acetylene flame also produces more soot, and as a result, she discovered that, by moving the torch back and forth or blowing the flame from below the paper, she could spray the carbon-based powder and incrementally build up layers in gradated bands. The sweeping gestures created modulated tones, like those made by a commercial airbrush. With its seductive, velvety presence and illusion of depth, the black soot generated a world of its own.

The content, or imagery, in Bontecou's drawings is as important as her technique. In contrast to many artists of her generation, her marks rarely sit on the surface as themselves; they are not discrete, autonomous, or autographic, nor are they meant to be read only as a mark made by the artist. Instead, she creates imaginary spaces by using the support as an entrée into another realm and insistently puts her



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1982. Colored pencil on colored paper, 24 x 36 inches (61 x 91.4 cm). Collection of the artist. Photo: Paul Hester

marks in the service of description. Often using framing devices—lines, halos of graphite and soot, and hazy rectangles and spheres that fall just within the perimeter of the paper—Bontecou draws the viewer into the miniature universes of her drawings.

Presented retrospectively, the drawings in this exhibition show how she has faithfully returned to certain images that reflect her fascination with and deep reverence for the natural world, which she sets alongside, or merges with, representations of human futility related to technological and scientific progress. Model airplanes, sharp teeth, billowing sails, eyeballs, avian skulls, crab shells, saw blades, submarines, flowers, vertebrae, fish, prison bars, black holes, and aeronautical and automotive parts are among the images that comingle in her compositions.

The void is one of the most important images that reoccurs throughout Bontecou's work. It appears as an anthropomorphic black hole; a sphere with teeth, eyeballs, and eyelashes; or a portal to dark worlds. It is an unlikely anchor, with sails billowing from its core; an orb of light; or a sun rising over the horizon. Shifting between depictions of empty space to representations of things that are of the world, it embodies death and absence but also becomes a generative space, holding potential for creation. The evolution of the void in Bontecou's drawings is traced in one of her more recent works, *Untitled*, 2011

(reproduced here). In it, a grid of voids reads like an index to the motif as it has appeared over the course of five decades.

The void, however, is by no means the only subject that consistently reappears in her drawings. A retrospective study reveals fascinating repetitions that are overtly political in their leanings. They can be read contextually, from the era of the Cold War and the birth of the environmental movement to today, as natural and mechanized disasters increase in frequency. This connection is best seen in Bontecou's depictions of gas masks. In addition to their use as a military and civilian defense against chemical warfare, gas masks were a common accessory of environmental activists in the 1960s and 1970s. They first appear in a small group of drawings from 1961 in which faces with wide eyes seem to have grown into the floating contraptions. They are uncanny creatures that look as though they have emerged from a dystopian future.

What is so remarkable about Bontecou's evocation of alarm is that it is counterpointed by an equally poetic wonder in the natural world. Where there are gas masks, there are also glimmering ocean waves. Such dichotomous subject matter is at the core of her examination of



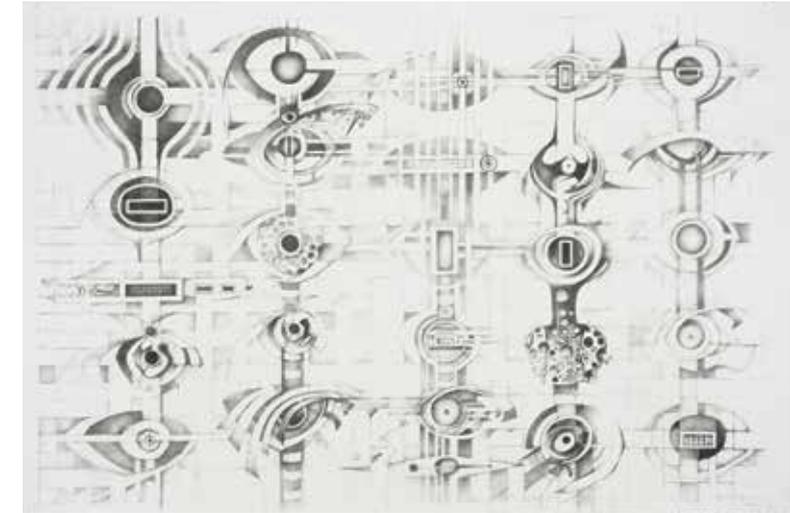
Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1961. Graphite on paper, 22 x 28¾ inches (57.5 x 72.9 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester

the balance and nature of things. Writing in 1963, Bontecou expressed the aspiration that her work could offer the chance “to glimpse some of the fear, hope, ugliness, and beauty that exists in all of us and which hangs over all the young people today.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, she has addressed the paradox of formal beauty and difficult content by contemplating a stealth bomber; she said of the awesome war machine, “It’s a beautiful thing up in the air, a piece of sculpture! But what it does is horror.”<sup>4</sup>

Spending her childhood summers on the Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia, home of the most dramatic tidal variations on earth, Bontecou was enchanted early on by the natural world. It was in the early 1960s, however, that her reverence took on a political dimension. The burgeoning politics of environmentalism—the “environmental movement” as it became known in the late 1950s—was taking root among a growing public in the United States, and the artist, like many, was deeply influenced by Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*. Pioneering in its accessible language that spoke to a mass audience, Carson's best-selling ecological text was prophetic. Its condemnation of the detrimental effects of pesticides articulated the absurdity of man's conceit to control nature.

Natural and manmade forms and the binary of freedom and entrapment continue to converge in Bontecou's drawings of fish and flowers. Unlike her early naturalistic studies, they are distinguished by strong contours and are starkly frontal. The flowers are composed of round disks, with petals that circle a central sphere. The fish swim in aquatic worlds, but they are unnaturally stacked or shown in profile. Corresponding to her sculptures of the time, the drawings bear representations of bolts and fasteners at the base of the stems and in the petals, as if the flowers have been pieced together, artificially constructed of plastic. Along with her imaginary sea creatures (later drawings include hybrid sea monsters with reptilian scales, feathery floating beings that look like elaborate lionfish, and spongy anemone-like plant forms with porous skins), this convergence reveals the heart of her work, the pulsing reverence for the biological world and the uneasy, treacherous merging of the organic and the artificial, nature and culture.

Emerging from the agitated cultural backdrop that defined the post–World War II era, Bontecou's drawings grapple with a broad range of concerns that her generation confronted while coming of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s: the reverberations of the Holocaust; the seeming expansion of the heavens as space exploration became a reality; apocalyptic Cold War fears of nuclear or toxic demise; and



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 2011. Graphite on paper, 30 x 44 inches (76 x 111.8 cm). Collection of the artist. Photo: Paul Hester

budding environmental fatalism. Yet such cultural and ecological themes are entirely contemporary; the preoccupation with disaster and instability pointedly speaks to the tenor of our time. The artist's works prophetically assert how a conventional approach to drawing—as both a window onto the world and a direct entryway to the inner realm of the artist's imagination—can help us negotiate our changing and increasingly fragile place in a universe that is as stunning and awesome as it is terrifying and piteous.

Michelle White, adapted from her essay  
in *Lee Bontecou: Drawn Worlds*

#### NOTES

1. Lee Bontecou, interview with Dore Ashton, January 10, 2009, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-lee-bontecou-15647>.
2. See Tony Towle, “Two Conversations With Lee Bontecou,” *Print Collector's Newsletter* 2, no. 2 (May–June 1971).
3. Bontecou, quoted in Dorothy C. Miller, *Americans 1963* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1963), 12.
4. Bontecou, quoted in Paul Trachtman, “Lee Bontecou's Brave New World,” *Smithsonian* (September 2004).