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SPENCER FINCH

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LOUISE NEVELSON

ISTANBUL BIENNIAL

The World of Mrs. N.



BY CAROL DIEHL

Guests remember how, at a 1975 dinner given by the Israel Museum in honor of Louise Nevelson, the sculptor stood up and said, "First of all, I want to thank . . . myself."¹ No one was more aware of the extent of her contribution to contemporary art, or knew better the life-long effort it took, than she. It was sheer force of personality—a powerful combination of talent, perseverance and guts—that enabled Nevelson to will her art onto a reluctant world.

When Nevelson began exhibiting her work in 1941 the times were not ready for her, and whatever critical acclaim came her way was reduced by her gender. An unnamed critic in *Cue* magazine wrote of her first exhibi-

In the first major museum retrospective since her death in 1988, Louise Nevelson, whose flamboyant persona often upstaged her work during her lifetime, is now revealed to be, just as she claimed, "the grandmother of environments."



tion: "We learned the artist was a woman in time to check our enthusiasm. Had it been otherwise, we might have hailed these sculptural expressions as by surely a great figure among moderns." Nevelson's breakthrough moment occurred in 1959 when curator Dorothy Miller invited her, at the age of 60, to be in the "16 Americans" exhibition at the Museum of

Louise Nevelson: Dawn's Wedding Feast, 1959, painted wood, reassembled for the Jewish Museum exhibition from various loans. Photo David Heald. All works this article © Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photos courtesy the Jewish Museum, New York.

The human body, its scale and the way it moves through space were Nevelson's constant preoccupations, reflecting her interest in dance.



First Personage, 1956, painted wood, two sections, front 94 by 37 by 11 1/4 inches, back 73 3/4 by 24 1/4 by 7 1/4 inches. Brooklyn Museum.

Modern Art, a show remembered as a landmark for its influence in ending the stranglehold Abstract Expressionism then had on American art. It established the careers of many artists, including Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella (the youngest at 23), although Nevelson was the only one given an entire room. By the time she died in 1988 at the age of 89, her public sculptures dotted the American landscape, and, honored by presidents and universities, she was hailed as a national treasure. Even so, with no major museum exhibitions devoted entirely to her work in the years since her death, it's possible that an entire generation has grown up only dimly aware of Nevelson's achievements and the extent of her influence.

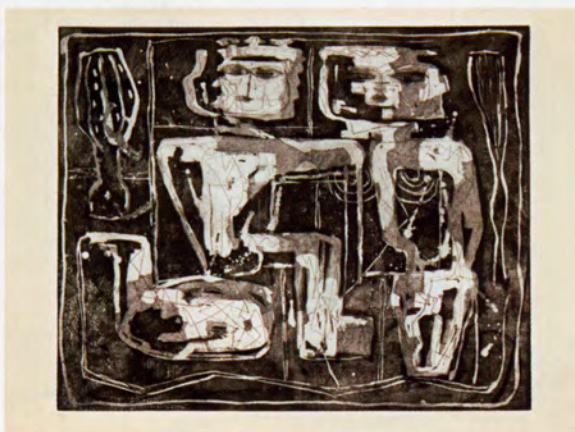
It could be that by the time she died everyone was simply Nevelson-ed out. Unlike her earlier accumulations of found objects, whose appeal was their gritty elegance, Nevelson's ubiquitous fabricated public sculptures were sleek and calculated, and her bigger-than-life, flamboyant persona had begun to overshadow the work. Now, with the passing of time and the artist no longer looking over our shoulders, a serious critical assessment is finally feasible, and this exhibition, which originated

at the Jewish Museum in New York and is currently at the de Young Museum in San Francisco [through Jan. 13], is the best possible way to be introduced—or reintroduced—to her work. While too many curators of museum surveys insist on making sure each phase of an artist's life is equally represented, placing the work in rigorous chronological order, guest curator Brooke Kamin Rapaport and the designers, Tod Williams Billie Tsien Architects, resisted turning the exhibition into a didactic lesson in the artist's development. Instead the emphasis was on selecting the best works available and placing them, not in the order of their making, but in juxtapositions that show them off to the greatest



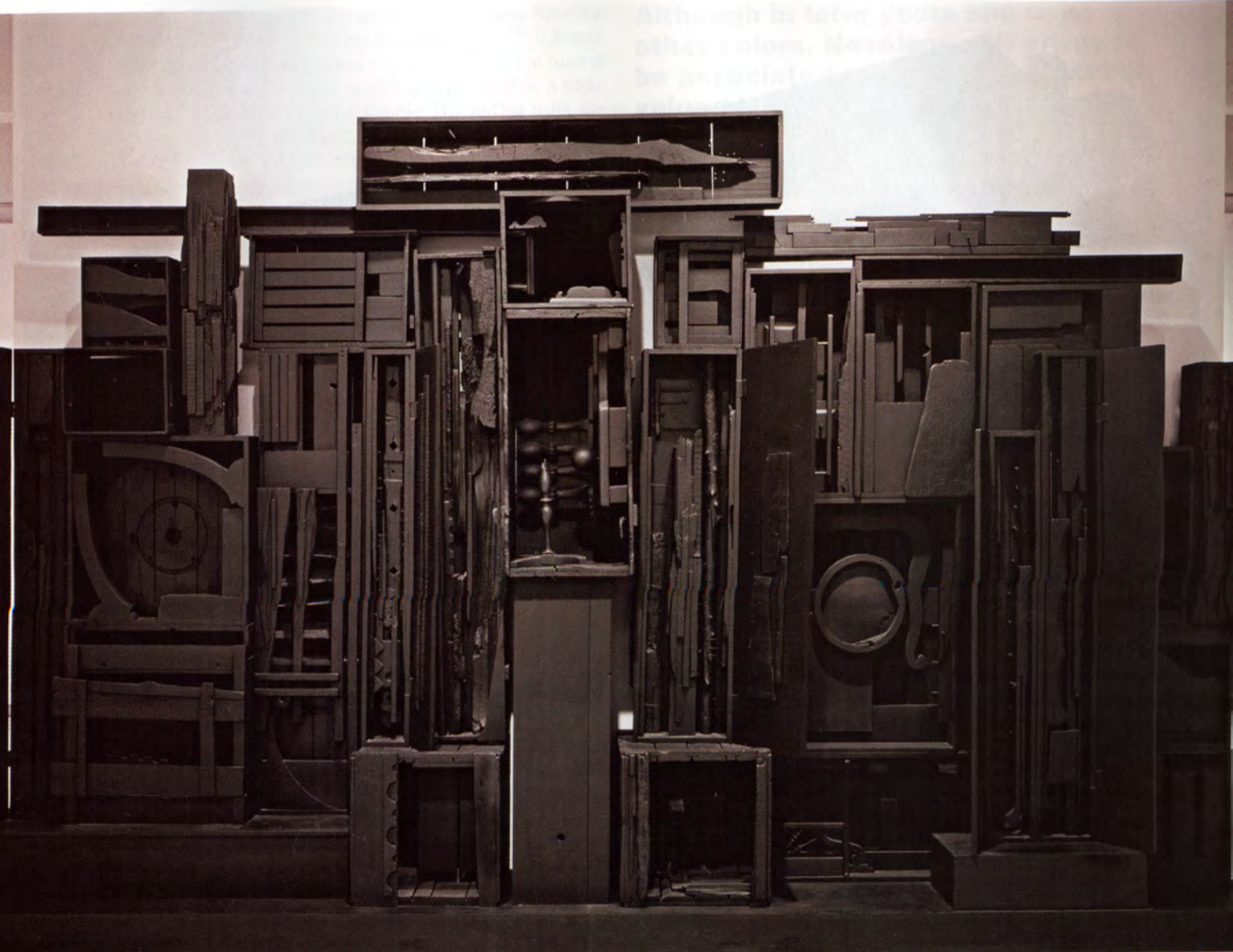
Morning Haze, 1978, cast-paper relief, diptych, 33 by 46 inches overall.

The King and Queen, 1953-55/printed 1965-66, etching on paper, 25 1/4 by 34 inches.



Ancient City, 1945, painted wood, 42 by 36 by 20 inches. Birmingham Museum of Art, Ala.





Sky Cathedral Presence, 1951-64, painted wood, 10 by 16½ by 2 feet. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

esthetic advantage. The result is a seamless integration of 66 examples of sculpture and works on paper into what feels more like a single piece of installation art than a retrospective—which would have pleased Nevelson, who called herself “the grandmother of environments.”

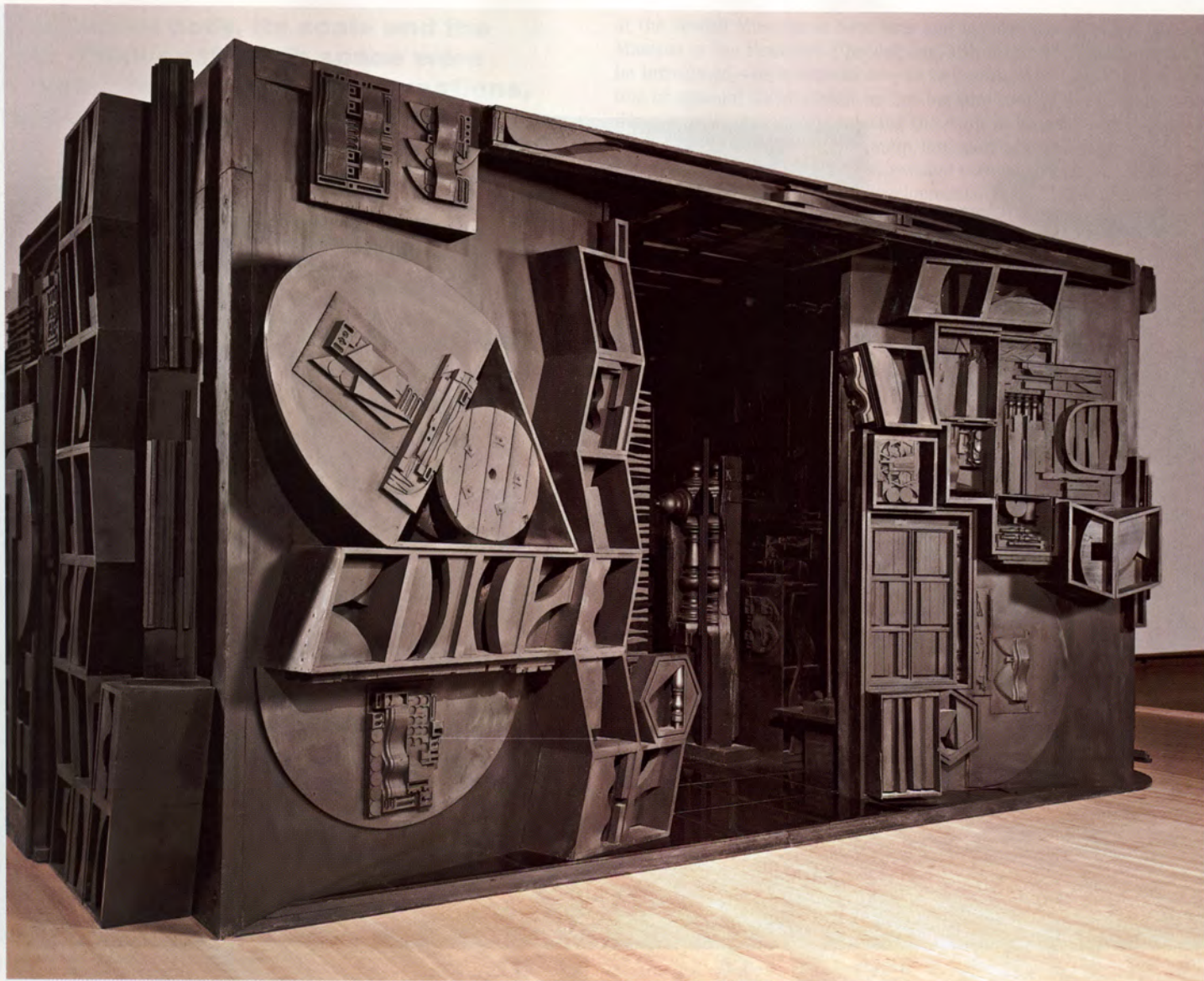
The earliest sculpture that viewers encounter in the show (which covers sculptural work from 1940 to 1988, and works on paper from 1928 to 1981) is a bronze self-portrait. Only 13 inches high, it demonstrates Nevelson’s interest in Cubism, to which she was introduced by her teacher, Hans Hofmann. (“When I found Cubism,” she said, “it was like when some people find God, and I have never left it.”) This bronze also exemplifies the contradictory qualities of hubris and humility that permeate her work. While the brawny figure has blocky, powerful limbs, with arms held out, biceps flexed and fists clenched like a boxer celebrating a knockout, the head is disproportionately tiny, and the figure is kneeling—a sign of deference, or perhaps, supplication.

The human body, its scale and the way it moves through space were Nevelson’s constant preoccupations, reflected in her lifelong study of dance and movement. “I felt a body discipline was essential to harmonious creation,” she said, and even in the last few months of her life she was

studying the Alexander Technique, a method of bodily alignment by which a teacher guides students in achieving optimum movement, balance and coordination. Nevelson was greatly impressed by the sets and costumes artists designed for Martha Graham, and these creations contributed to her concept of sculpture as a “surround” for the body. One of her earliest exhibitions featured moveable components that viewers were invited to rearrange experimentally in space. “Dance,” she said, “made me realize that air is a solid through which I pass, not a void in which I exist.”

Perhaps it was that understanding which enabled Nevelson to move from direct interpretations of the body (as exemplified by the 1945 terra-cotta series “Moving-Static-Moving Figure”) to abstract work that was conceived with its spatial relationship to the body in mind: the signature accumulations of found wooden objects she began to develop in the ’50s.

Nevelson was born in Kiev to a father who came from a long line of woodcutters. Unlike most Jews who fled Eastern Europe during the first decade of the 20th century, however, he immigrated not to a city but to the forested state of Maine, where Nevelson felt she acquired her sense of what she called the “livingness” of wood. Although with time



Mrs. N's Palace, 1964-77, painted wood, mirror, 11½ by 20 by 15 feet. Photo Lynton Gardiner. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

her father was able to support his family comfortably, Nevelson's early years were characterized by poverty, as he made ends meet by scavenging and selling discarded items from the local dump. It's interesting to note that his means of survival ultimately became a component of his daughter's as well.

The variety in size and shape of the cast-off scraps and remnants Nevelson collected for most of her life found unity and order when she placed them in groupings or gridded boxes and painted them monochromatically. Although later in her career she employed other colors (as well as other materials when she became involved with public sculpture), Nevelson will always be associated with black, a color she valued less for its symbolic associations than for its transformative power. Paint anything black, she used to say, and it becomes aristocratic, sophisticated, elegant. This monochrome treatment gives the form of an object dominance over its utilitarian aspects. A spool, for instance, no longer brings to mind thread and sewing but instead becomes simply a cylinder that's wider at the top and bottom. Similarly, the turned balusters in Nevelson's *Sky Cathedral/Southern Mountain* (1959) contribute an impression of Gothic ornament rather than anything to do with stair-

ways. Disparate items placed together and covered with black also cast shadows whose shapes are as distinct as the objects themselves, and whose depths seem unlimited—places of “in-between,” as Nevelson called them, the “dawns and dusks.”

As idiosyncratic as Nevelson's art is, it can also be seen as a co-creation with the viewer, a quality it shares today with the work of Robert Irwin and Olafur Eliasson, among others. When many elements are packed together, the impact of each is diminished, and we're left with an “overall” composition, so that the eye is rapidly drawn from one thing to the next, so that it's almost impossible to take everything in at once. The three-dimensionality of Nevelson's work, plus her use of familiar, everyday objects, further increases the effect. What catches one person's eye is not necessarily what will catch another's, nor is the pattern that seems so evident today going to be the same one you see tomorrow, with the result that the sculpture never devolves into a unitary “thing” to be completely grasped. As Arthur C. Danto wrote in his catalogue essay for this show, “It is as if her works were three-dimensional drawings of realities created by the viewers themselves; they were prompts for the imagination.”

After struggling for 30 years to live and make art, when Nevelson received Dorothy Miller's invitation to participate in "16 Americans," the artist, who had reached this point in her career on the basis of her black-painted sculptures, accepted by saying, "Dear, we'll do a white show. . . Don't tell anybody, it will be a surprise." Up to that point she had painted a few sculptures white but never exhibited them, and it is testimony to her courage and confidence that she took on the challenge of switching gears at this longed-for moment of recognition. As usual, there were no maquettes or drawings; Nevelson assembled all 15 elements of her contribution to the show in a special "white" studio, and relied on her intuition when it came time to install them—in the largest gallery of the exhibition, a procedure that took all of four hours.

Titled *Dawn's Wedding Feast*, the finished work includes bride- and groomlike totems, a "chapel" that resembles the Gothic facade of Notre Dame Cathedral, a horizontal "case" (for a trousseau?) and a number of columns that rise from the floor or hang from the ceiling like stalagmites and stalactites. Painted white, Nevelson's familiar balusters, finials, knobs,

Royal Tide I, 1960, painted wood, 86 by 40 by 8 inches.
Photo Sheldon C. Collins. Collection Peter and Beverly Lipman.



Although in later years she used other colors, Nevelson will always be associated with black, which she valued for its transformative power.

moldings, dowels, roughly sawn boards and decorative architectural scraps take on the lacy lightness of wedding finery, and the shadows are less pronounced, becoming like an etching that sets off the intricacy of the shapes without any suggestion of infinite depth. Nevelson saw *Dawn's Wedding Feast* as a single work and was disappointed when, for financial reasons, its sections had to be separated and sold to various collections; no doubt she would be delighted to know that they have been regrouped (and the lost or destroyed ones carefully reconstructed) for the current exhibition, so the piece appears just as it did when originally shown at MOMA.

After experimenting with white and, later, gold, as in two beautiful sculptures included in the exhibition (*Royal Tide I*, 1960, and *Golden Gate*, 1961-70), Nevelson turned again to black. Examples from this period are *Homage to the 6,000,000 I* and the supremely elegant *Concorde*, both from 1964. She continued to make the black wooden sculptures until she died (as witness the totemlike *Mirror-Shadow VII*, 1988), and it is for these found-wood accumulations, with the rawness of their components still evident, that Nevelson is best known. Working with found material, one is never completely the master of one's fate; it's a collaboration with chance, and the material itself can be the source of inspiration. No one ever asked Joseph Cornell to make something from raw, untouched materials, and it's probably a good thing. When Nevelson veered off into Plexiglas and Cor-Ten steel, her works grew stiff and oversimplified as a result of the planning and forethought that outsourced fabrication requires. Her work of this period, a boom era for public sculpture, further suffered from her decision to have it fabricated by the Lippincott foundry, which tended to give everything it made—be it a work by Claes Oldenburg, Tony Smith or Nevelson—the same overly smooth, corporation-friendly surface.

Along with *Dawn's Wedding Feast*, the other room-sized installation in the exhibition is a walk-in work (or in this case, given the velvet rope cordoning it off, a "peer-in" work) titled *Mrs. N's Palace* (1964-77), a complete surround that resembles a building interior. While spectacular in its sheer ambition, it's not as engaging as her other wooden pieces, because it's too easy to get caught up in its straightforward resemblance to a home, or even a mausoleum, complete with entrance, black mirror "floor" and rear "garden." While Nevelson's other work has a psychic weightlessness that defies its black color, the literalness of *Mrs. N's Palace* overwhelms its abstract elements.

However, as a metaphor, *Mrs. N's Palace* fits Nevelson perfectly. She was a queen who picked things up from the street to build her own monuments, gathering humble materials to make grand statements. And as eclectic as her materials might be, Nevelson borrowed no less promiscuously from contemporary and historical art—introducing elements of Cubism, Surrealism, Dada, Abstract Expressionism, Arte Povera, Pop and Minimalism into her work. Nevertheless, in retrospect it's clear that she fits no niche but her own. "I have made my world," she said, "and it is a much better world than I ever saw outside." □

1. This quote is provided by Carol and Arthur Goldberg, who attended the dinner in question. Other sources drawn upon for this article include the author's own recollections, an interview she conducted with the artist in 1989 and Laurie Lisle's biography, *Louise Nevelson: A Passionate Life*, New York, Summit Books, 1990.

"The Sculpture of Louise Nevelson: Constructing a Legend" appeared at the Jewish Museum, New York [May 5-Sept. 16, 2007], before traveling to the de Young, San Francisco [Oct. 27, 2007-Jan. 13, 2008]. The show is accompanied by a 238-page catalogue with essays by Brooke Kamin Rapaport, Michael Stanislawski, Arthur C. Danto and Harriet F. Senie.

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