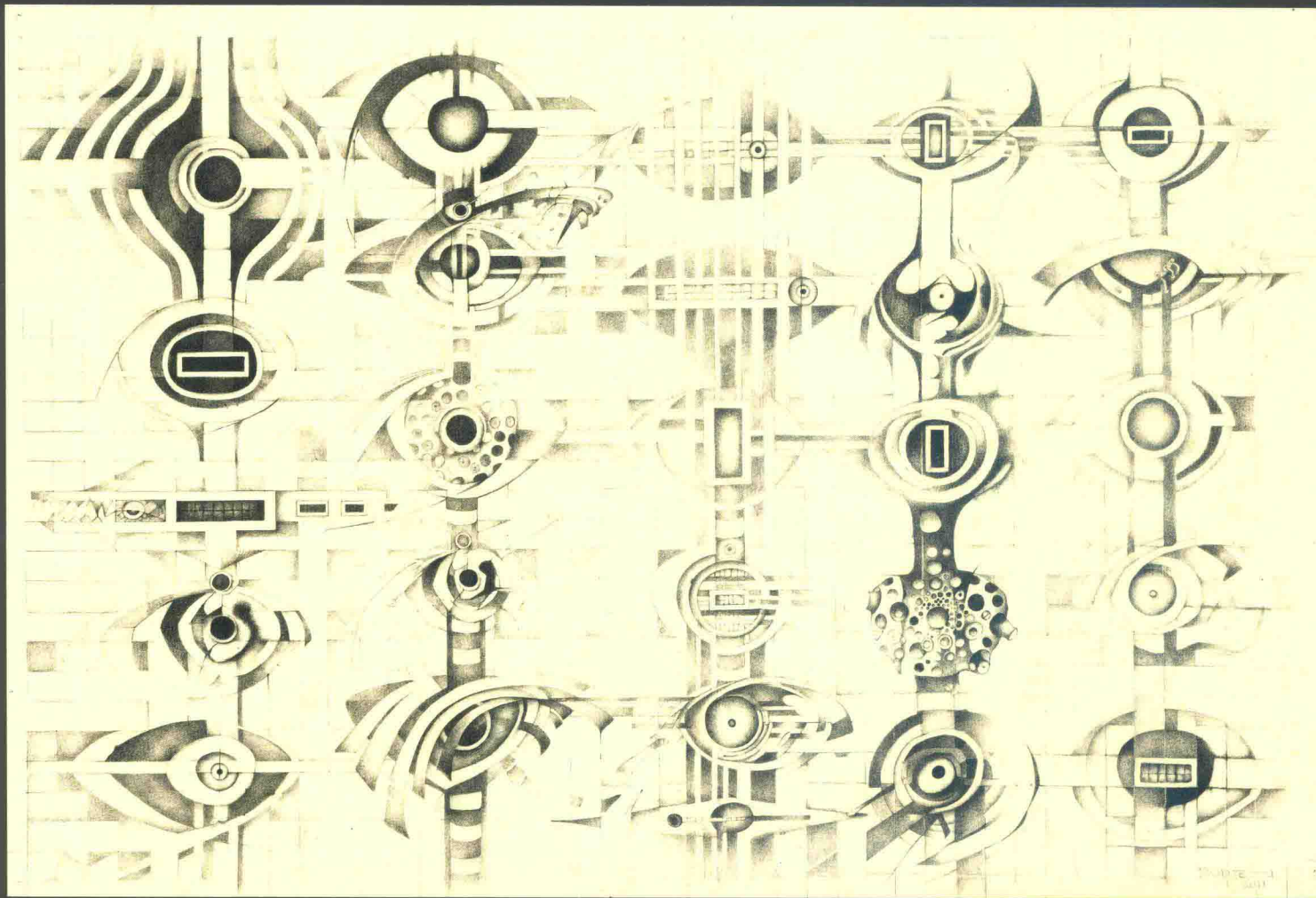


Lee Bontecou



Drawn Worlds

Lee Bontecou
Drawn Worlds

Michelle White

with writings by
Dore Ashton and Joan Banach

The Menil Collection, Houston
Distributed by Yale University Press,
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Published in conjunction with the exhibition
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organized by The Menil Collection, Houston
Curated by Michelle White

The Menil Collection, Houston
January 31–May 11, 2014

Princeton University Art Museum, New Jersey
June 28–September 21, 2014

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"Lee Bontecou's Ledger" © 2014 Joan Banach

Artwork by Lee Bontecou © Lee Bontecou 2014

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Frontispiece: Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1963. Soot and
aniline dye on muslin, 38 ³/₄ x 36 inches (98.4 x 91.4 cm).
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University,
Ithaca, NY, Gift of Katherine Komaroff Goodman

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Foreword

The Menil Collection is pleased to present *Lee Bontecou: Drawn Worlds*, the first retrospective of the drawings of Lee Bontecou. The carefully selected works in this exhibition and catalogue represent a significant aspect of her practice that spans over five decades and vigorously continues today. As the title *Drawn Worlds* suggests, these drawings expand the notion of space into vast dimensions, fold into pictorial space, and create fantastic landscapes. Propelling the imagination into cosmic terrains, they are as beautiful as they are frightening. They initiate an extraordinarily contemporary conversation about the fragility of our place in the natural world.

I would like to first thank Princeton University Art Museum, whose participation brings this exhibition to a wider national audience. It has again been a pleasure to work with Director James Christen Steward; Haskell Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Kelly Baum; Heather and Paul G. Haaga Jr., Class of 1970, Curator of Prints and Drawings Laura Giles; and the excellent staff at the museum.

We are grateful to the artist for lending such a significant group of work from her own collection and to the institutional and private collectors who have generously shared their works with us: the Arkansas Arts Center Foundation Collection, Little Rock; The Art Institute of Chicago; Rosette Delug; Gail and Tony Ganz; Agnes Gund; halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld; the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Jeanne and Michael Klein; Barbara Lee; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Marc Selwyn Fine Art, Los Angeles; John McEnroe; Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York; the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Princeton University Art Museum, New Jersey; Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut; and those lenders who wish to remain anonymous.

Special thanks go to Curator Michelle White for her vision and dedication to this project. She has organized the show under the auspices of the Menil Drawing Institute, an initiative that seeks to create a substantive dialogue about modern and contemporary drawing through exhibition and research projects. Like this exhibition and publication, the institute is formed around an inquiry into the nature of drawing and its fundamental role in artistic production.

We are indebted to the ongoing support of the Menil Board of Trustees, most deeply to President Janet Hobby and Chairman Louisa Stude Sarofim. Further thanks are due to our sponsors, who have made this exhibition and catalogue possible: 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. And finally, my sincere gratitude goes to the artist, Lee Bontecou, whose incredible drawings provide us with a new way of seeing the world.

Josef Helfenstein
Director
The Menil Collection

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I'd like to thank Lee Bontecou. It has been an honor and a pleasure to spend this time immersed in her drawn worlds and to bring this exhibition to fruition. Special thanks go to Joan Banach, whose thoughtful and insightful approach to all aspects of this project, as well as her commitment to the artist, has been a guiding force; and to Ann Freedman, who has been a tireless champion for this exhibition from the very beginning.

I'd like to extend my gratitude to those whose work on Bontecou paved the way; thank you Elizabeth Smith, Ann Philbin, Veronica Roberts, Donna De Salvo, Anna Katz, and Jo Applin for your time and conversation. I would also like to acknowledge the support of my colleagues Ian Berry, Calvin Brown, Kathy Curry, Susan Davidson, Alison de Lima Greene, Nicole Gallo, halley k harrisburg, Carmen Hermo, Jan Howard, Andrea Inselmann, Per Haubro Jensen, Leslie Jones, Lawrence Markey, Mark Pascale, Jessica Phifer, Michael Rosenfeld, Ann Wagner, Waqas Wajahat, Daniel Weinberg, and Oliver Wick. The early enthusiasm of Kelly Baum, curator at the Princeton University Art Museum, was also invaluable. She played a critical role in bringing the exhibition to Princeton.

Thanks are also due to art historian Mona Hadler. Her scholarship on Bontecou has been pioneering, and I am thankful for her intellectual generosity, which has guided my own thinking on Bontecou's work. Thanks are also due to Dore Ashton. Her contribution to the field is uncontested and she has been a critical voice in shaping our collective understanding of the artist's work. I am grateful for her thoughtful reflection in this publication.

This catalogue has been made possible by the Menil Collection's incredible Publishing Department: Director Joseph N. Newland and Assistant Editor Sarah E. Robinson. The expertise Bethany Johns brought to the catalogue design and Karen Kelly to the editing of the manuscripts were also invaluable. Thanks are due to Erh-Chun Amy Chien, Rights and Reproductions Manager, for her assistance with catalogue production.

This exhibition would not be possible without the continued excellence of the entire Menil Collection staff. I would like to thank Menil registrars Anne Adams and Heather Schweikhardt for ensuring the safe transport and seamless presentation of the work in the exhibition.

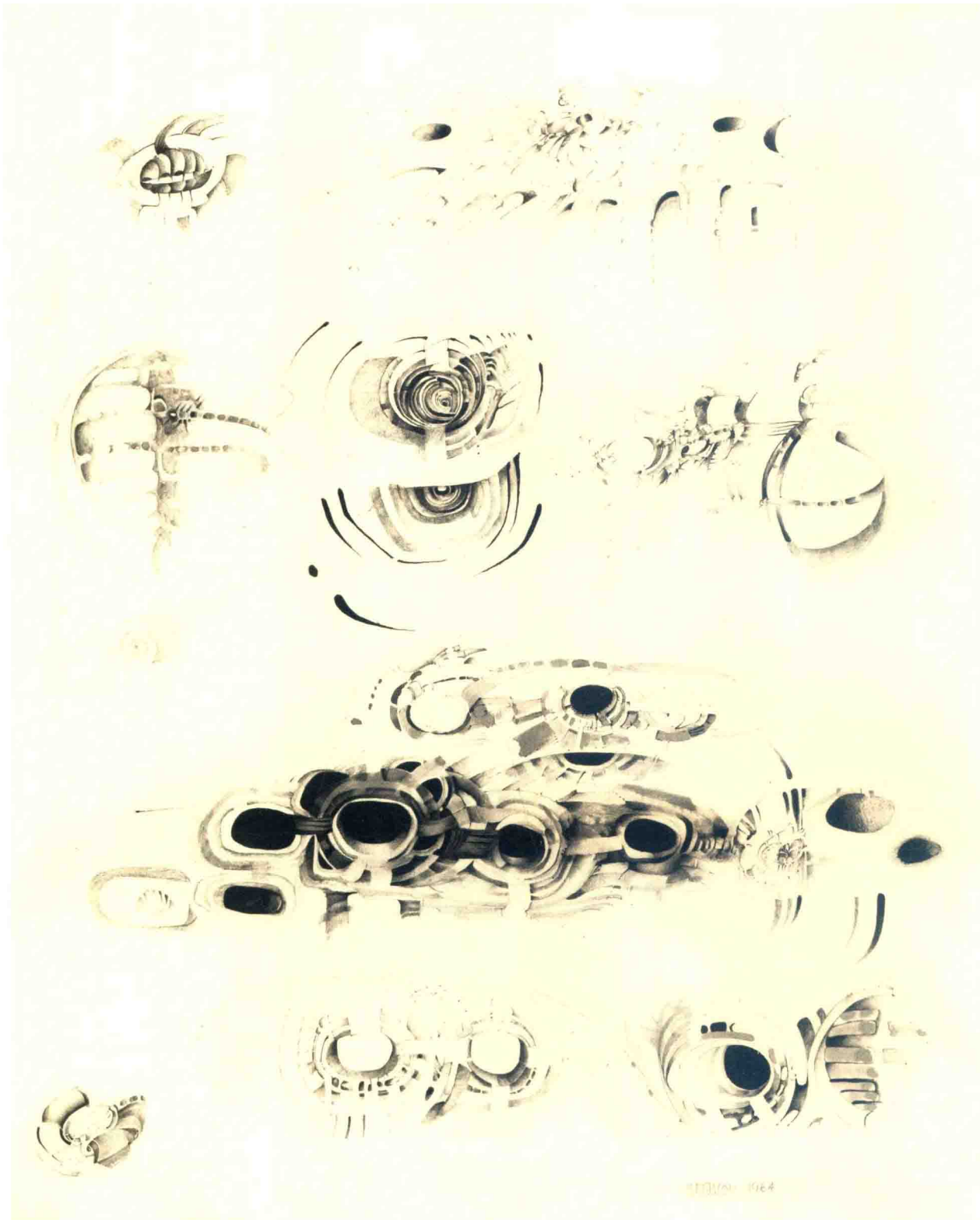
Special thanks are due to Budget and Project Manager Melanie Crader, Chief Financial Officer Michael Cannon, and Deputy Director and Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Kolasinski for their oversight of the project. I am grateful to Eric Wolf, Librarian, for his assistance with research and for the efforts of Alexis Harrigan, former Acting Director of Advancement; Peter Hyland, former Director of Development; and their staff on behalf of the exhibition and catalogue.

Thank you to Adam Baker, Framer; Thomas Walsh and his colleagues in Art Services, Tobin Becker and Tony Rubio; and exhibition designers Brooke Stroud and Eric Zimmerman for their diligence and professionalism in ensuring that the exhibition was installed with the utmost care and sensitivity. I would also like to acknowledge our Security and Facilities staffs under the direction of Getachew Mengesha, Steve McConathy, and Tim Ware for their role in guaranteeing the continued safety of the works in the exhibition. I extend my thanks to Karl Kilian and Tony Martinez in Public Programs, Jennifer Hennessy and Amanda Shagrin in Membership, and Vance Muse and Gretchen Sammons in Communications.

Special thanks go to Paper Conservator Jan Burandt, whose knowledge and expertise have provided important insights into Bontecou's drawings. I would like to especially thank curatorial Administrative Assistant Tessa Ferreyros for her invaluable support on all aspects of the project and my colleagues in the Curatorial Department, Toby Kamps, Susan Sutton, and Clare Elliott, for their support. I am also grateful to former interns Madeline Kelly, Emily Griffith, and Sarah Beck for their research for the catalogue and exhibition.

Thank you to the passionate lenders to the show. Your love for Bontecou's work has been inspiring. I am grateful for the support of my friends and family, and to Haden, always.

Michelle White
Curator
The Menil Collection



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1964. Graphite on paper, 28 1/2 x 22 1/2 inches (72.4 x 57.2 cm). Collection of Gail and Tony Ganz, Los Angeles

Lee Bontecou's Drawn Worlds

Michelle White

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

—Lee Bontecou, 2009¹

In the work of Lee Bontecou, drawing is everywhere. It is in the welded steel frames that support stretched pieces of coarse cloth, the wire stitches that hold together delicate ceramic forms, and the black soot that sweeps across muslin surfaces. It is in the tentacle-like strands of translucent resin that drip from plastic flower petals, the contours that define hovering space-age sculptures, and the linear shadows that fall on the wall when light touches the surfaces of suspended forms.² Like simple graphite marks on a piece of paper, the lines in Bontecou's work indicate space, delineate figure and ground, and in their more poetic role suggest deep and mysterious realms that belie clear narrative interpretation. Indeed, the artist hopes that the enigmas of her drawn worlds will produce diverse responses, linking intimate, individual human emotions to concerns far greater in scope.³

While general principles of drawing, regarding line, mark making, perspective, and process, are woven throughout her three-dimensional work in diverse ways, Bontecou also embraces a traditional drawing practice that has resulted in a large corpus of two-dimensional works on both paper and supports more typically associated with painting, such as muslin, stretched canvas, and, occasionally, metal. This body of work spans her more than fifty-year career, starting in the late 1950s, when she began to use a welding blowtorch as a drawing tool while studying in Rome, and continuing through today, as she works in her Pennsylvania studio. Like her sculptures, her drawings demonstrate how faithfully she has returned to imagery symbolic of the natural wonders of the universe, which she sets alongside, or merges with, representations of human futility related to technological and scientific progress. Model airplanes, sharp teeth, billowing sails, eyeballs, aviary skulls, crab shells, saw blades, submarines, flowers, vertebrae, fish, prison bars, black holes, and aero-

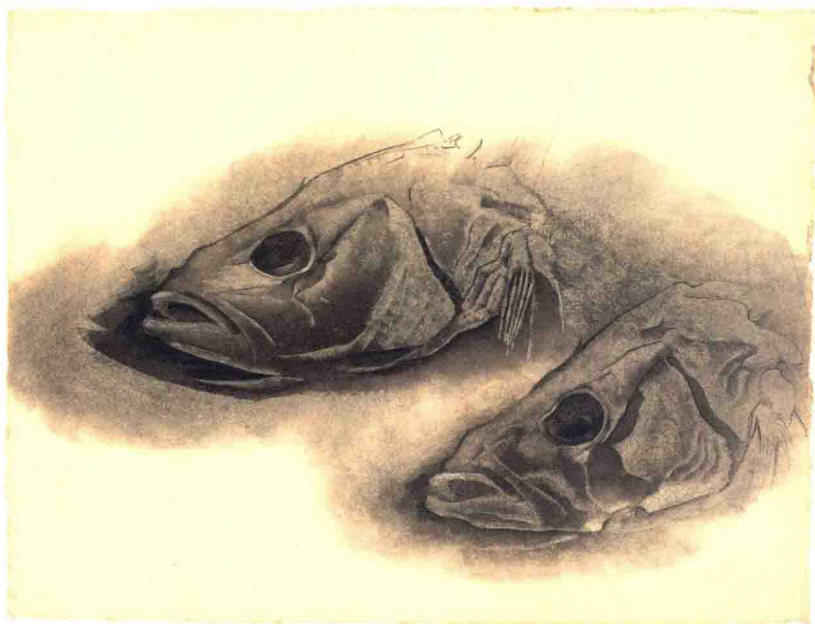
nautical and automotive parts are among a list of her drawn subjects and materials. Emerging from an agitated cultural backdrop that defined the post-World War II era, her drawings grapple with the broad range of concerns that her generation confronted while coming of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s: the reverberations of the Holocaust, the seeming expansion of the heavens as space exploration became a reality, apocalyptic Cold War fears of toxic demise, and budding environmental fatalism. Such preoccupations with, if not fascination and fear of, disaster and instability catapult her work's relevance into the present; for they pointedly speak to anxieties that fuel our own time.

Bontecou's ability to conjure both fear and fascination is palpable. In reviews of some of the artist's first exhibitions at Leo Castelli Gallery in the early 1960s, critics delightfully, though pejoratively, hyperbolized this aspect of her work. One writer claimed that a particular sculpture, ridged with sharp saw blades, was so "sinister" it made him want to reach for a Beretta.⁴ Another likened a sculpture's gaping crevice to a "primordial funnel" that presented the "female archetype at its most ugly."⁵ 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 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."⁶ 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."⁷

Like many contemporary sculptors, Bontecou takes a traditional approach to drawing. The flat surfaces of the paper supports are not only the preparatory staging

ground for three-dimensional work but also the point of origin for her imagery. They demonstrate how her acute observations of the living and breathing world are the generative sources for her work. One of her first courses at the Art Students League in New York City in the early 1950s revolved around a methodology developed by the school's former instructor Kimon Nicolaïdes. His influential book, *The Natural Way to Draw* (1941), which the artist still keeps on her bookshelf, established a holistic way of thinking about drawing through a series of exercises.⁸ For Nicolaïdes, the discipline requires "physical contact with all sorts of objects through the senses," and rigorous practice guided by the laws of nature.⁹ "Look not at art history and art theory for inspiration but out into the world," he wrote, further encouraging his students to make "fresh" and "vivid" contact with actual objects through touch and smell. Bontecou's early life studies, including drawings of crickets and the heads of decapitated fish (see below) are emblematic of this directed and sensorial gaze.

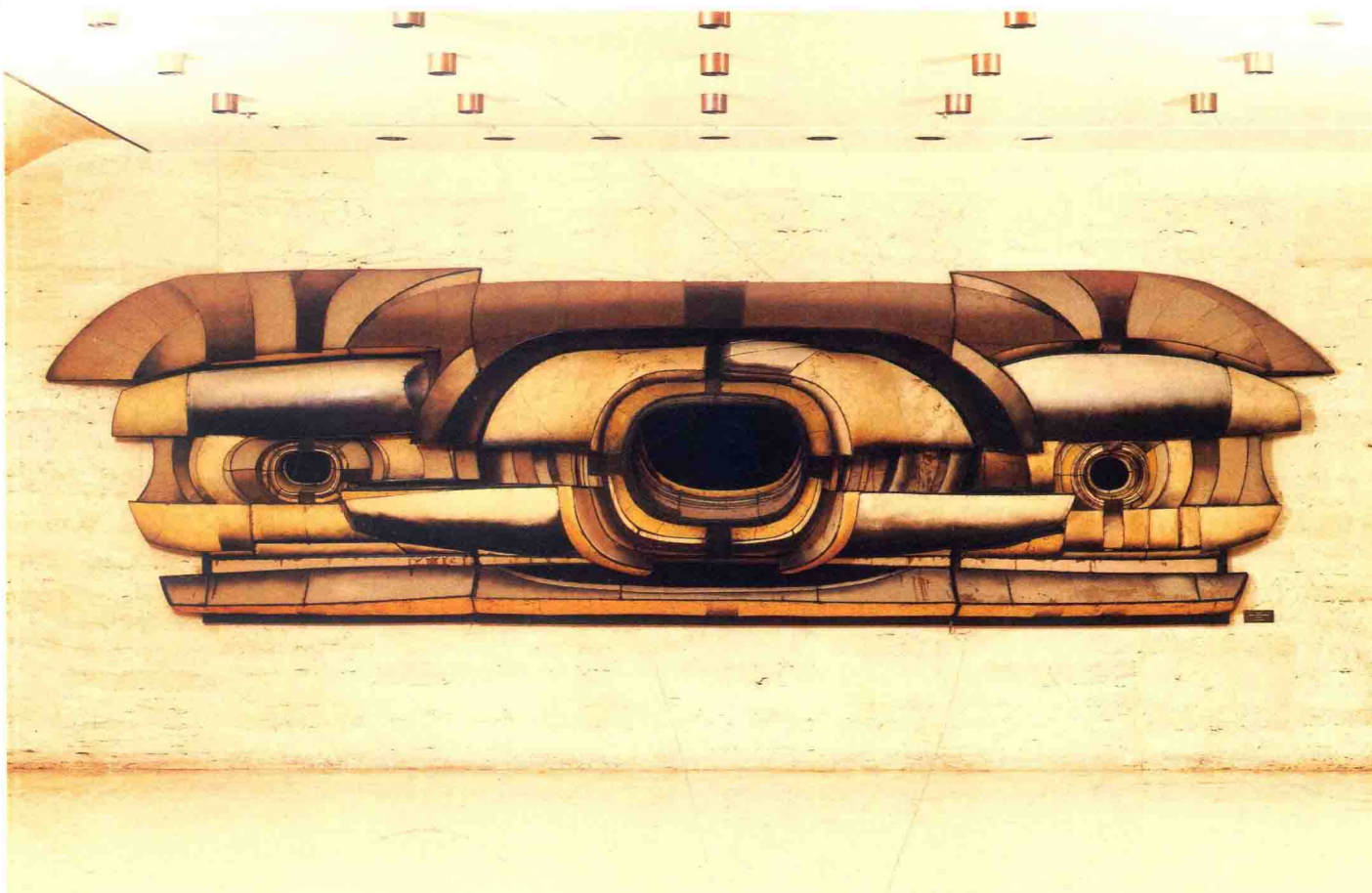
Beginning in the late 1950s and continuing today, Bontecou plans and experiments on paper with charcoal, chalk, gouache, pastel, and graphite, among many other mediums, in anticipation of building, welding, and constructing her sculptural forms, forms that in turn reappear in her drawings.¹⁰ She understands drawing as a process of discovery, a place to solve problems, and a means to explore the imagination. Bontecou's drawings of the early 1960s, including those found in a sketchbook dating from this time (see pp. 24–31), particularly demonstrate how she uses the process to figure out the composition and structure of her large-scale reliefs.¹¹ Richard S. Field, the curator of the first exhibition devoted to Bontecou's works on paper, has noted that her studies are revealing because they document the way she connects seemingly disparate lines of inquiry. In her drawings, he wrote, "One can actually see the artist shuttle back and forth between a lobster and a jet engine or find a common denominator between a fish and a spaceship."¹²



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled (a study of fish)*, ca. 1958.
Charcoal and graphite on paper, 10 x 13 inches
(25.4 x 33 cm). Collection of the artist



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled (cricket)*, 1957. Pen and ink
on paper, 12 1/2 x 8 5/8 inches (31.8 x 21.9 cm).
Collection of the artist



Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1964. Welded steel, canvas, epoxy, resin, and Plexiglas, 5 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 2 feet (1.7 x 6.5 x .6 m). Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Inc., New York State Theater, Gift of Albert A. List Foundation, Inc.

A drawing from 1964 (pp. 8 and 57), for example, indirectly relates to the monumental twenty-one-foot sculpture from the same year, which was commissioned by architect Philip Johnson for the then newly built New York State Theater at Lincoln Center (above). Made from canvas, Plexiglas, soot, and welded car and airplane parts—including a turret from a World War II bomber—the sculpture comprises a horizontal sequence of dark circles circumscribed by curved shapes that reiterate the central figures in rippling reverberations. The drawing consists of variations on the motif. Nested contours spiral from black holes. Simultaneously protruding and recessing, they pictorially parallel the dynamic physical effect of the large sculpture, which both seduces and repels the viewer.

In considering this drawing, it is interesting to note the small depictions of a snail shell and a crustacean-like insect nestled into the left side of the paper. The organic specimens, with undulating patterns in their exoskeletons, provide evidence that Bontecou's drawings are not only starting points for her three-dimensional work but also

exercises inspired by Nicolaïdes's mandate to look to nature while engaging the senses. It is as if these modest insertions, or marginalia, have been rendered from close study of objects on the shelf of curiosities in her studio or from items pulled from her pockets, which we might imagine are full of such tactile inspirations as shells, fragments of vertebrae, ladybug wings, tufts of animal fur, and broken pieces of pottery.

There is not, in fact, always a traditional progression in her process from drawing, as foundational step, to sculpture, as final outcome. Discussing the fluidity of her practice, she has mentioned that she often goes back and forth between three and two dimensions, and there is not necessarily a clear point of origination for an idea or an image.¹³ Moreover, while many of her drawings are formally intertwined with her sculptures, we can also consider them separately by looking in particular at those that utilize techniques unique to drawing. Revealing her deeply pleasurable and tactile approach, as well as the great care she places in the art of drafting, these methods of marking

manifest diverse effects, which the artist achieves by pushing, smudging, and rubbing her mediums (primarily charcoal, chalk, pastel, soot, and graphite) against a surface.

The variety of drawing techniques Bontecou employs is extraordinary. She procures slick and smooth surfaces by working on plastic or by prepping paper supports with gesso in a preliminary step that leads to velvety-soft 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, and areas of reworked surfaces where an eraser has worn down the grain of the paper's weave. Tiny and precise marks made with a thin lead tip are matched by broad swaths of dusty blacks, and 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 black soot, leaving feathery prints. For others, she scrapes into the soot with a knife for an inverse effect, dispersing the dark pigment with the sharp blade. The voluptuous forms in her series of Wave drawings, which tend to swell in repeating bands of colored pencil and graphite (see pp. 103 and 105), exhibit such drafting acumen that they have been compared to *écorché*, anatomical drawings that depict the underlying human corporal structure. It is as if she has peeled back a skin to uncover rippling muscles and tendons.¹⁴

Through a Narrow Window

... a very narrow window through which at a distance one can see only a crack of light. As one comes closer, the view grows wider and wider, until finally through this same narrow window one is looking at the universe.

—George Wald¹⁵

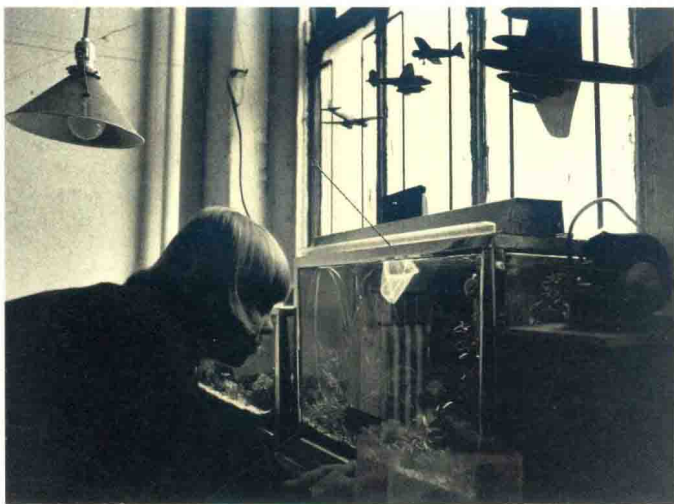
The present exhibition considers Bontecou's drawing practice as distinct—one that, while informing her sculpture, does not always directly relate to it—and this allows for a careful examination that effectively counters the view that her work can be positioned outside art history, as has often been claimed.¹⁶ Instead, it suggests that the work plays a role of critical refusal or, at least, that it represents an alternative to practices of art making that were in line with dominant critiques when she came of age as an

artist. In addition, this consideration allows for a compelling observation about Bontecou's drawing practice in relation to a larger conversation about the role of drawing in modern and contemporary art. For what is so unique about Bontecou's drawing is its subversion of the hierarchy of form and content—the *how* and the *what* that have come to define the discourse of modern art since the advent of post-World War II abstraction.

In Bontecou's drawings, meaning is primarily found in the content, not in the form. Unlike her sculptures, which fold into real space, her drawings are primarily representations on flat surfaces. This simple, if not obvious, observation is critical because the goal of her drawing is not abstraction but description. As opposed to many artists of her generation, Bontecou's 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.¹⁷ Instead, they tend to forcefully distinguish figure and ground. As such, her marks show that her approach to the discipline is one of illusionistic projection. She creates imaginary spaces by using the support as an entrée into another realm and insistently puts her marks in the service of creating a three-dimensional effect. While uncommon in the 1960s, illusionism has a formidable history in the Western tradition of offering a window onto the world.¹⁸ Indeed, such spatial allure, which pulls the eye into the flat plane and allows for a suspension of disbelief, forcefully defines the artist's drawings.

Bontecou invites her viewers on a journey through the open window, drawing them into the picture plane by deploying framing devices, with lines, halos of graphite and soot, and hazy rectangles and spheres that fall just within the perimeter of the paper, rarely dropping off the edge. It seems as though we are looking through portals into microcosmic fantasy worlds, small pockets of captured nature, worlds reminiscent of aviaries, grottos, dioramas, and snow globes. Looking into such captivating miniature universes, we are sucked into an illusory space. A photograph taken at the artist's studio in 1963 shows Bontecou looking into a fish tank (opposite). She is so close to the glass that the borders of the container must have disappeared from her scope of vision; she has been transported into the aquarium's dreamscape.

The horizon line that Bontecou has introduced in many drawings also serves as a device that both displaces and pulls in the viewer. This grounding mechanism produces a perceptual shift. Her smudged graphite and web-like



Lee Bontecou in her Wooster Street studio, New York, 1963

forms in a group of 1963 drawings (see p. 68) would hardly constitute recognizable scenes if not for slight indications of horizon lines. The spatial perspective generates picture planes that allow the imagery to operate microscopically and macroscopically. At once, the image can be read as both a strange cellular organism and a sprawling panorama of a lunar landscape; an eye of an insect and a vast, starry sky. The dualities—big and small, inner and outer, light and dark—are formal, but their effects are psychological. We become explorers of strange mindscapes. The Surrealist artist Matta was known to describe his visionary landscapes as “inscapes.”¹⁹ With just a hint of a horizon line, he created fictional dreamscapes, filled with floating figures and forms, that for him served as retreats from an external reality of war and destruction (see above). They, like Bontecou’s amorphous and cosmic terrains, pull viewers into the cerebral and hallucinatory spheres of the psyche. Indeed, she considers the process of drawing as a metaphoric journey into an alternate and intangible realm, explaining, “you can travel miles within a drawing and not have to take all the baggage along. I always envied poets because of that fact. They can take the pencil in their head.”²⁰

A Bontecou drawing, therefore, is like a proverbial universe-in-a-box and can therefore be seen within a lineage of collections and displays that includes the cabinet of curiosities, or *Kunstkammer*, which emerged in Europe during the sixteenth century, as well as the twentieth-century diorama sculptures of Joseph Cornell. Scholar Barbara Maria Stafford, in a study of this tradition, has argued that accumulation and display is born of a desire to construct parallel worlds, miniature equivalences, that can,



Matta, *Untitled (Venimos Volando [We Arrive Flying])*, 1951. Oil on wood, 15 ³/₄ x 23 ⁵/₈ inches (40 x 60 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Gift of Alexander Iolas

unlike the real world, be subject to compression, order, and control. She writes, “As the shadowy box of boxes and paradigmatic multitasking instrument, the analogical case of wonders is a tantalizing emblem of the endless struggle to incorporate infinite variables into our lives.”²¹

Bontecou’s negotiation of the inner and the outer in her miniature worlds is evident in recent works known as *Sandpits*, from 2011, assemblages of objects gathered from her studio and arranged in low boxes filled with sand (see p. 14). Handmade ceramic vessels and beads, thin strands of wire and balsa wood, delicate vertical paper forms resembling tiny sails, and fragments of her suspended sculptures, among other assorted bits and pieces, fill the containers. Like the lines and forms in her drawings, the material elements are graphic, and the white sand operates as their support. Moreover, a *Sandpit*’s spatial relationship to the viewer, with its placement on the floor, forces a birds-eye perspective that flattens it, turning it into a picture plane. The openings at the top of the round ceramic vessels—like black holes or open, yearning mouths—are bursts of punctuation. Like cabinets of curiosities, Bontecou’s contained collections articulate the human desire to wrap meaning around infinite wonder.

This ambiguity of scale inside her drawn worlds must be considered in relation to the artist’s environmentalism. 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. The way we see the objects in her *Sandpits* is not unlike the way she would then have espied ocean creatures, seaweed, stones, and shells washed up on the beach.²² It was in the early 1960s, however, when her