

Lee Bontecou

A Retrospective

This catalogue was published in conjunction with the exhibition *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, which was co-organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

The exhibition was presented at

UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
October 5, 2003–January 11, 2004

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago
February 14 – May 30, 2004

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
July 28 – September 27, 2004

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COVER

Untitled (detail), 1998
See plates 160 and 161

BACK COVER

Untitled (detail), 1970
See plate 105

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Bontecou's Pennsylvania studio, 2003
Photographs by Will Brown

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Sponsor's Statement

When an opportunity arises to bring greater recognition to one of the most compelling artists of our time, one should seize it. At Altria Group, Inc., we are fortunate that we could do just that. As we have seen in our sponsorship of the arts for more than forty-five years, the arts unite and vitalize communities and inspire us to envision and explore new possibilities. In this spirit, we are proud to sponsor *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, the first major exhibition in more than three decades celebrating this groundbreaking and visionary American artist.

Lee Bontecou's innovation and boldness of spirit electrified the art world in the 1960s and early 1970s with works that continue to inspire a new generation of artists. However, the large-scale sculpture and intimate drawings she has created in relative seclusion during the past three decades have remained largely unseen, until now.

Altria is honored to be part of the collaboration that is bringing Bontecou's powerful art to light once more. We thank the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, for their truly visionary leadership in organizing this landmark exhibition, and thank

The Museum of Modern Art for bringing the exhibition to our hometown of New York City. But most important, we applaud and salute the boundless strength and creativity of Lee Bontecou, whose passion and conviction inspire us all.

Jennifer Goodale
Vice President, Contributions



Foreword

It is an extraordinary privilege for our institutions to have collaborated to produce this long-awaited exhibition of the work of Lee Bontecou, a leading artist of her generation whose work was critically acclaimed, actively collected, and powerful in its impact on other artists when first shown in New York in the early 1960s. More than forty years later, this exhibition and catalogue — the first major publication devoted to Bontecou — reposition this artist's extraordinary work within the history of recent art. Following an extensive period since the mid-1970s during which Bontecou was notably absent from the art world, it reintroduces her as a significant figure whose practice continues to hold relevance and interest for a generation of younger artists. We are grateful to Elizabeth Smith, James W. Alsdorf Chief Curator at the MCA, for her leadership in bringing this project to fruition and for her dedication to the work of Lee Bontecou.

We are extremely pleased that this exhibition is being presented in three major American cities — Los Angeles, where interest in Bontecou's work became revived during the past decade; Chicago, where her work was the subject of a survey exhibition at the MCA in 1972; and New York, where she lived and worked at the outset of her career and where her reputation was first established. We are grateful to our colleague Glenn Lowry, Director of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, for his support and enthusiasm in presenting the exhibition.

Numerous donors from both the public and private sectors stepped forward to support this project. Altria Group, Inc., the lead corporate sponsor for the exhibition and its tour, has given crucial support for which we are extremely grateful. The Henry Luce Foundation provided a generous initial grant for its research and development. The National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency; The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation;

Friedrike Merck; and Sarah-Ann and Werner H. Kramarsky also made generous gifts for this project. This catalogue was made possible, in part, by Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro and The Ruth and Murray Gribin Foundation. The Sara Lee Foundation provided lead corporate sponsorship for the Chicago presentation of the exhibition. Helen and Sam Zell, Marilyn B. Alsdorf, and Beatrice Cummings Mayer provided additional generous support. To all of the above we wish to express profound appreciation; their enthusiasm for the project has been a testament to the power and interest of Bontecou's deeply significant work in sculpture and drawing and to our commitment to reassessing and presenting it to today's audiences.

Robert Fitzpatrick
Pritzker Director
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

Ann Philbin
Director
UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles



Museum of Contemporary Art

Lee Bontecou

A Retrospective

A legendary American artist returns.
February 14 – May 30, 2004

Co-organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles

Museum of Contemporary Art
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Untitled (detail), 1939
 Collection of the artist
 Courtesy of Knoedler & Co., New York
 Photograph by Will Brown

A visionary American artist returns.

LEE BONTECOU

A RETROSPECTIVE

She electrified the art world in the 1960s and '70s with works that astonish us to this day. Yet the extraordinary sculptures and intimate drawings created by Lee Bontecou over the past thirty years have remained largely unseen — until now.

Altria is honored to be part of the collaboration that is bringing Lee Bontecou's groundbreaking art to light once more. The people of Altria are committed to supporting arts organizations and programs that enrich our communities, inspiring us all to envision and explore new possibilities.

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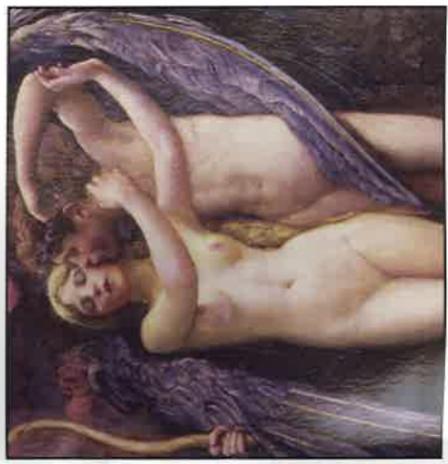
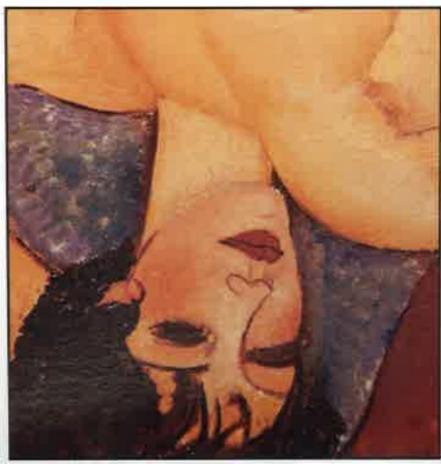
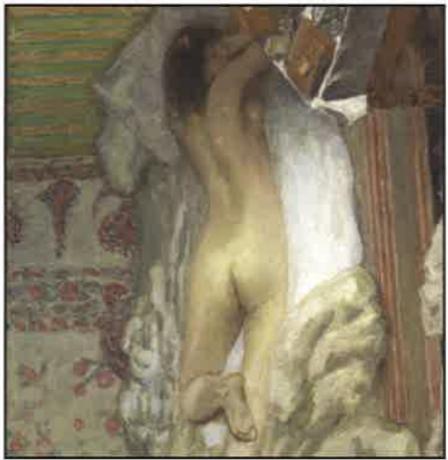
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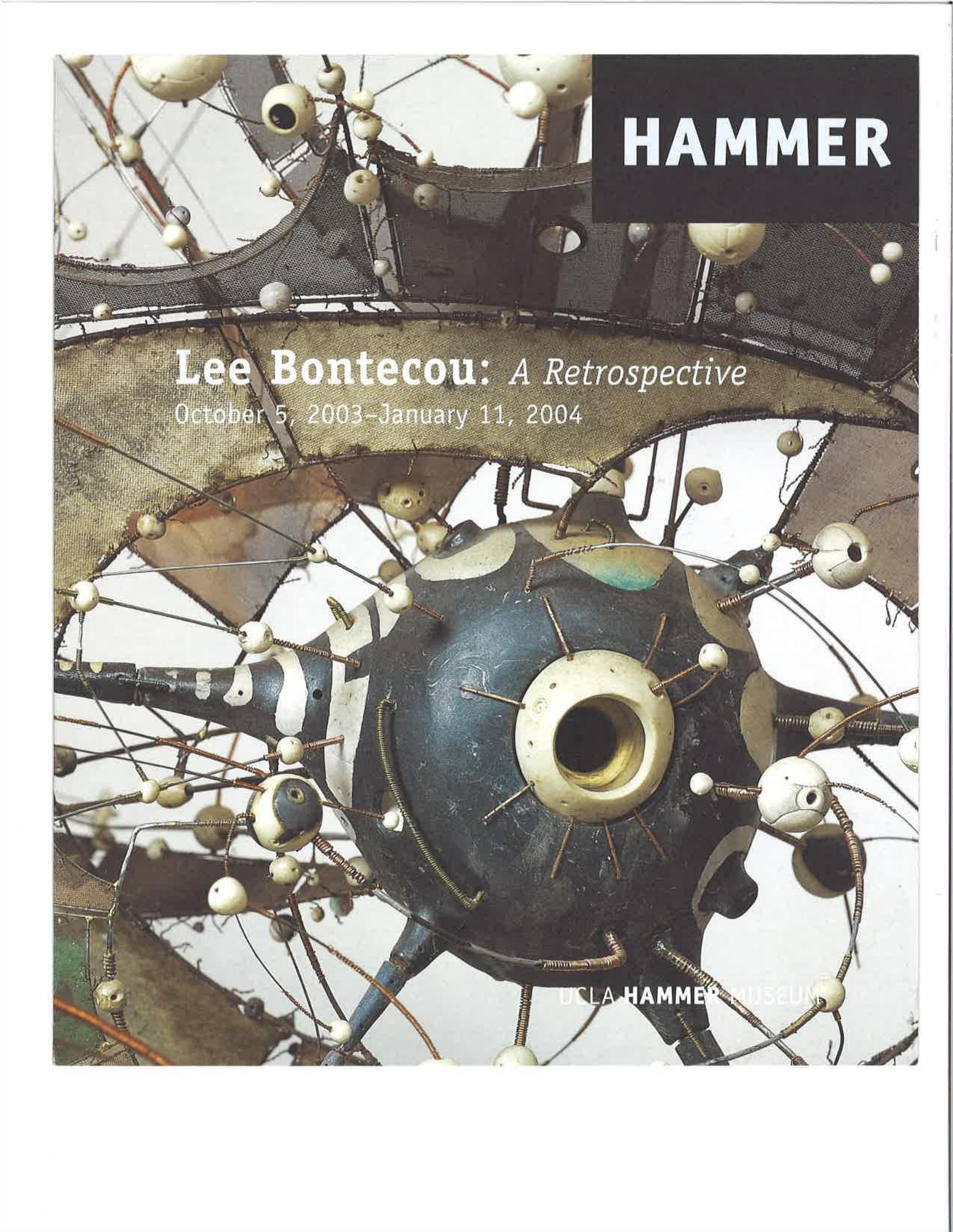
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Franz Gertsch. *Patti Smith I* (detail), 1978. Acrylic on canvas, 95 1/4 x 139 3/4 inches
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HAMMER

Lee Bontecou: *A Retrospective*
October 5, 2003–January 11, 2004

UCLA HAMMER MUSEUM

HAMMER

Lee Bontecou: *A Retrospective*

October 5, 2003–January 11, 2004

Elizabeth A. T. Smith



Co-organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the UCLA Hammer Museum

Above: Lee Bontecou in her Pennsylvania studio, 2003. Photo: Josh Titus

Right: Untitled, 1966. Welded steel, canvas, epoxy, leather, wire, and light. Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; gift of Rober B. Mayer Family Collection (1991.85)

Back Cover: Untitled, 1997. Graphite on paper. Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles

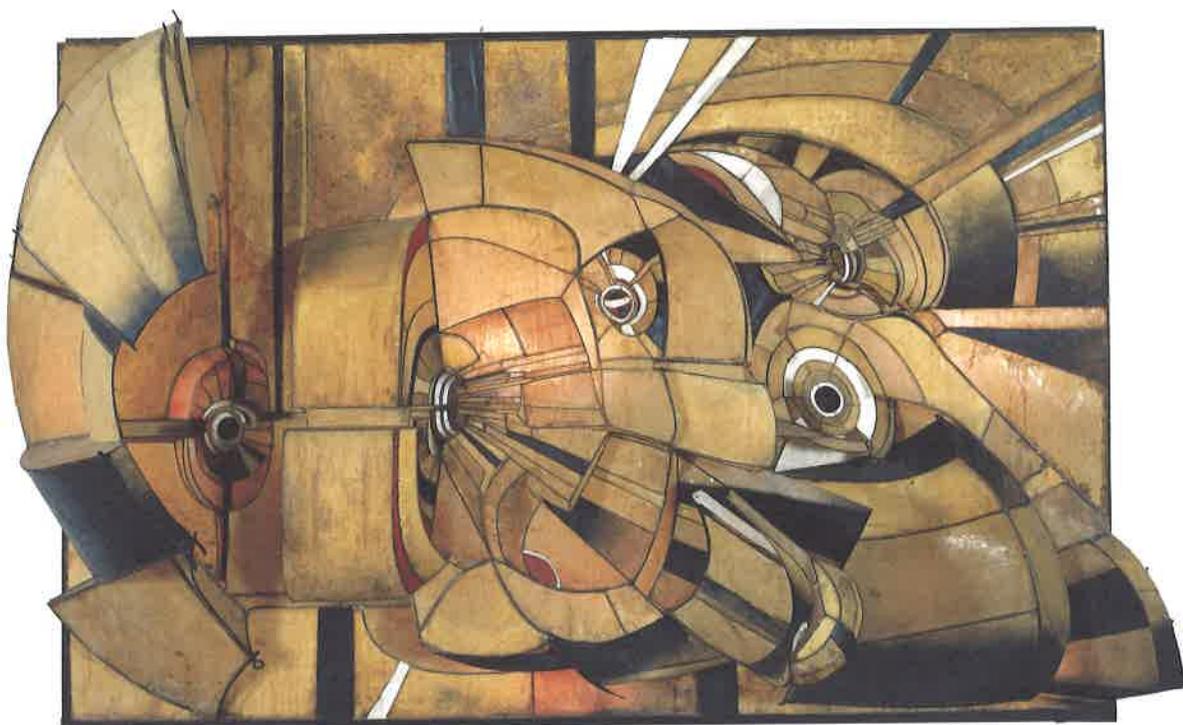
Cover: Untitled (detail), c. 1980–98. Welded steel, porcelain, wire mesh, canvas, and wire. Collection of the artist, courtesy of Knoedler & Co., New York

One of the few women artists to achieve broad recognition in the 1960s, Lee Bontecou created a strikingly original body of work from the late 1950s to the present. Co-organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the UCLA Hammer Museum, this exhibition surveys almost fifty years of her work, including numerous recent sculptures and drawings that have never before been exhibited. It provides an extraordinary opportunity to reconsider an artist who has become a legendary figure due to the powerful impact of her work of the 1960s and 1970s and the relevance and interest it still holds for many younger artists.

Whether heroically scaled or intimate, Bontecou's predominantly abstract work has consistently incorporated figurative, organic, and mechanistic references to states of transformation between the natural and the man-made. From her early sculptures—wall-mounted, three-dimensional objects in which geometric fragments of canvas and other materials are stretched over and fastened onto welded metal framework—to the explosive intricacy of her most recent pieces, many of which are suspended in space, Bontecou's greatest preoccupation as an artist has been to encompass "as much of life as possible—no barriers—no boundaries—all freedom in every sense."

Born in 1931 in Providence, Rhode Island, and raised in Westchester County, New York, Bontecou attended the Art Students League in New York from 1952 to 1955, followed by a period of residence in Rome. She worked in a vein of abstracted figuration, sculpting animal and bird forms that in their crudeness and vigor anticipated the direction of her subsequent work. Upon her return to New York, Bontecou arrived at the idea of creating lightweight welded frameworks resembling boxes and infilling them with wire mesh, canvas, and muslin to impart a painterly sense of depth and illusion. The resulting objects, while primarily geometric in form, resembled rough-hewn machines with a curiously handmade presence.

Beginning in 1959, a large circular opening began to recur in Bontecou's sculpture, projecting from the surface of the work itself and framing a dark, receding inset. She intended these



blackened voids to evoke mystery and a range of emotive responses to the unknown, the wondrous, and the sublime, prompted in part by her fascination with scientific and technological advances surrounding the exploration of outer space. At the same time, this aspect of her work refers to the underbelly of human nature, encompassing fear, violence, brutality, and war. In a statement accompanying the Museum of Modern Art's 1963 exhibition *Americans*, Bontecou said that her goal was to "build things that express our relation to this country—to other countries—to this world—to other worlds—in terms of myself. To glimpse some of the fear, hope, ugliness, beauty, and mystery that exists in all of us and which hangs over all the young people today."

References to airplanes, the wings of birds, and other anthropomorphic and mechanomorphic elements increasingly reverberated within Bontecou's sculpture, including a monumental work commissioned by Lincoln Center for the New York State Theater, and in numerous drawings of the early and mid-1960s. By the later 1960s Bontecou began to further shift the direction of her sculpture, developing works made of balsa wood and silk, resembling chrysalis forms. She also began to experiment with synthetic materials such as fiberglass and epoxy, departing from the rugged textures and receding spaces of her earlier pieces in favor of ballooning forms that appeared more rounded, finished, and protective.

Around 1969–70 Bontecou made a group of vacuum-formed plastic works in the forms of flowers, plants, and fish, the sections of which were affixed to suggest overlapping gills, petals, plates of armor, or shells. Embodying curiously disturbing interpretations of their subjects, the fish are sharply scaled, with ferocious teeth, shown in the act of swallowing and ingesting smaller species, while the flowers and plants appear sinister and mutated. This body of her sculptures directly reflects the negative implications of human degradation of the natural world, transmitting a pronounced ecological message.

During the 1970s and 1980s Bontecou devoted herself primarily to teaching in the Art Department at Brooklyn College, continuing to work in both sculpture and drawing over the next two decades. Her recent works include small porcelain sculptures that evoke miniscule and mysterious landscapes or galaxies and a group of suspended objects resembling airborne hybrids of organic and mechanistic forms. Concurrently, she has made a series of more representational sculptures derived from the figures and heads of birds—coming full circle to the subject matter of some of her earliest works, but with a markedly different expression that is graceful and surreal, comical and frightening, and compellingly intricate.

Bontecou's innate sense of connection among nature, culture, and self and her emphatic commitment to a wide range of sources—from the art of ancient and non-Western cultures to abstract expressionism—have generated a profoundly original corpus of work that continues to evolve while eluding easy classification. Her continuous experimentation with materials and modes of making—while consistent in her use of certain key images and motifs—endows her work with an uncommon vibrancy and vitality. The lyricism and cornucopic sense of visual abundance emanating from her sculpture and drawing, in which recognizable forms from nature fuse with the abstract, are simultaneously unsettling, otherworldly, surreal, and fundamentally mysterious.

Elizabeth A. T. Smith is James W. Alsdorf Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.

The exhibition is curated by Elizabeth A. T. Smith in association with Ann Philbin, director of the UCLA Hammer Museum.

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