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Louise Nevelson: The Artist and the Legend

'I seek truth. What I seek is anything that will work for me. I'll use a lie if it works, and that [becomes] the truth.' Louise Nevelson

As an artist whose life coincided with the major historical events and artistic movements of the twentieth century, Louise Nevelson (1899-1988) remained to a remarkable degree true to a singular vision of herself as an artist and her work. Although her name has been connected with Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, installation art and feminism, she did not ally herself with any movement and easily threw off all labels. She worked hard to establish herself within the male-dominated art world, but did not wish to be seen as a trailblazing 'woman artist'. Nevertheless, Nevelson was a trailblazer, a bold woman who made bold choices. She enjoyed being an artist as much as creating art and, by the end of her life, had become a legend.

The celebrity that surrounded being an artist had great appeal for her. Her flamboyant costumes consisted of dramatic clothing, colourful headscarves and elaborate layers of false eyelashes. Her friends and acquaintances included Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Edward Albee, whose *Occupant*, a play about Nevelson's life, premiered off Broadway in 2002 with Anne Bancroft in the leading role; Andrew Wyeth; Diego Rivera, with whom she worked briefly as an assistant; and Frida Kahlo. In 1985, she appeared at the White House to receive a National Medal of Arts from President Ronald Reagan. She was photographed for the cover of the May 24, 1958, issue of *Life* magazine. And she was the subject of a set of Louise Nevelson commemorative stamps issued in 2000 by the U.S. Postal Service. These and other accomplishments pointed to a person who was as comfortable in the public spotlight as she was showing her art in major museums and galleries in the U.S., Europe and Japan.

To celebrate Nevelson's art and the legacy that she left to younger generations of sculptors, the Jewish Museum has organised with freelance curator and writer Brooke Kamin Rapaport the first survey of Nevelson's work in America since 1980.¹ With more than sixty works displayed, the exhibition features drawings, sculpture and two room-size masterworks. It follows Nevelson's development

from an early self-portrait cast in bronze circa 1940 to an untitled wood and cardboard collage made in 1981. Two adjuncts to the show add immeasurably to the experience of entering Nevelson's world: an audio guide produced by the Jewish Museum and Antenna Audio, with commentary by Rapaport, Nevelson's friend Edward Albee, her long-time studio assistant, Diana MacKown, and her granddaughter, Maria Nevelson; and filmed interviews with contemporary sculptors who reflect on Nevelson's contributions to modernism and the public art revival that began in the late 1960s. The 256-page full-colour catalogue, co-published by the museum and Yale University Press, includes photographs of the artist at different periods in her life from circa 1906 to 1985 and critical essays, notably one in which contributor Michael Stanislawski examines the artist's unique path of self-discovery.²

Nevelson cultivated her life with as much passion and intensity as she crafted her sculptures. She was an intuitive artist who drew on the methods of collage to assemble her most famous works from found objects made of wood, piecing together room-size and smaller sculptures that would function together as total environments. Similarly, she pieced together a formidable sense of self from her childhood experiences, adolescent dreams and adult conception of life as an artist. Her good friend and dealer Arnold Glimcher described Nevelson's life as 'such an intricate pattern of fantasy synthesised with reality that separation of myth and fact is nearly impossible' and stated that 'Nevelson's life itself is her greatest work of art'.³

When Nevelson struck upon her now-signature use of monochrome, she was able to do in her art what she had hoped to do in her life: neutralise idiosyncratic details, harmonise disparate elements, and transform the common and mundane into elegant objects of mystery. She rendered neutral the wood castaways that she first scavenged from the streets and later acquired from friends and acquaintances with coats of black, white or gold paint. Stripped of the details that hinted at their histories, that contained threads of stories, the cast-off objects acquired dignity and power, a grandeur they never had as baseball bat shards, chair backs and other furniture fragments, crates and timberyard orphans. According to the artist, 'black contained all colour... It was an acceptance... Black is the most aristocratic colour of all'.⁴

There were details from her early life that Nevelson hoped to make neutral, or at least harmonise with her more lofty aspirations. She was born Leah Berliawsky in 1899 in Ukraine to a family of landowners. Harsh conditions for Jews in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century had led many of her relatives to leave for America. For Jews living in Russia under the Tsarist regime, life had become untenable. Nevelson's father, Isaac Berliawsky, chose to stay in Russia to care for his parents and the family land, but after his mother died, in 1902 or 1903, he left

his own family and made the journey to America alone. Unlike most Jewish immigrants who settled in large urban areas, Isaac settled in a small town in Maine, where he worked as a woodcutter and later opened a junkyard. In Rockland, he stood out as one of very few Jews. When he brought his family to join him in 1905, they experienced a different kind of notoriety than they had in Russia, yet they were still under scrutiny and uncomfortably isolated.

From her own accounts, Nevelson knew as a child that she would be an artist. At age nine, she saw a statue of Joan of Arc at the Rockland Public Library and decided to sculpt. Her artistic yearnings were spurred by other circumstances: her family's diminished economic standards, religious discrimination and her mother Minna's inability to adapt to their new life. Soon, Nevelson was planning her getaway, and when a chance to move to New York appeared in the form of a suitor, she grabbed it. In 1920, she married Charles Nevelson, whose family owned a shipping firm. Their son, Myron, or Mike as he was known, was born two years later. The strictures of marriage and motherhood produced a negative effect on Nevelson. Charles's family disparaged her intent to study and practice art, and Charles wanted a society wife. In 1931, she left Mike with her family in Maine and travelled to Europe to study Cubism with Hans Hofmann in Munich. When Hoffmann went to America in 1932, she followed him and continued her studies with him in New York at the Art Students League.

In the exhibition catalogue, Rapaport says that 'Nevelson's work of the 1930s demonstrates varied interest in painting, sculpture and works on paper, often exemplifying an established modernist style'.⁵ As she experimented with different styles and materials, Nevelson was learning more about herself and the vision that was sparked when she saw the statue in the Rockland Public Library. The sculpture she made in the 1940s reveals a growing confidence and the influence of modern dance, which Nevelson studied for years. Other artists at this time - Alexander Calder, Theodore Roszak and David Smith, for example - were working with welded metal to create their abstracted forms. Nevelson rejected metal, welding and the political and existential themes embraced by her male counterparts. Set off on a search for an art of her own making, she began to gather wooden objects on the streets of New York. Like her father, she made her career from wood and junk. Then she hit on the effect that monochrome paint had on the objects when assembled into groupings. The methods and materials that she pioneered during the 1940s provided enough inspiration for a lifetime, and she was able to amplify her style by changes in scale (from small-scale to room-size to outdoor installations), colour (black to white to gold) and imagery (personal, cultural and universal).

Nevelson never stood back from the swirl of artistic ferment in New York. For instance, in April 1953, she hosted a meeting of the Four O'Clock Forum, founded by Will Barnet, Peter Busa and Steve Wheeler, at which they discussed the future

of abstract art. Nevelson sat on a panel and agreed to become a sponsor for future meetings. She served as a moderator at many of these meetings, including one in 1954 in which Willem de Kooning participated. In 1957, she was elected president of the New York chapter of Artists' Equity and held the position through 1959. Still, she managed to be touched by contemporary trends while maintaining a certain distance to secure her independence.

In his catalogue essay, Arthur C. Danto speculates on the meaning that the colour black had for Nevelson. In fact, Danto says, 'black was not intended to contribute meaning to her work, but to induce a sort of alchemical transformation in work and viewer together, with monochrome black used only as a means'.⁶ Danto says that he sees Nevelson's use of monochrome white and gold as 'temporary departures', and that black was, for Nevelson, the primary means of transformation. The first works that visitors to the Jewish Museum will see are the sculptures that make up 'Moving-Static-Moving Figures' (c.1945). These terracotta and tuffstone sculptures are forceful testimonies to the power and presence of black in Nevelson's work. The shapes and figures seem ancient and modern and, in the end, timeless; the lines scratched into the wood could be primitive efforts at communication. The dichotomies continue: rough and polished, simple and sophisticated, childlike and mature. Nevelson worked by improvisation. In the studio or in galleries setting up shows, she would, often, create in a quick, intuitive way that seems astounding given the harmonious arrangements that resulted. For example, 'Sky Cathedral/Southern Mountain' (1959) is a grouping of black wooden shapes that fit so perfectly that it is difficult to imagine that these pieces had former lives and purposes. A self-assured hand is evident in works from every period of her career. Walking through the exhibit, Nevelson's presence is as strong as that of her creations.

In 'Mrs. N's Palace' (1964-77), painted wood and black mirrored floor, Nevelson's use of her biography as a source is clear. Fascinated by royalty, palaces, kings and queens, such images figured in many of her works, but here she created a palace for herself that is also a tomb filled with fragments from her life. Every inch of 'Mrs. N's Palace' - front, back sides, ceiling and floor - displays her sculpture. A decade later, near the end of her life, Nevelson continued the theme in 'Mirror-Shadow VII' (1988). In this work, though, it is not the crowning glory of a life's work but a quiet reflection on the decline that comes at the end. Symbolic elements in 'Mirror-Shadow VII' include a chair that faces inward and is pushed through a sculptural box, another box filled with cast-offs, and a circular form resting on a shelf that seems to indicate release.

The powerful presence of black in Nevelson's work is matched by the startling effect of her first publicly exhibited work in white. Even without knowing the work's impetus, coming upon Nevelson's 'Dawn's Wedding Feast' (1959) is a poignant experience. The artist created the wood installation for a show at the

Museum of Modern Art in New York and hoped that the individual pieces of the assemblage would remain together. This was not the case, but Rapaport and the Jewish Museum's staff were able to secure loans from twelve museums and private collections to reassemble the work. Although, or perhaps because, Nevelson's own marriage was not successful, the symbolism of marriage was important to her. In her sculpture, she brought together disparate and distinct entities to explore what remains and what changes through the alchemy of union. The woman who felt that she was losing an essential part of herself married to a well-to-do businessman found herself in a marriage to art. The white paint in 'Dawn's Wedding Feast' is an emblem of hope, possibility and new beginnings.

'Dawn's Wedding Feast' was part of the Museum of Modern Art's seminal 1959 show of avant-garde contemporary art, 'Sixteen Americans'. For this exhibition, the 60-year-old Nevelson was grouped with the younger generation of artists making waves in the international art scene, including the 29-year-old Jasper Johns, 34-year-old Robert Rauschenberg, 23-year-old Frank Stella and 36-year-old Ellsworth Kelly. In some ways, the exhibition represents a turning point for Nevelson. She took it as a chance to make a new statement and came up with a grand conception based on the theme of marriage. 'Dawn's Wedding Feast' consists of four wedding chapels, a cake, chest, mirror, pillow, several attendants (stationary and hanging columns) and, of course, a bride and groom, all made of abstracted wooden forms.

The gold sculptures in the exhibit are somewhat disappointing, and visitors may find it difficult to articulate the reasons. The dignity and mystery conveyed by the colour black and the hope and possibility reflected by the colour white are solid perceptions. The gold sculpture does not elicit such clear perceptions. Sculptor Mark di Suvero, who learned of Nevelson's work in the late 1950s when he moved to New York City and met her on two occasions, said he first saw some of her gold sculptures in 1960 in a show at the Whitney Museum. According to di Suvero, he found them to be jarring. 'The gold ones were disturbing to me because she was tough, abstract and real. It was this kind of pandering art. The gold ones looked like - it wasn't that she was sanctifying these scraps. They were disturbing in the sense that they looked like she wanted to make them into costume jewellery. Like glitz, glitter...'⁷ 'Royal Tide I' (1960) and 'Golden Gate' (1961-70) are beautiful as objects, but they are not surrounded in the mystery that makes Nevelson's sculptures 'Nevelson'.

Since Nevelson conceived of her sculpture as environments, it seems natural that she be offered and accept commissions for outdoor and indoor public installations. These include works for religious institutions (St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York, Temple Beth-El of Great Neck, New York, and Temple Israel in Boston), corporations (Bendix Corporation of America in Southfield, Michigan, Georgia Pacific Corporation and Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in

Atlanta) and civic organisations. She was one of the first artists and only woman to play a major role in a renaissance of public art beginning in the 1960s. She had rejected metal in the 1940s for many reasons, including its association with war. (Her son had served in the merchant marine.) But for her public works, she embraced Cor-ten steel with gusto.

Before leaving the exhibition, visitors can see Nevelson's public works in the environments for which they were created on a video screen. After leaving, they might choose to walk east on 92nd Street to Park Avenue, where Nevelson's 'Night Presence IV' stands on the median. Nevelson donated to the city the more than twenty-foot sculpture, which is based on a small wooden work of 1955. She chose the site on Park Avenue with her dealer Glimcher, who explained that she wanted to establish a connection between Spanish Harlem and the Upper East Side.⁸ A few years after 'Night Presence IV' was installed, Nevelson designed a complete environment with sculpture, 'Shadows and Flags' (1978), for what came to be named Louise Nevelson Plaza in lower New York. Currently, the plaza is being redesigned and is scheduled to be completed by autumn 2007. A third public work, a painted wood relief located at the World Trade Center, was destroyed during the 11 September 2001 attacks, along with works by Alexander Calder, Roy Lichtenstein and other artists.

While Nevelson's life is fascinating from many perspectives, the best place to start is with her works. The Jewish Museum has done a splendid job of making them 'speak' and spotlighting lesser-known aspects of her life and production, like her etchings ('Moon Goddess' and 'The King and Queen', both from 1953-55, for example), lithographs, and wood and cardboard collages. Nevelson's public persona overshadowed the private person who clung to her vision of what it meant to be an artist. Her real life was in the studio, where she unified the fragments of her life through art. Moving through 'The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson', visitors will discover a person behind the legend, the woman who left behind a legacy. As New York-based sculptor Chakaia Booker says, 'When I see her work, I sense the hundreds and thousands of decisions that underlie the movements of her hands, arms, eyes and body all recorded in the work. I see what she did in order to realise what she wanted to see, and I know we jointly occupy this same solid space.'⁹

Cindi DiMarzo

References

1. 'The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson: Constructing a Legend' opened at the Jewish Museum in New York City on 5 May 2007 and closes on 16 September. The exhibit will travel to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, de Young, running there from 27 October to 13 January 2008.
2. *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson*, edited by Brooke Kamin Rapaport (New

Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) with essays by Rapaport on the connections between Nevelson's public and private personas and her art; Arthur C. Danto, Emeritus Johnsonian Professor of Philosophy, Columbia University, on the meaning of monochrome in Nevelson's art; Harriet F. Senie, Professor of Art History, City College of the City University of New York, on Nevelson's public art; and Michael Stanislawski, Nathan J. Miller Professor of Jewish History, Columbia University, on Nevelson's biography as the primary source of her work. The catalogue also includes a chronology by Gabriel de Guzman and an exhibition timeline.

3. *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson*, p 27, quoted from Glimcher's book *Louise Nevelson* (New York: Praeger, 1972).

4. *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson*, p 12, quoted from Nevelson's autobiography *Dawns + Dusks*, edited by Diana MacKown (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976).

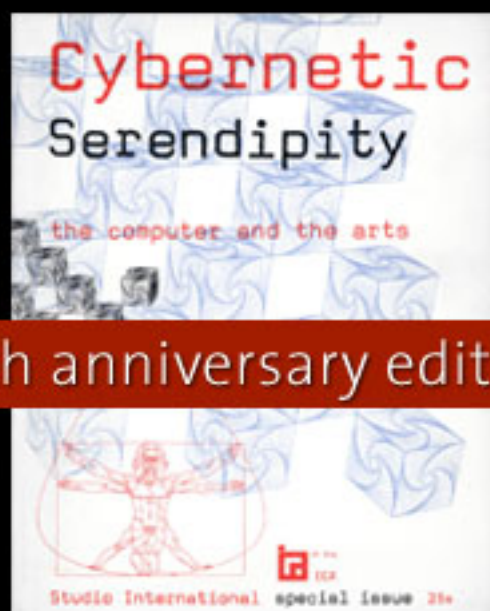
5. *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson*: 8.

6. *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson*: 39.

7. *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson*: 168.

8. *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson*: 53.

9. *The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson*: 165.



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