

REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS

NEW YORK

Lee Bontecou at Leo Castelli

During the 1960s and early '70s, the work of American artist Lee Bontecou (b. 1931) was widely exhibited, praised and collected. Hailed as one of the most promising young sculptors of her generation, Bontecou created a unique and important body of work that stood somewhat apart from the major currents of that time and is relatively little known today. The recent exhibition of sculpture and drawings at Castelli Gallery reintroduced her art of the period 1958-72. The show included several of her signature wall constructions and, unexpectedly, a number of less familiar (though no less extraordinary) works: an early bronze sculpture, a portfolio of six etchings and aquatints, a lithograph, several drawings, a bamboo and wire piece and a late plastic work.

One of the few women artists to receive broad recognition in the 1960s, Bontecou first distinguished herself in 1959 with a series of mid-sized wall constructions. They were fabricated from canvas, worn-out laundry conveyor belts, airplane parts, industrial sawteeth and black velvet, and sewn together with copper wire on steel frames. These heavy, asymmetrically balanced, three-dimensional constructions often project 2 to 3 feet into the viewer's space, achieving a dramatic and aggressive environmental presence. At once organic and mechanistic, Bontecou's constructions evoke

multiple associations, from airplane engines and craters to the *vagina dentata*.

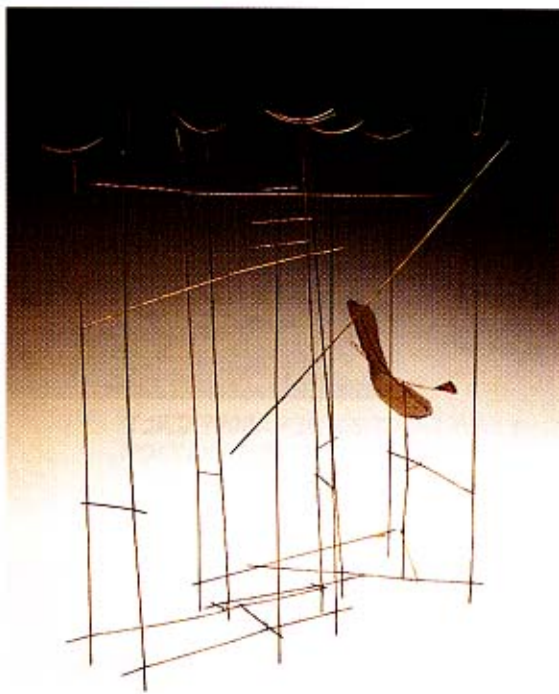
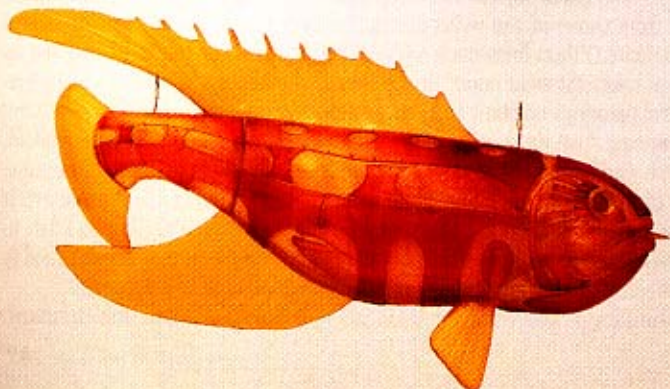
Bontecou's drawings indicated how these abstract wall constructions morphed out of recognizable (albeit at times otherworldly) subject matter. For instance, in several of the preparatory sketches, skeletal insects turn into chasms, cyborg creatures don crater-shaped gas masks, flower corollas transform into machine guns. Less fantastic though no less impressive, the earliest work in the show was a small, abstractly rendered bronze bird (1958) whose head and neck are tucked into its shoulders. It belongs to a series of bronze and terra-cotta birds that she made during the years 1956-58 while on a fellowship in Rome.

At the end of the 1960s, Bontecou's art changed drastically in style, imagery and strategy as she returned to making figurative pieces, working in transparent plastics, paper and bamboo. An untitled work of 1970 is a large, translucent, yellow and orange-brown plastic fish that hangs from the ceiling by a thin wire. From its mouth dangles the tail of a smaller fish. Unlike the abstract wall constructions, this later piece is light, buoyant and delicate; yet it is no less ferocious, with sharp fins, pointy teeth and the remains of a meal contributing to a sense of menace.

Considering the power of the work at Castelli, one cannot help but wonder in what direction this extraordinary artist would have gone had she not abruptly ceased to exhibit in the early 1970s.

—Maura Reilly

Lee Bontecou: Untitled, 1970, vacuum formed plastic, 30 by 21 by 52 inches; at Leo Castelli.



Fausto Melotti: *Bird Entering the Forest*, 1977, brass, 39½ by 35½ by 10½ inches; at Lawrence Rubin-Greenberg Van Doren.

Fausto Melotti at Lawrence Rubin- Greenberg Van Doren

Fausto Melotti (1901-1986) is an Italian modernist whose work is well known in Europe but unfamiliar to an American audience. A man of many talents, Melotti was a mathematician, an engineer, a poet, a musician and a sculptor. As a young man in the '30s, he participated in the Futurist and Abstract-Creationist movements. He emerged from the war years severely shaken, but eventually picked up his career as a sculptor in the '50s and '60s. My first impression on walking into this show was of an Italian Calder making lyrical abstractions. Closer examination, and learning some of Melotti's history, radically altered my perceptions of the work.

The show opened with a suite of drawings from the '30s and a single sculpture from the same period. *Scultura N. 14* (1935) was an elegant piece of Italian design based on musical ideas of phrase, modulation and rhythm. Built entirely in stainless steel, it consists of a wavy vertical sheet which provides a background and support for three identical configurations formed from thin

square rods. Each of these incorporates a long skinny S-curve that seems to vibrate like a plucked string.

The next piece in the show was *Falso Trofeo II* (False Trophy) from 1961, nearly 30 years later. All the assurance and optimism of the prewar piece are gone, replaced by an incredibly spare, tentative lyricism, a whispered, elegiac poetry that reflects the work's physical frailty. *Falso Trofeo II* is built in brass from nuggets and scraps of sheet arrayed on a thin mast with cross-ties, giving the effect of tiny sailors aloft in the rigging of a ship. Boats and other vehicles with visionary or mythic connotations—the chariot, for example—turn up in later pieces from the '70s like *Viaggio delle Muse* (Voyage of the Muses, 1973) and *La Medusa allo Specchio* (The Medusa in the Mirror, 1974). These works use the same spare means of brass rod and sheet, with the occasional addition of bits of cloth or painted paper, to tell mythic narratives of passage and transformation. The vocabulary of the late works is tenuous and improvisatory—the minimum amounts of materials assembled with the least possible technical intervention.

One of the most engaging pieces