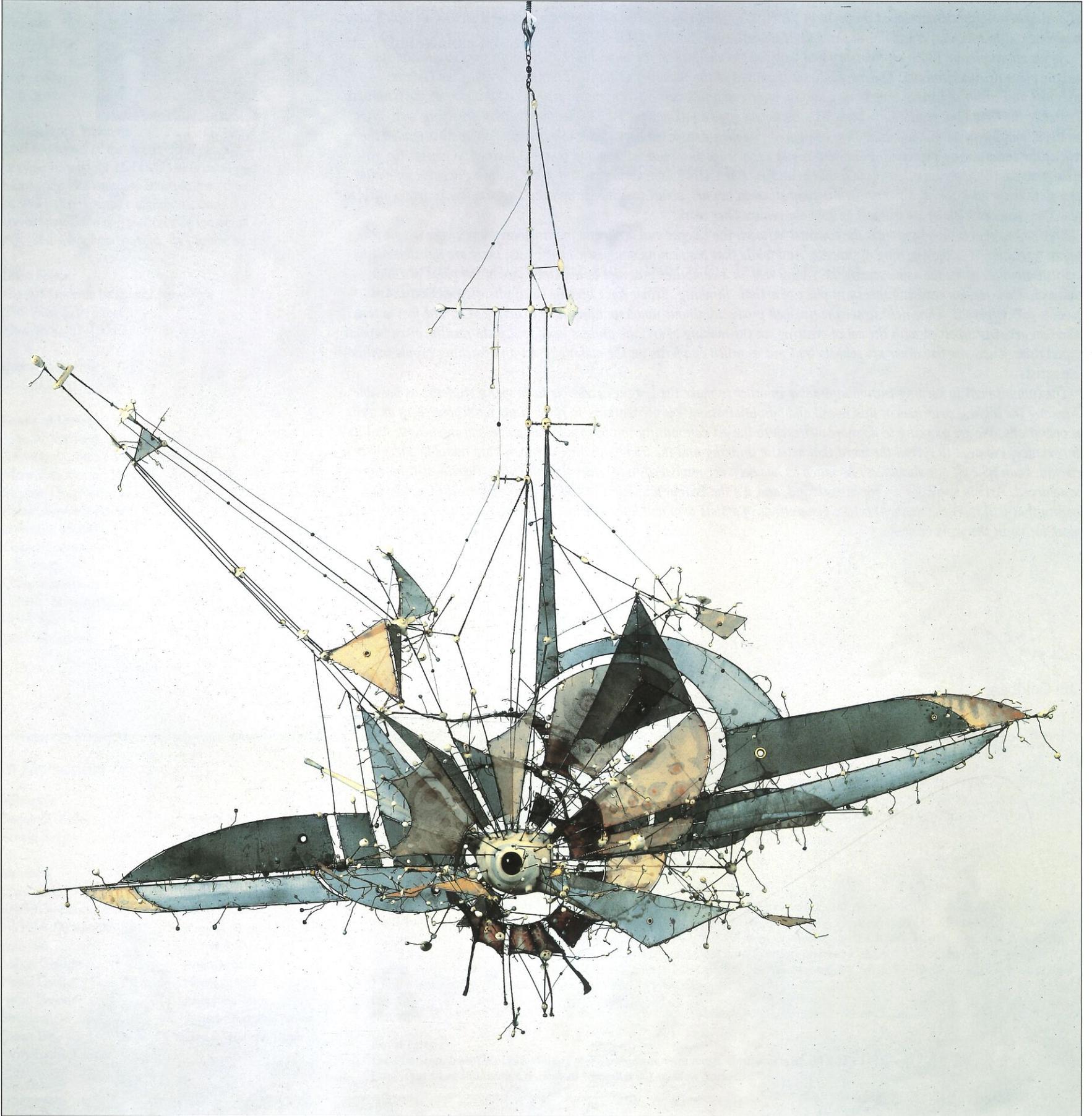


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A Homecoming

Lee Bontecou Speaks at the League

This past May, on the occasion of her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, Lee Bontecou spoke to a packed gallery at the Art Students League. The following is an abridged transcription of her dialogue with the audience who asked questions about her early training, work methods, current projects, and the state of art education.

What kind of sculpture did you work on while a student at the Art Students League?

I studied with William Zorach. The class entailed putting up an armature and doing academic figures. The students were all different, so you would learn more from the students than you would from the instructor, who came in and was really nice. He made one criticism of everybody's work once a week and that was it. There was no pressure on him and no pressure on us. I was lucky to observe people who were more advanced than me. I was also in a drawing class, and I could hardly make a stick figure. Eventually, you got better. I worked and worked and worked, and the situation was just fine. There was a fellow called Johnson who had taught the Nicolaides method. It's the best, very natural, and it covers everything. Although I must admit, we could never follow work on one drawing for three hours as the book suggested. When I taught, I could not get myself to demand this of a student either. We're pressured, and we're running faster. We'd be better draftsmen if we had the patience to do some of those academic drawings like those of the nineteenth century. Yet, I don't know if our psyches could take that.

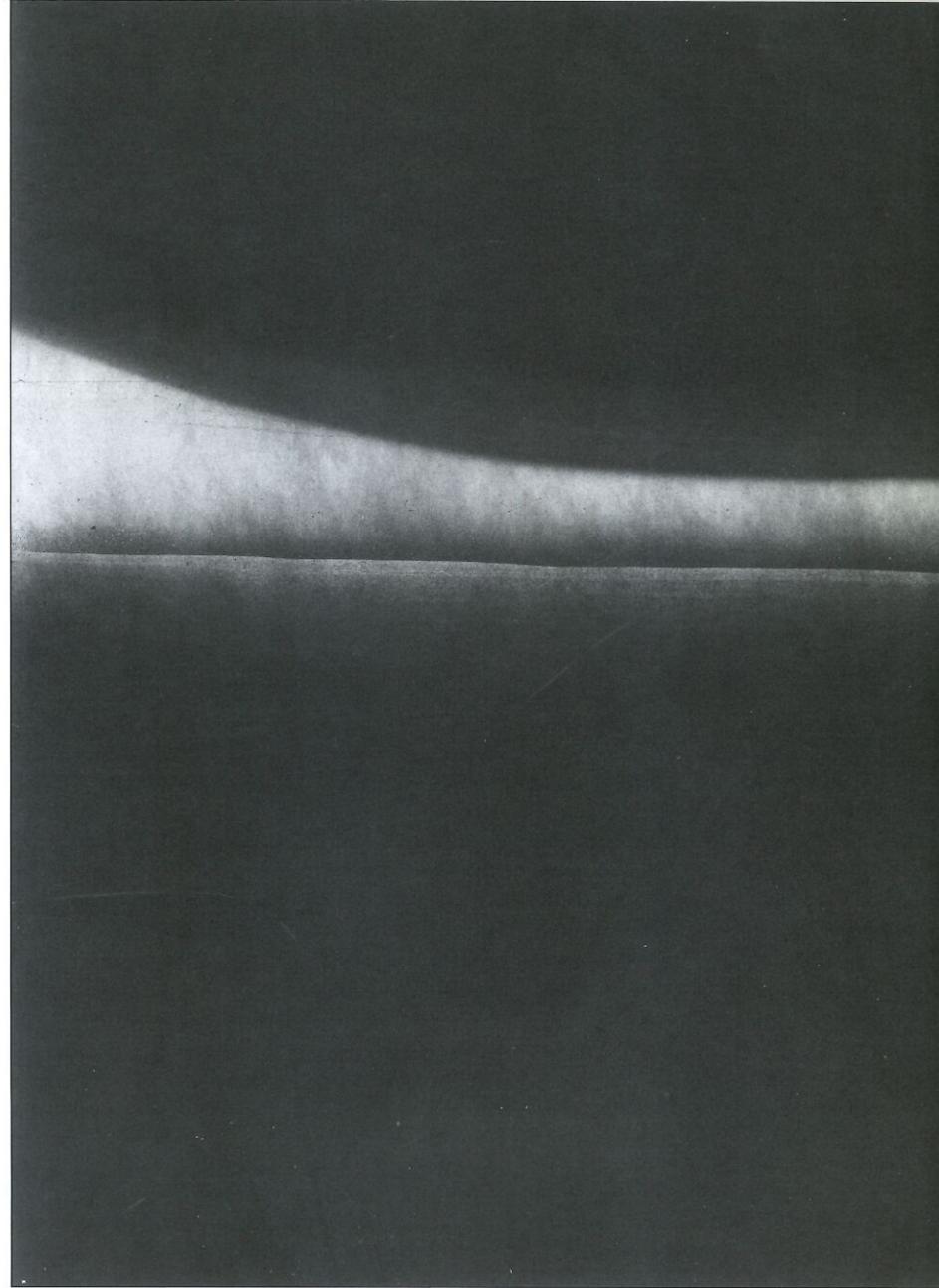
Do you notice when your early experiences or the lessons you learned at the Art Students League are suddenly taking shape in your current work?

Yes. After I stopped working academically, trying to figure things out, I started working with slabs. Zorach was very nice; he didn't try to force me to work like he did. He said, "Go ahead, Lee. Just do it." I made some horrible big old plaster things that I kicked out and tore down. We all would just build things and then tear them down. Eventually, I used wax, pouring it out, cutting it up, and then welding it together. From these, I made sculptures. It is nice to be able to go back to those old lessons and bring them forward, advancing in an upward spiral. Even if I dig down deep and go back, since I'm older and have had other insights, I can push those ideas even further. The technique has changed, so the thing comes out differently. You may have noticed that if you are working on a drawing and then drop it for three months, when you go back to it, somehow you've grown, almost effortlessly. That is really nice. You have new ideas, and maybe even your technique has a different aspect to it. So, time is a big factor in the process. But, it is hard to be patient when you're a student. As you get older, time can be a big problem solver. If you can let something you have a problem with sit for three months or a year, you look again and think, "Why did I have a problem with this, I know exactly what to do." When I taught at Brooklyn College, I tried to get my students to realize this. I understood their feelings, but you have to let things progress naturally. Being patient is part of it, too.

Did you cast things while a student at the League?

I cast plaster. In fact, I inherited a casting job. When we were just kids, we'd cast for the older students, which enabled us to learn the whole process.

When you were at the League, did they have the red dot system?



I don't think we ever had class shows. Did we? Oh. Well, the red dot, I remember, signified it was sold. Well, I never got a red dot.

Who were some of the painters you were interested in?

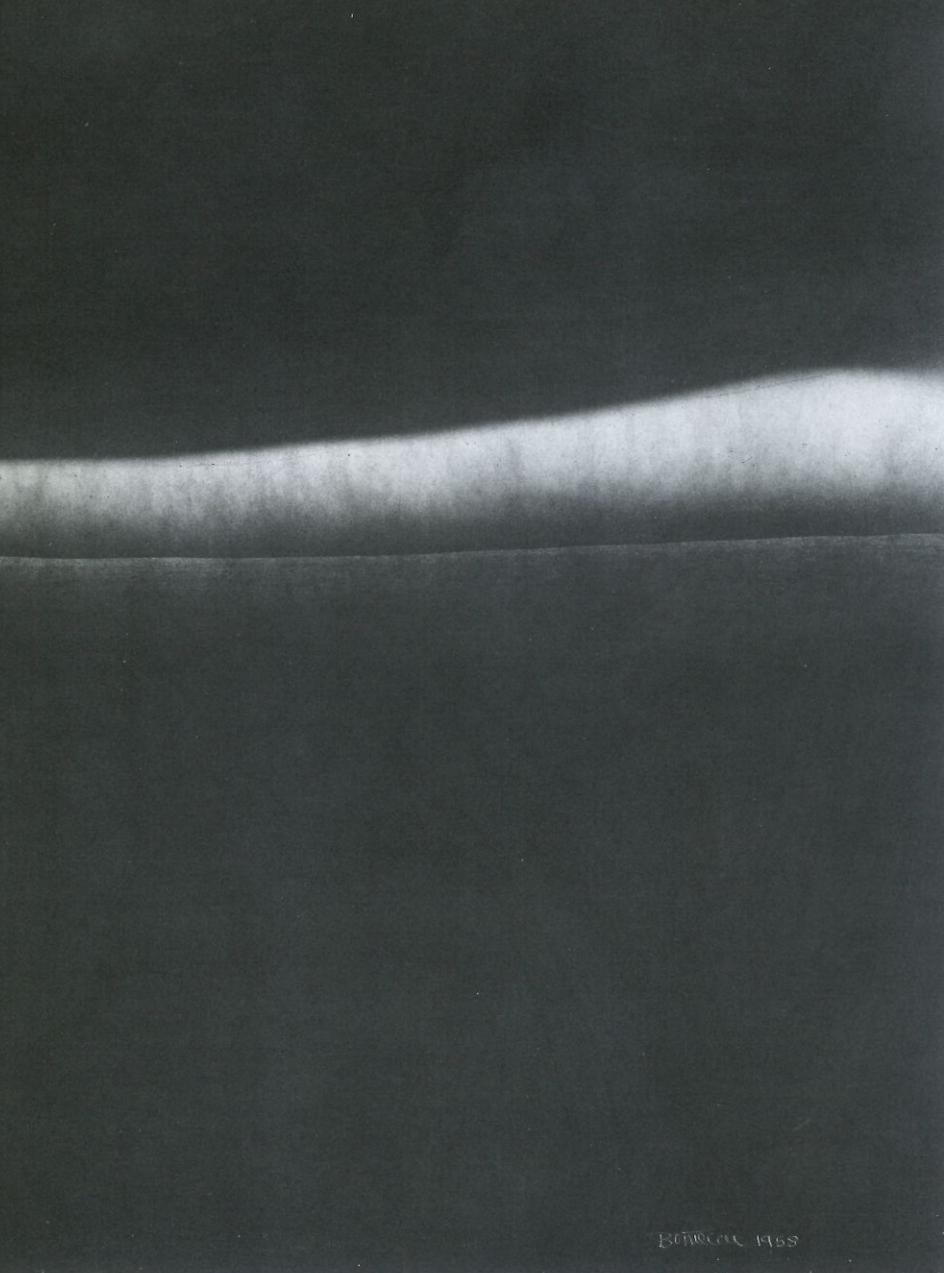
There wasn't any particular painter, but the whole abstract expressionist movement embodied a spirit and energy that influenced all of us at that time. I used to visit the Metropolitan Museum and would look at the collection of armor. You just keep looking at different things. I did gallery hop a lot. I'd see a Birchfield show, and it was incredible. Or I'd see Sam Francis, which was a terrific show of big paintings. Though, I don't think I was ever stuck on anybody. I was happy to see things that excited me, some of it contemporary and some not. I always felt everybody was older than I, certainly the abstract expressionists were. I also went to the Museum of Natural History just to look, not intending necessarily to put it in the work. The more you see, the more that enters you, and the more that comes out when you don't even know it.

Were you reading any particular writers or philosophers during your formative years?

I read a lot, classics mostly. I don't think that any philosophy affected my work.

What were the sources of the shapes you were using in the work that was exhibited at the Guggenheim in the sixties?

Well, it didn't come overnight. I was fortunate to have a Fulbright to Italy. There I worked on animals, abstract to a certain extent, and I was learning different methods of working. Then, it just happened; it was exciting. I did some reinforced cement and welded pieces. I had learned welding at Skowhegan one summer. I was lucky enough to go there. You were just thrown a torch, and a student would say,



Lee Bontecou (b. 1931), *Untitled*, 1958. Soot on white paper. 27 1/2 x 39 3/8 in. CA 25590.
©Lee Bontecou/Courtesy of Knoedler & Co., New York.

though I have left the art world, and I don't even like that term. I never felt I left working. When I moved, it was wonderful to live without phones, just to confront your own problems of bringing a child up or farming and doing things to keep yourself alive, and then to work. I didn't have the greatest studio. It was without heat, but it was free. I could look out, and see all the things that I had always loved as a kid, all the natural things that are around you, the mountains, the light. That was interesting. That was different in the Pennsylvania landscape. I grew up for a time in Nova Scotia, and I had missed the water. I still miss the water [laughs]. Nearby, we have a meadow (it's a Devonian area), surrounded by mountains. I thought, "I'm free here; I can see the water, I can smell the water." Change was just fine for me. Writers have written about it like a lost and found, comeback or coming out. I've never left.

I was teaching in Brooklyn for twenty years, looking at a lot of painting. I think that everybody, when they get to a certain time, they've had enough. Young people should ask themselves: "Can I live without this?" And you might find, Heck...I don't want to. When I left my loft in the city, a young man took my studio. Across the street there was a beautiful building, which I thought would make a terrific studio. There was some great light in it. The man said, "My parents are buying that." And I thought, "Oh. Here he is, with his parents behind him so hard, he is going to have to be a painter." That's a lot of pressure. Whereas when I was in school, none of the young men were even given allowances by their parents. They were cutting them off because they'd taken to the arts. They knew what they wanted, but they weren't nurtured in the sense of building a career. Anyway, it is not a career; it is just something you have to do.

Did you find you missed the cross-fertilization with other artists when you left the city for the country?

No. I had lived in the city for twenty-five or thirty years. I wanted to have time to let work flow instead of being interrupted. I was ready for a change. I love New York, and when I come, it is as if I'd never left. When I went to the country, I found everything was there. I just tell the people out there, "You don't need any art, you just walk out your door and you see these mountains, you see the light, you see everything changing." I sort of carried everything for work in my head, so I didn't miss it at all.

Your drawings and the sculpture both possess a romantic quality. Do you use the drawing as a study for the sculpture?

I have used the drawings not for a specific sculpture, but I do solve a lot of problems with them. If I have a problem with a sculpture, I sometimes make a sketch to find out if something will work. I consider them all work drawings, even the finished drawings I really consider work drawings. The drawing was a nice thing to fall back on and enjoy and move forward and have ideas come as fast as you can have ideas come out. I've enjoyed that. I just love drawing.

Have you ever had dry periods of being stuck?

If I had a problem or was just getting back into the studio after a break, I would experiment with shapes, but not make any sculpture. Experimentation is how I got out of that kind of problem.

At your point of success, does the business end interfere with your creativity?

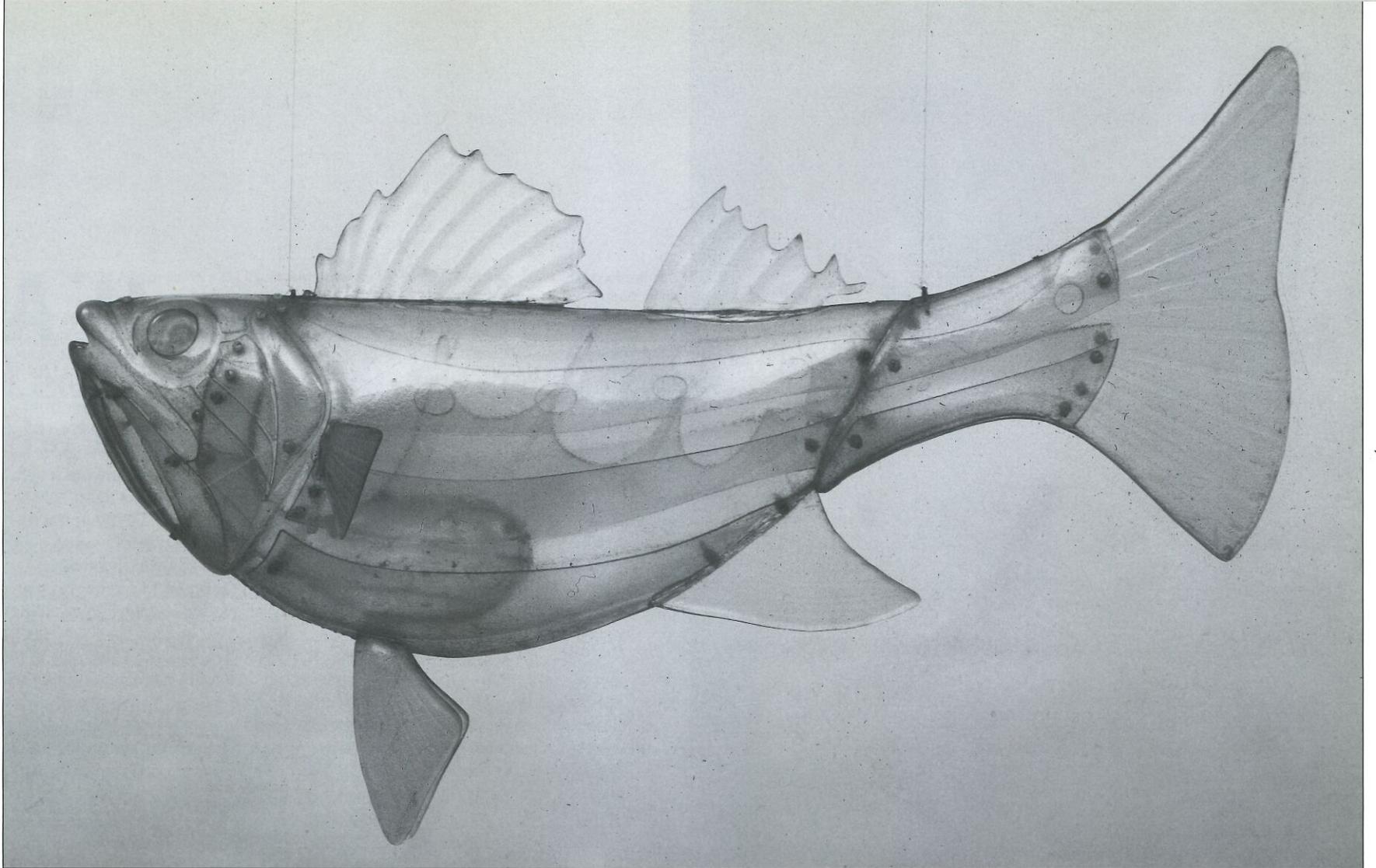
I think some artists can handle the two very well. When I left the city, I didn't have a gallery. You should find a gallery that you can get along with. (Any gallery that you can get along with is a good gallery.) If you find somebody you can work with,

"This is how you do it, and so you do it. You start building. It was real freedom. I realized you could extend the piece; you could add clay to it and extend clay. It just all came together. In Rome I discovered that soot that came out of the settling torch. I forget exactly how I came across it, but when the torch passed across the floor or the wall without oxygen, it created a black streak, a truly neat line. So I started just fiddling with that, putting paper up and passing the torch over it, and it was just exciting. There was no drawing there. It is just one of those nice times when you sort of...well, it's better than drugs. [Audience laughs.]

Anyway, I started making big drawings. Toward the end of my two-year stay, I started to see things and to make circles or an opening, which is a universal symbol. But I didn't even think in those terms. As a human being, I just followed along in the pattern of the cave man or the Indian. Then I began experimenting with small boxes so that I could get that blackness inside the sculpture that I had achieved in the drawing. At one point, as students do, I became really snotty, thinking I don't like sculpture, this thing sitting in the middle of a room. I preferred that experience of drawing when you can explore depth and mystical feelings. You take the same wonderful feeling that painters can have, of depth and relationship to the surface. When I began working with the structures, I used canvas and realized that I could go anywhere with it, using a welding structure. I could use values and build them up like a painter would. I consider these pieces classical sculpture. They are not constructions, nor are they just plain sculpture.

A lot has been written about your withdrawal from the art scene in the early 1970s. It seems difficult to imagine that someone at the height of her career would have the fortitude to do that. How did you make that decision?

I don't think it really was a decision. My life changed, so I never thought of leaving the art world. I just thought I wanted to go someplace and work. I never feel as



that's just the greatest thing, whatever it is, wherever it is. I know some artists can do it themselves, and they do it very well. A friend of mine working in Florida told me, "I'm just doing fine. I'm teaching, and I sell out of my studio to Europe." I think wherever you are, you find your way. I think New York is quite a melting pot. A lot of students I've had have moved out west. They have their own little gallery and people coming by, and it seems to work for them. It is no big deal. So there are all kinds of ways of handling it.

You don't feel that your peace of mind is disturbed?

No, I don't. You know, when I was in the country, I didn't even think about it. One time I thought I'd look at an art magazine, and you know I just couldn't do it. So, I put it down again, and that was it. But everybody is different. Some people get a great charge out of all aspects of it, and it makes them motivated. You just find your own motivation.

Can you picture yourself as a student today?

I think I'd just have to do exactly what I am doing. When we all went to galleries, we were not eating well, and many of the galleries were just beginning. It was really not nice. We'd figure out which gallery had goodies. We'd go to the opening and be fed hors d'oeuvres. I think young art students now have found ways to manage it to a certain extent. I'm sure some of them are frustrated, not being able to be seen at all. On the other hand, there are so many galleries, and they're probably struggling, too.

What is your advice to artists to overcome that frustration?

If you have to do it, you do it. Someone told me about two women in their 80s who live up in Vermont or Maine. These women just make a vegetable garden, and they go out to paint, which they've been doing for years. They are content. I think it is a very individual thing. Knowing your own expectations allows you to find your own path.

Were your parents artists? Did they encourage you?

No. The best thing that my mom did was to take me to a van Gogh show at the Met.

It was during the 1940s. She just nabbed me, and said, "Come on, Lee." We went at night, and it was exciting. I think I was about 13. We grabbed the train and walked through the thing. It was the best show that I'd ever seen. I think even today. It was huge. Drawings after drawings. Both of us. The nice thing about it was that my mother was excited, and so we were both excited. This was the kind of encouragement I had. She didn't think of me being an artist, even though I was drawing as a kid. And me, I didn't even think that either. In school, I was asked what I'd like to do. I thought I'd try commercial art. When I got into that I said, "Ugh, no way." I think that sort of wiped out art for me. My parents were neat. They didn't pressure me. When they came to my loft on the Lower East side, on Sixth Street, they walked in and looked around. There was no heat, only steam coming up through the floor, and they just burst out laughing. That was it. They didn't say, "Get out of there." They never said no. I would kind of fib and tell them I was selling so they wouldn't worry about me. I was getting rich. [Laughs.] And they didn't worry.

Did you have a chance to exhibit when you were living in the country?

No. I didn't show a thing. I didn't want to really. I didn't want to talk about art or my old work or anything. I just didn't want to talk about it. When I studied with Zorach, he told me two things...but it wasn't even that. I just wanted to be at peace and to let things flow. Other friends of mine could paint with people all around, whether fixing a bicycle or with intellectual talk going on, and they loved it. It worked for them, and they did beautiful paintings. Everybody's different.

What was it that Zorach said to you?

He said, "Lee, there're two things: Don't sign anything and don't talk about your work."

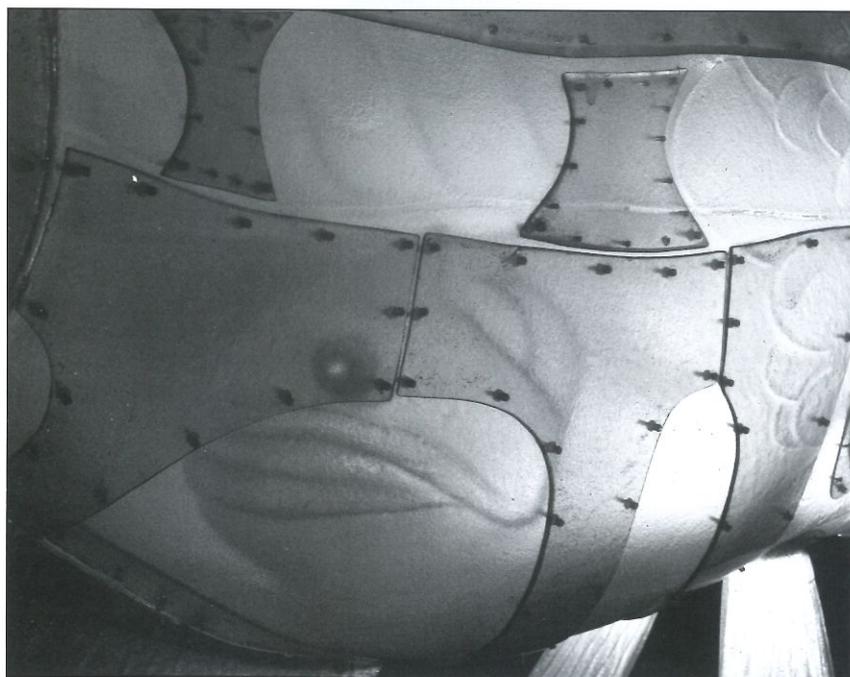
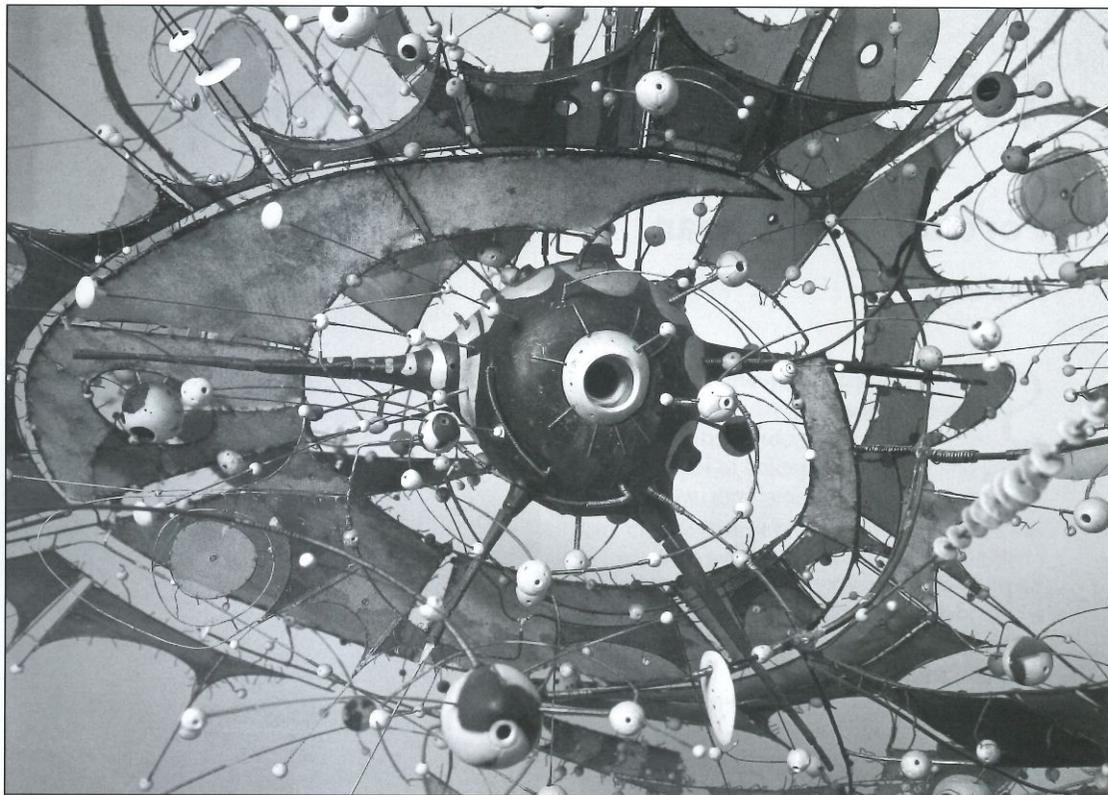
How do you feel about master's degrees for artists as opposed to just doing your work?

I prefer doing your work. [Laughs.] Early on we heard about being a doctorate of art. A one-man show was a requirement for the degree, so then we all said, "Well, we're doctors!" I've taught at Brooklyn College, and the degree question was sort of a problem for me at first. I told Morris, who was the department chair, "I can't

Right: Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1998. (Detail) Welded steel, porcelain, wire mesh, canvas and wire. 7 x 8 x 6 in. ©Lee Bontecou/Courtesy of Knoedler & Co., New York.

Opposite page: Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*. Vacuum-formed plastic. 30 x 57 x 21 in. ©Lee Bontecou/Courtesy of Knoedler & Co., New York.

Below: Lee Bontecou, *Untitled*, 1970. Vacuum-formed plastic. 13 x 15 x 8 in. ©Lee Bontecou/Courtesy of Knoedler & Co., New York.



grade these people." He told me I had to. So, I did. I just gave them all As. Then, I was called in. I don't think I ever gave any Cs. I gave people who didn't have as much talent an A minus or a B plus if they had motivation and were really trying. For undergraduates it was worth it for them to be able to try their imagination and just get their hands dirty. So I felt better about that part. The grad students already knew where they were going.

I think art should be in the streets, you know. That is why this place is wonderful. It doesn't have to be this great business. You can change classes by the month and quit for a while, then come back. There are no strings, and it's wonderful. I know when I was hired at Brooklyn, I didn't have a degree. I don't think they're necessary.

In a way it is necessary today because a university would not hire....

Oh! No, they would not hire me.

So, as a way to support yourself while you're doing your art, it may be necessary for young people to do something completely alien to their art.

[Sigh.] I'm afraid that is so...It's just too bad.

If you are not going to teach, you're ok. But if you want to be a teacher, you're going to have to do it. You can be a teacher not in a university, but in other kinds of schools. But to be in a university, no one would be hired. It's not right. It's stupid. We're not taking the talent that we have. It's cutting out a lot of talent and it's very limiting. There is no spirit.

What are you working on right now?

The latest work I started in the 1980s. I started small with the idea that I didn't want to do any more wall pieces, so I began experimenting in forms and shapes. I loved using clay. I finally caught on to using porcelain instead of something really hard like terra cotta. I started making round forms, almost like an eye or like an opening. I began making holes and then putting steel with it. I began by making tiny ones, thinking, "O.K., I can go with this." I hung these pieces, and they can move. I used a fish swivel. They would take the air with mesh if the wind wasn't blowing hard in the studio. If it got going, it was nice. I used wire mesh instead of cloth because you could see through it, and you could build up different aspects, and you could see right through it so you were working within the piece.

What issues have you been looking at with your constructionist pieces?

I think they're more hopeful pieces than some of the other things I've done. I've been thinking more of space and just letting things flow and encompassing as much as I can about the world. I don't know how to answer that really.

What kind of school did you study in when in Italy? What did you study?

I didn't have to go to a school, at least for very long. We had maybe three required sessions. It was embarrassing. There was kind of a criterion where we had to fill their forms. It was an academic setting and an academic school, and the poor model was freezing. We were freezing. No one went back, so I don't know what happened. After that, we just went and found studios and worked. It was neat. So we didn't have any formal training, and we weren't supposed to either. You just had to find your own place. It was not easy when you didn't know the language, but anyway that is how everybody worked.

Do you feel that the opportunities for artists today are the same, less, or more?

I don't know if I can really answer. I've been so out of it. All I know is that there are an awful lot more students and artists, and I have the feeling that we will never see what they are doing. It is overwhelming. And I just don't know the answers.