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I, Sara E Mastbaum, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

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"Systems Within Systems, Microcosms Within Microcosms": The Sculpture of Lee Bontecou after 1980

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“Systems Within Systems, Microcosms Within Microcosms”: The Sculpture of Lee Bontecou after 1980

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Abstract

After two decades spent creating work out of the public eye, Lee Bontecou (b. 1931) allowed her work to be exhibited in a major retrospective at the UCLA Hammer Museum and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in 2003. Co-curated by Ann Philbin and Elizabeth A.T. Smith, the retrospective brought Bontecou and her artwork, past and present, once more into the art world’s purview. Although scholars and critics have discussed Bontecou’s earlier sculptures extensively, very little examination of the artist’s work since 1980 exists at present. This study seeks to fill that gap. In chapter one, I discuss the themes and motifs that Bontecou has used throughout her career, and explore the political context of her work. Chapter two is an exploration of feminist themes and the gendering of Bontecou’s work by art critics. The final chapter focuses strictly upon Bontecou’s work after 1980, the year when she began to create work outside of the gallery system, using the context established in the study to discuss Bontecou’s studio practices, her rural surroundings, the dualities in her work, and the late work’s ties to Surrealism. Bontecou’s art, though formally very distinct in each period of her career, can be understood as a web of continuing ideas and broad themes that are informed chiefly by her life and socio-political interests.
Acknowledgements

In 2003, I read an article in the *New Yorker* by Calvin Tomkins about the re-emergence of an artist named Lee Bontecou, who originally rose to fame in the 1960s. Because Bontecou lived in Orbisonia, PA, close to my then-home in Boiling Springs, I became intrigued and began to follow her newly re-established career. In 2004, while an undergraduate at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, I had the good fortune of seeing Bontecou’s work in person at the Carnegie International. Her art immediately drew me in: the mysterious black voids at the center of her assemblages, the eerie plastic fish and flowers, and the delicate, almost unbelievably intricate beadwork of the mobiles. Upon entering graduate school for art history, Bontecou’s mostly unexamined recent work seemed a natural choice of topic for extended study.

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16. Max Ernst, *The Horde*, 1927, oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm, Collection Wurth, Kunzelsau, Germany.


“Despite their almost microscopic complexity, and the sense they are whirling at the edge of chaos, these works have great lightness and lyrical energy.”

Daniel Baird

Introduction

In 1960, the American sculptor Lee Bontecou (b. 1931) was the first female artist to be signed and included in the stable of artists represented by the Leo Castelli Gallery. Beginning in 1959, Bontecou created large, abstract canvas reliefs that critics frequently describe with words such as “threatening,” perhaps because Bontecou used discarded military equipment to create assemblages and their remnant forms are apparent in the surfaces of these works. One of Bontecou’s champions at this early stage in her career was the minimalist sculptor and art critic, Donald Judd (1928-1994), who wrote several essays on her early sculptural relief works. Though she received numerous accolades for these reliefs, by 1967 Bontecou felt that she had exhausted this style of abstract art-making and turned to working with recognizable images in her art. Using pieces of plastic, as well as discarded gas masks, Bontecou created “vacuum-formed” sculptures from 1967 to 1971 by forming plastic into shapes with a vacuum hose. Art critics gave these sculptures lukewarm reception. In 1977, Bontecou, married and with a young daughter, decided to leave the New York art scene to focus on raising her family and to create work away from the limelight.

Since Bontecou’s departure from New York, her sculpture has undergone a fairly deep formal and conceptual set of transformations that relate to issues in ecology and feminism. In 2003, after the artist had spent more than two decades making works

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beyond the art world’s purview and without the scrutiny of public exhibitions, the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago co-organized a retrospective of Bontecou’s art that included works that she had made after 1980, the year when her work underwent its third material shift. These prints and sculptures were also shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2004, as well as the prestigious Carnegie International exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh from 2004 to 2005. Despite the recent flurry of interest in this so-called “late” work, little has been written about the art that Bontecou has made since 1980 – delicate pieces made of wire and bead, intricately crafted without the help of studio assistants. Bontecou’s most recent sculptures include representational elements and feature prominent ecological and outdoor motifs. Untitled sculptures with motifs, such as insects, dragonflies, and sailboats, are among the works in this group of sculptures that critics have discussed. In this thesis, I augment the literature on Bontecou’s recent sculpture with its focus on the artist’s studio practices, by providing an in-depth study of the course by which her artwork has developed in its various, disparate forms, and I examine the extreme significance of ecology in Bontecou’s work. My central claim in the study is that the trajectory of Bontecou’s work, far from being divisible in three completely separate stages, may be understood as a web of similar and linked themes. These themes include militarism, ecology, and feminism.

Little scholarship exists on Bontecou’s most recent work. The bulk of the sparse criticism dedicated to her sculpture focuses on her early canvases. Donald Judd wrote the first major assessment of Bontecou’s art, which was an essay on the artist’s canvas reliefs for *Arts Magazine*, in 1965. Eleanor Munro examined Bontecou’s work in a chapter of
her book, *Originals: American Women Artists* (1979). Munro discussed both Bontecou’s large canvases and also her vacuum-formed sculptures of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Munro felt that Bontecou’s early works, which Judd had discussed, “were of such an awesome openness to interpretation that they caught the Zeitgeist by many sails.”

Nothing significant was written about Bontecou’s art during the 1980s, there was just a mention in an exhibition catalogue, *Standing Ground: Sculpture by American Women*, by Sarah Rogers-Lafferty. Bontecou had a minor role in a group show of American women sculptors at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1987, and her sculpture of the 1960s is cited by Lafferty in this catalogue as an exemplar of concerns with “form/process” in sculpture of the 1960s and early 1970s.

A significant scholar of Bontecou’s work, Mona Hadler, wrote an essay for *Art Journal* in 1994, in which she focused on the sociopolitical “warnings” and the “social message” transmitted by Bontecou’s early work. Further analysis of Bontecou’s early canvases comes in a recent text published by Kirsten Swenson in 2003, which appeared in *Art in America*. Swenson includes new details about the artist’s biography, and she approaches the subject matter by arguing that Bontecou does not have complete control of her work and that the artist’s interpretation is not necessarily the “correct” one. Swenson posits that the work is about the context in which it was created, the political and social climate of the early 1960s at the height of the Cold War. I agree with Swenson that the Cold War and its events were a significant influence on Bontecou’s art.

The exhibition catalogue from the UCLA Hammer Museum/Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago retrospective exhibition is the most comprehensive

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publication about Bontecou’s art. The show’s curator, Elizabeth A.T. Smith, wrote an essay, “All Freedom in Every Sense,” for the catalogue, which not only analyzes the early canvases, but also makes mention of Bontecou’s post-1980 work. This publication is the most important resource on the topic to date.

Calvin Tomkins wrote a lengthy essay, “Missing in Action,” for The New Yorker in which he discussed the reemergence of Bontecou in the art world after 2003. In this text, Tomkins is more concerned with Bontecou’s biography than in providing a technical or conceptual analysis of her work, but he does echo the sentiments of various scholars such as Judd concerning the awe-inspiring and threatening nature of the early canvases. He also gives a brief discussion of Bontecou’s wire sculptures of the 1980s, noting the stark contrast between the early and later styles in her oeuvre.

In 2007, curator Elisabeth Sussman wrote an exhibition catalogue for Knoedler & Company’s exhibition of Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures, which remains one of the few texts that concerns the sculptures in detail. Stressing the importance of the materials, formal elements, and the positioning of these sculptures in a gallery space, Sussman gives a mostly formalist critique of Bontecou’s intermediate work. Bontecou’s biography, she feels, is paramount in understanding the work, and so Sussman draws connections between the creation of the first vacuum-formed works and the publication of the book Silent Spring, which Sussman hypothesizes must have inspired this rendering of natural objects in such an environmentally degrading material.

Numerous reviews of Bontecou shows also exist, as her work has been shown with more frequency since the 2003 retrospective. The independent arts newspaper The Brooklyn Rail has reviewed these sculptures especially often. Two graduate student
studies about Bontecou’s early work, “The Architecture of Reception: Sculpture and Gender in the 1950s and 1960s” by Elyse Marie Deeb Speaks (2005) and “Art Criticism and the Gendering of Lee Bontecou’s Art: 1959 – 1964” by Victoria Estrada-Berg (2005), focus on the importance of gender in Bontecou’s art.

In the first chapter of the study, I discuss the iconography of Bontecou’s post-1980 sculptures. Bontecou does not give titles to her sculptures, but creates recognizable objects, such as sailboats or dragonflies. Therefore, though she has worked prolifically since 1980, the images are restricted to a few main themes, whose significance is explored.

In the second chapter, I examine the idea of femininity, motherhood, and gendering in Bontecou’s work. Bontecou began to create work that many scholars and critics feel has ties to femininity in the late 1960s, following the birth of her daughter, Valerie Giles. I explore why gendering is problematic in attempting to understand Bontecou’s past and present work.

In the final chapter of the study, I focus on Bontecou’s later work. I analyze the “beautiful/ugly” duality of Bontecou’s divergent imagery and materiality. I also discuss in depth Bontecou’s studio practices and their contribution to many scholars’ readings of Bontecou’s post-1980 work as “obsessive” and “chaotic.” In addition, I explore the significance of Bontecou’s rural surroundings and the role that the mountains, lakes, fields, and wildlife of south central Pennsylvania has played in this art. I also examine the influence of Surrealism on Bontecou’s later work, particularly the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966).
My approach in this study consists of analysis of the imagery in Bontecou’s sculptures from 1980-2003, especially as pertains to ecology, a feminist critique of Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures and her wire-and-bead sculptures, and an examination of Bontecou’s surroundings and studio practices. Many scholars feel that Rachel Carson’s seminal work *Silent Spring* was a source of inspiration for Bontecou’s vacuum-formed “intermediate” work, and I analyze the images in her post-1980 sculptures to find a continuation of these ecological themes. Additionally, I discuss the military iconography that is present in Bontecou’s early canvas-assemblages, the symbolism in her formally distinct vacuum-formed plastic sculptures, and the use of this military theme in Bontecou’s wire-and-bead sculptures. Motherhood and femininity are explored by Sussman as an important influences on Bontecou’s art after 1970, and though she denies being a “feminist artist,” a feminist reading of her most recent work is called for, especially in light of the fact that she created this art after retiring from the New York art world to focus on being a mother. Additionally, I discuss the duality of meaning and materiality that seems to exist in Bontecou’s art, for example, “beautiful” flowers made of the environmentally degrading material of vacuum-formed plastic.

Criticism and scholarship exist on Bontecou’s early work, so many of the themes in these sculptures can be determined using these sources. I explore the iconography of her later pieces using recent a interview with Bontecou by Karen Wright, as well as Elizabeth A.T. Smith’s essay, and Calvin Tomkins’s essay. To explore the concepts of motherhood and femininity in Bontecou’s sculptures, I rely on interviews given by Bontecou soon after her daughter’s birth, especially that with Munro, as well as criticism generated about work created during this period. Given Bontecou’s private and reclusive
nature, I was unable to speak with her directly, although several attempts to contact her via mail and through galleries were made. Through the elements of iconography, feminist critique, and exploration of studio practices, I investigate the meanings of Bontecou’s later sculptures and the trajectory of her corpus of work.

Lee Bontecou was a rising star in the art world and a pioneer among female artists in the 1960s and 1970s. Because of Bontecou’s meteoric rise in the New York art scene, coupled with her status as the first woman artist signed by the Leo Castelli Gallery, many authors have analyzed her early assemblages. Not only was Bontecou’s later work created away from public scrutiny, but it was not shown until 2003. Therefore, little analysis of this work has been made, and a significant gap exists in the criticism of Bontecou’s art. This study will contribute to the understanding of Bontecou’s sculpture as a whole and seeks to fill the gap in the scholarship of the artist’s later pieces.
Chapter 1
“Systems Within Systems, Microcosms Within Microcosms”: Lee Bontecou and Iconography”

“Encompassing such a vast and varied terrain of references, Bontecou’s work continues to elicit a wide spectrum of readings and responses.”

-Elizabeth A.T. Smith

Introduction

The imagery in Lee Bontecou’s sculpture is a deeply personal reflection of the artist’s emotions and experiences. Bontecou’s reactions to World War II, the Korean War, and the Cold War are essential to determining the themes in her sculpture. The materiality and form of these sculptures owe a great deal to wartime incidents and the events that shaped Bontecou both as an artist and more generally. Though each phase of Bontecou’s work is materially and formally distinct, Bontecou has used similar themes through her career. For example, Bontecou’s earlier work, created in the late 1950s and early 1960s, is more obviously bound in military and World War II themes, but military iconography has remained a theme in Bontecou’s work until the present day. Although Bontecou maintains that the art of her contemporaries did not influence her work, it is important to note the work of some of her colleagues, especially with the theme of militarism in mind. Robert Morris, in an interview with Pepe Karmel published in Art in America in 1995, discusses his background as a member of the Army Corps of Engineers during the Korean War and the experiences he faced while serving in the military. Karmel states that, “Morris’ choice of materials, and sometimes even his deployment of them, seemed to have been influenced by personal experiences and associations which

had never been discussed in the critical literature on his work.” Because World War II and the Korean War were in recent memory as Bontecou and her contemporaries began their careers, militarism was a common theme for many artists of that time.

In the three phases of her career, Bontecou has addressed in some way militarism, ecological themes, ideas of flight, water imagery, futuristic themes, and erotic imagery. This and each subsequent chapter are arranged thematically, rather than chronologically. Because works of art may include more than one theme, I may discuss a work more than once per chapter.

Military Concerns

As Bontecou was growing up, World War II not only raged throughout Europe, but it threatened the security of Bontecou’s home in Providence, Rhode Island as well. Bontecou’s mother went to work in a factory that specialized in submarines, a source of anger to Bontecou in the years that would follow. She told Eleanor Munro, “During World War II we’d been too young. But at that later time [the fifties and sixties], all the feelings I’d had back then came to me again ... Africa was in trouble and we were so negative. Then I remembered the killings, the Holocaust, the political scene.” Not only was World War II a formative experience for Bontecou, but the Korean War added to the artist’s frustration with the political world. Bontecou channeled her discontent into her artwork. According to art historian Mona Hadler, “Bontecou maintains that world politics and events, more than artistic precedents, inspired her soot drawings and the boxes that

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5 Munro, 384.
followed them.” Bontecou used the soot from her welding torch to create a dark black, and later used this technique to create black expanses in her canvases.

Bontecou’s studio on C Street in Manhattan was located above a laundromat and near enough to a military supply outlet that Bontecou was able to salvage objects for her sculptures from its garbage bins. The canvas belts from the laundromat and salvaged military equipment became part of her early sculptures, abstract assemblages meant to convey a threatening message. The artist Joseph Cornell wrote, “In other days there were the ‘mouth of truth’ and the lions’ mouths of the Venetian Inquisition, then, there is the terror of the yawning mouths of cannons, of violent craters, of windows opened to receive your flight without return, and the jaws of great beasts; and now we have Lee’s warnings.” Cornell noted the violence of these sculptures, particularly Untitled (1959) (Figure 1), the “cannon.” Untitled (1959) bears the distinction of being one of the few non-abstract images of Bontecou’s early career. This piece is very obviously militaristic and was crafted with seemingly innocuous items, such as found clothes racks, and dangerous items, including bullets. Bontecou’s assemblages of the late 1950s and early 1960s recall her mother’s job in the wartime factory, as Bontecou herself built “war equipment” in creating these sculptures.

Bontecou’s “monumental work” Untitled (1964) (Figure 2) hangs at Lincoln Center in Manhattan. This piece, arguably among the most publicly visible of any Bontecou work, carries clear evidence of military connections. Called “a crowning

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achievement in a long career…” the sculpture is an enormous wall relief measuring over twenty-one feet long, six and a half feet tall, and two feet thick. It is an assemblage of “the Plexiglas turret from a military aircraft, fire hoses and other “heavy” industrial paraphernalia…covered lightly in white canvas, stitched roughly, and blackened with soot.” The “military aircraft” is in fact an aircraft used during World War II. The materiality of the work is similarly warlike: canvas, found parts from war machines, and the sooty residue left by bombings. Because the Cold War was a daily threat in 1964, the idea of bombings was at the forefront of Bontecou’s consciousness. She told Munro, “I was angry…in a way, the anger became part of the process…Rockefeller was trying to push bomb shelters on us….Out of that came two kinds of feeling…more open work, work that I felt was more optimistic…[and] the other kind of work was like war equipment.”

Bontecou’s fears about the Cold War were twofold. First, she had an uneasiness about the threat of nuclear attack and, at least in part, shared in the fear of the time period. The “warnings” discussed by Cornell are partially warnings of imminent attack. However, Bontecou was also issuing warnings of a different kind. During the Cold War, the “consensus culture” propagated during the McCarthy era was troublesome to many. Bontecou simultaneously worried over the threat of nuclear war and disdained the policies of the United States government “[which] annually spend[s] on military security

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9 Ibid., 37.
10 Munro, 384.
11 Swenson, 75.
more than the net income of all United States corporations.”\textsuperscript{12} Therefore, Bontecou’s “warnings” also dealt with governmental propaganda and that the country was becoming too focused on military endeavors such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. According to historian Martin Walker, “The endemic wars of Europe in the past millennium have been of two broad kinds: wars of ideology about what other men and women were allowed to believe: and wars of succession and the balance of power. The Cold War, for the first, time combined both of these characteristics.”\textsuperscript{13} During that time period, the United States and the Soviet Union both resorted to propagandizing in the popular media and promoted hysteria to gain the support of citizens. It was this practice that Bontecou warned against with her military works.

In the late 1960s, Bontecou abandoned both her canvas reliefs and abstraction. Her vacuum-formed plastic sculptures, the “second phase” of her career, are often seen as a complete departure from her early works. However, Bontecou continued to use militarism as a major theme. \textit{Untitled} (1967) (Figure 3) is a plastic flower created by forming the material into shapes with a vacuum hose. Bontecou added plastic tubing to the work and painted it with frosted acrylic. The final result resembles a hybrid flower and gas mask; the plastic tubing represents both vines and oxygen filters. Bontecou drew much of her inspiration for this sculpture from the dread of nuclear winter resulting from the Cold War.\textsuperscript{14} If the politics of that war continued, Bontecou felt, everyone would eventually be wearing a gas mask. In addition, plastic was “a complex signifier during the

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
forties...seen as military and artificial all at once”, “used to replace materials made scarce during wartime deprivations.” Therefore, plastic was a material that Bontecou very much associated with militarism.

After 1980, when Bontecou left New York and stopped exhibiting her work publicly, her sculptures again underwent a radical material and visual transformation as she abandoned vacuum-formed plastic in favor of wire and ceramic. However, she continues to add militaristic elements into her current work. For example, though the Cold War ended well before 1998, its echoes were heard in events like the fall of the Berlin Wall and its anniversaries, as well as the failure of the Soviet space program, and therefore Bontecou continued to incorporate overtones of the conflict into her sculpture. *Untitled* (1998) (Figure 4) is frequently compared to Sputnik, the Soviet satellite launched in 1957. Though officially part of the space program, Sputnik was part of a campaign to launch nuclear weapons. Because the satellite preceded an American version of the same type of spacecraft, the United States grew fearful of both an inability to keep up with the Soviet Union and nuclear war. As several significant events of the Cold War, particularly the Cuban Missile Crisis and the races between the United States and the Soviet Union to fill their arsenals, took place during the peak of Bontecou’s career, she used the radio news as a source of artistic inspiration, and it is conceivable that end of the Cold War could have at least partially inspired her post-1980 oeuvre.

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Flora and Fauna

In 1962, environmentalist Rachel Carson (1907-1964) published her seminal work, the bestselling book, *Silent Spring*. The book uncovered the rampant use of pesticides by industries and the detrimental effects of such chemicals on earth’s air, land, and water supplies. Carson focused upon “the universal contamination of the environment [in which] chemicals are the sinister and little-recognized partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world – the very nature of its life.”¹⁸ Warning that humankind will eventually destroy the earth through the use of pesticides such as DDT and gasses like Strontium-90, Carson advocated both government and private safety testing for chemical products before they were put on the market.

Though Carson’s message is well-known today and the idea of “greening” has swept the marketplace in recent years, in 1962 when Bontecou first read the work, her ideas were revolutionary and hardly well-received. Bontecou’s earliest ecological sculptures also met with a less-than-welcome reception. Whether this is because of their controversial content or the work’s departure from the canvas assemblages is not entirely clear. Also, ecology is one of the few iconographies that is not apparent in each stage of Bontecou’s work. This is due to the fact that *Silent Spring* was published after Bontecou had devised the steel-and-canvas assemblages.

Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures bear the most obvious connection to themes of ecological decline. The use of gas-mask-like imagery in these sculptures was not only representative of militarism, but also of Bontecou’s concerns with *Silent Spring*’s message as well. Curator Elisabeth Sussman writes, “In the plants, particularly

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those with the embedded form of the gas mask, there are hints at possible threats to natural life of poisonous gasses of peacetime, the world described by Rachel Carson in her then-recent book *Silent Spring.* Bontecou’s sculpture *Untitled* (1967) is a clear example of such work. The piece consists of a flower in bud and a flower in full bloom made of white plastic standing beside each other with leaves outstretched. The large flower appears to have a face, large “eyes,” and a circular mouth from which six tendrils of plastic tubing dangle. The bud lacks eyes, but has eight tendrils of tubing. The “faces” of the flowers clearly resemble gas masks, and a tube that runs down the transparent stem of each makes it appear “as though they were on life support.” Bontecou says of these sculptures:

> Just as there were gas masks and Nazi helmets involved in the steel-and-canvas sculpture, so the flowers in their way were saying, “Okay, we have to have plants. If you don’t watch out, this is all we’ll have to remember what flowers used to look like, this kind of flower made out of plastic.” My making them out of synthetics was a way of saying what would happen if we keep gallivanting the way we are.

Bontecou’s ideas about “what would happen if we keep gallivanting the way we are” directly echo Carson’s warnings against herbicides and the fact that they kill not only weeds, but all plants and are deadly to people.

It is possible that Bontecou’s sculpture *Untitled* (1969) (Figure 5) is a reflection of Carson’s writings on the dangers of mutagens. Carson wrote extensively on the contamination of the water supply and the harm to both humans who consume water and the living organisms in the lakes, rivers, and oceans. *Untitled* (1969) is a translucent, white plastic fish with jagged teeth, jagged spikes protruding from the top of its head, and

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19 Sussman, 12.
21 Munro, 386.
a dark mass inside of its body. It is mounted on a rectangular base, and its tail is pointed upwards. A later piece, *Untitled* (2001) (Figure 6) consists of the neck of a creature resembling a sea monster with jagged teeth and sharp spikes in its large, thin mouth, sharp spines down the back of the neck, and an intricate webwork of wire and porcelain beads across the top of the head. The fish appears mutated, and Carson says of mutagens, “Among the herbicides are some that are classified as “mutagens” or agents capable of modifying the genes.” Carson goes on to describe the horrific effects of mutagens on fish and other water creatures as a result of such chemicals. Curator Elizabeth Smith describes Bontecou’s aquatic creatures thusly: “Frankly representational, they embody curiously disturbing interpretations of their subjects…revealing affinities to internal organs, [they] appear sinister and mutated.” The fish and “sea monster” represented in *Untitled* (1969) and *Untitled* (2001) seem to be “sinister, mutated” examples of what might happen to animals exposed to harmful chemicals.

Another comparatively recent sculpture, *Untitled* (1986-2002) (Figure 7), is a possible exemplar of ecological imagery in Bontecou’s work. The piece, crafted from white porcelain and wire, is a bird’s skull with a dark hollow eye. The skull is surrounded by small beads attached to protruding wires. Throughout much of *Silent Spring*, Carson, a biologist who focused on ornithology, is concerned with bird populations. In the chapter “And No Birds Sing,” Carson notes, “Over increasingly large areas of the United States, spring now comes unheralded by the return of birds, and the early mornings are strangely silent where once they were filled with the beauty of bird song.” Smith mentions Bontecou’s bird sculpture, but does not place it within the context of ecology. She relates

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22 Carson, 36.
23 Smith, 177.
the piece to very early animal sculptures that Bontecou created as a student. However, a bird’s skull seems to be a very clear link to Bontecou’s environmentalism.

**Sea Creature Imagery**

Many of Bontecou’s childhood summers were spent on the island of Nova Scotia, where she played in the marshes and studied the sea life that washed up on the beach. During Bontecou’s interview with Munro in 1977, she describes her explorations of the shore:

> All I remember is the sea and walking barefoot around there – mud-flat walking. Ever mud flat walked? It’s great. Your parents don’t know the tide comes in so fast and deep. But we kids understood. We knew about the eel grass. How the tide comes underneath it so fast it could be dangerous. But the mud squishes through your toes when you’re walking out there and there are lots of animals. Crabs and fish. So we went ahead and did it, though we cleaned up before we went home.  

Obviously Bontecou, who lived among fishermen both in Providence and in Nova Scotia, developed a deep and lasting affinity for the ocean and sea life. Possibly further cementing Bontecou’s love of the water, her father and another relative invented the first aluminum canoe.  

Bontecou’s mother, as I have said, worked in a factory building submarines, and, though the circumstances were a source of anger to Bontecou, the idea of welding pieces of steel to form a watercraft was a formative one.

The early sculpture *Untitled* (1961) (Figure 8) from Bontecou’s best-known career period is an assemblage of canvas, rope, and welded steel. The canvas pieces are sewn together roughly and in small parts and resemble the welded sections that form a canoe. The same method is evident in *Untitled* (1964). Art historian Charles Riley makes this

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24 Munro, 379.
25 Ibid.
connection: “Her father collaborated with her uncle to invent the first aluminum canoe, a bit of trivia that jibes nicely with the hull-like constructions that are so important to her own sculpture.”26 Not only Bontecou’s early work, but also many of her post-1980 pieces employ this technique, for example Untitled (2001), “the sea monster” and Untitled (1998). The difference is material: Bontecou replaced the patched canvas with scraps of silk either sewn or held together by wires.

Two of Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures, Untitled (1969) and Untitled (1970) (Figure 9), an orange and white sculpture of a fish with its mouth partially open, along with two later works – Untitled (1998) and Untitled (2001) – clearly have ties to Bontecou’s examination of sea life. The water-related themes of the vacuum-formed sculptures, both fish, is obvious. Although Untitled (1969) does carry ecological implications, as discussed, it is also indicative of water imagery more generally, especially when paired with Untitled (1970), which does not have the same ties to Silent Spring and the problems with mutagens. This is also true of the more recent Untitled (1998) and Untitled (2001). Untitled (2001), though a threatening sea monster with ecological undertones, is a piece that has ties to the ocean and her childhood imaginings of the deep water. Untitled (1998) has no ecological ties, and though it is said by some to resemble Sputnik or galaxies, other feel that the work “hover[s] between being [a] model of…strange contraptions, like boats or flying machines.”27 Still more critics have

26 Riley, 34.
compared the mobile to a jellyfish.\textsuperscript{28} Despite differing opinions of what object is represented, the imagery of these sculptures is rooted in the sea.

**Weightlessness and Buoyancy**

The idea of flight, of both animals and machines, has been a prevalent theme throughout Bontecou’s career. I previously discussed the sculpture *Untitled* (1964) in terms of its military iconography and ties to the aluminum canoe, but, as I have demonstrated, Bontecou’s art works often contain layers of meaning based on her biography, the work’s form, and its materiality. In terms of flight, the materiality of *Untitled* (1964) is highly significant. Bontecou often strove to create a duality of animal and machine forms. Bontecou used part of a World War II bomber plane to remind the viewer of mechanical flight, but she also formed the sculpture to give a hint of natural, or avian, flight. Though references to mechanical flight are most palpable within the work, Bontecou also employs subtle bird-like elements such as the outstretched, gracefully shaped wings to “combine biological with mathematical-mechanical form to produce a type of organic machine.”\textsuperscript{29} Hadler comments upon the sculpture’s “delicate avian forms” and says that “in her work, these remnants of fighter planes morph into swelling avian shapes.”\textsuperscript{30}

The sculpture *Untitled* (1970) also incorporates elements of flight, though its subject matter is less obviously so than *Untitled* (1964). This vacuum-formed plastic sculpture of a fish is intended to hang from the ceiling when displayed. Bontecou has a

\textsuperscript{29} Hadler, *Lee Bontecou: A Retrospective*, 206.
\textsuperscript{30} Hadler, “Plastic Fish and Grinning Saw Blades,” 12.
great love of model airplanes and suspended several from the ceiling of her New York studio.\textsuperscript{31} Elisabeth Sussman refers to them as “buoyant structures, made of plastic, reminiscent of her brother’s balsa-wood models made in their childhood.”\textsuperscript{32} In Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic sculptures, particularly the ones that dangle from the ceiling, light and airiness are defining qualities. When Bontecou began to shift from her heavy, dense canvas assemblages to the plastic sculptures, her sculptures took on not only elements of flight, but of floating weightlessly in the air.

Bontecou continued the idea of lightness after her departure from New York and kept making mobiles as her work underwent another material shift after 1980. \textit{Untitled} (1998) is constructed mainly of diaphanous silk scraps and delicate wire. Though the object is abstracted, its lacelike protrusions are similar to dragonfly wings. Like Bontecou’s early sculptures, the piece is “[an] airborne hybrid of organic and mechanistic forms” although it is “something between a helicopter and an insect”\textsuperscript{33} rather than bird-like. The materiality of the work also connotes flight and weightlessness. Silk, as opposed to canvas, which flutters while the mobile is suspended, and delicate wire and porcelain beads instead of welded steel help to convey a sense of buoyancy that her earlier flight-related works lack.

\textbf{Futuristic Themes and “The Unknown”}

From the black voids in her early assemblages to the “microcosms” in her post-1980 work, Bontecou has maintained a fascination with the future and the idea of “the

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\textsuperscript{31} Sussman, 7.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Smith, 178.
unknown.” In *Untitled* (1964) and *Untitled* (1961), the famous “black void” in the center is a notable feature of the work. The black is intensely dark and gives the viewer a sense of unending depth. Bontecou said in an interview with Smith, “At one time I had a joy and excitement about outer space – nothing was known about black holes – just huge, intangible, dangerous entities…” The idea is both to threaten and excite. The combination of the organic and mechanical also plays a role in this theme because of its ties to science fiction, a genre popular during that time because it was seen as a mechanism “to cope with the terror endemic to the post-Hiroshima age.” Bontecou was influenced by the post-Hiroshima terror and the Cuban Missile Crisis of the Cold War.

Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic flower, *Untitled* (1967), is also representative of this space-age aesthetic. Hadler refers to them as “sci-fi mutated flowers” and the gas-mask refers not only to ecology and militarism, but also more generally to what Bontecou feared the future would be. The flower is also a blend of machinery, specifically the “life support” referenced by Tomkins and the synthetic material itself with the organic object represented.

Bontecou’s post-1980 sculptures offer many examples of futurism and the unknown. *Untitled* (2001), the sea monster, is not only a “science fiction” type of creature, but also an example of the unknown, of what could possibly lurk beneath the ocean’s waves. *Untitled* (1998) is associated both with Sputnik and with galaxies themselves. Bontecou, at first enthusiastic for the space program until she realized its military implications and the possibility that it was a spycraft, has said “I felt great

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34 Ibid., 174.
36 Ibid., 12.
excitement when little Sputnik flew.”37 Daniel Baird refers to this work and the other mobiles as “systems within systems, microcosms within microcosms.”38 Mona Hadler called them “the center of small universes, the eyes of storms.”39 The nebulous, hazy, chaotic quality of these works creates a feeling of the unknown that is at once contemporary with today’s science fiction and simultaneously a memory of the era of Sputnik and the fear of Soviet attack.

Eroticism

Eroticism is an often-disputed, relatively minor theme in Bontecou’s work, but it generally receives a great deal of attention from critics. The black expanses in Bontecou’s work, for example in the middle of Untitled (1964), are routinely interpreted as feminine symbolism, and the jagged metal mouths full of steel “teeth” in works such as Untitled (1961) were assumed by Judd to be vaginae dentatae. In his essay entitled “Lee Bontecou” written for Arts Magazine, Judd finds the sculptures threatening and powerful, but that they possess an underlying eroticism. He says of the canvas reliefs:

“The image extends from something as social as war to something as private as sex, making one an aspect of the other…The images also extends from bellicosity, both martial and psychological – aspects which do not equate – to invitation, erotic and psychological, and deathly as well.40

Judd felt that the steel “teeth” did in fact represent vaginal dentitia: “…some have bandsaw blades in the mouth. This redoubt is a mons veneris. ‘The warhead will be mated at the firing position.’”41 Untitled (2001), the “sea monster” with its jagged teeth

37 Smith, 174.
38 Baird.
39 Smith, 178.
41 Ibid.
has also been subject to this interpretation, though not by Judd, but instead by Smith and Tomkins.

Munro mentions this theme also, but offers more than just the erotic interpretation. She suggests that, as the public viewed the early assemblages, “to many, especially women newly tuned to Feminist preoccupations, these shapes were sexual apertures, the private parts of Moloch’s mother herself, splayed on the marble examining tables of museum walls.”

Moloch was an ancient god associated with sacrifice and war. However, Munro feels that the individual’s experiences and mindset are paramount in determining the meaning of the black void in the assemblages, and the erotic is merely a possibility. Robert Storr also feels that it is a possibility, saying, “The holes suggest pores, eyes, mouths, and other bodily orifices. The *vagina dentata*, devouring nemesis of all masculine fantasies of phallic penetration and dominance comes up frequently.”

Eroticism is not mentioned with regard to the vacuum-formed plastic sculptures and only in passing in relation to the post-1980 work. Personally, I feel that eroticism is the least important of the main iconographies in Bontecou’s work and am unsure as to the validity of the *vagina dentata* arguments.

**Conclusion**

Bontecou’s work is bound in complex and multilayered ideas that originate in profound personal experiences in childhood and deep emotional reactions to socio-political events. Though Bontecou was naturally aware of other artists’ work as she created her assemblages and vacuum-formed pieces, and no doubt as she sculpted her post-1980 works, she did not, as a general rule, draw inspiration from those around her.

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42 Munro, 378.
43 Storr, 189.
Feeling that Pop Art, the work of her 1960s contemporaries was “glorified consumer culture,” Bontecou eschewed most of the parties and glamour of the New York art world to focus on simply making her art work. Therefore, Bontecou’s themes are indicative of the experiences she had, especially while growing up, the anxiety about militarization she felt while immersed in news of Cold War events and politics, and her worries about the earth’s ecological health. These formative experiences were so important to her that Bontecou, though with different materials and modes of representation, continues to use these ideas.

44 Smith, 175.
Chapter 2
“She Was Not a Protofeminist”: Feminism, Femininity, and Lee Bontecou

“...This oval O cropped out with teeth...”
-T.S. Eliot

Introduction

Ten years before Linda Nochlin published her influential essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists,” (1971) Bontecou was the first female artist to be signed by the exclusive Leo Castelli Gallery. Though Bontecou has maintained throughout her career that she does not wish to be interpreted as a feminist artist and, in the 1960s, just like her fellow artist and follower Eva Hesse, disliked being referred to as a “woman artist,” her work has often been read in ways that incorporate elements of the feminine. Though not specifically feminist in nature, sculptures from each phase of Bontecou’s career often suggest ideas of the feminine including succubus myths or vaginal dentitia, marriage, and motherhood. Bontecou’s tenure with the Castelli Gallery is also noteworthy from a feminist standpoint, especially as sculpture and welding have been traditionally associated with male artists. It is significant, therefore, that the first woman signed to this gallery was a sculptor.

Scholars, such as Kirsten Swenson, Charlotte Willard, and Mona Hadler, note the anger and emotional depth present in Bontecou’s art. Although critics of the 1960s and 1970s were inclined to ascribe this feeling of anger in the work to female or feminist sources, the origin of Bontecou’s strong feelings lies in her reactions to political events, specifically the Cold War and its various crises, for example, the Cuban Missile Crisis. In October 1962, early in Bontecou’s career, but after she had found success with the

Castelli Gallery, the United States, Cuba, and the Soviet Union entered into a military standoff, and the United States experienced a period of deep uncertainty about the safety of its borders. The United States discovered surface-to-air missiles in Cuba, a Communist country sympathetic to Soviet aims. Because of Cuba’s close proximity to the United States, this event was constantly in the media, and a culture of fear arose in the United States. Because Bontecou was situated within this culture and was very aware of current events, issues of fear and anger stemming from crisis in American society directly influenced her work.

**Bontecou and the Castelli Gallery**

According to art historian Charles Riley, “Bontecou’s academic background is impeccable.” She first earned a degree at Bradford College, a junior college in Massachusetts, and went on to study at the Art Students League in New York in 1952. Riley calls that time period of the institution’s history, “Its most vibrant, even thrilling period, when such master teachers as Hans Hofmann were attracting the top talent from around the world.” Indeed, many of Bontecou’s classmates went on to become well-known artists. When she finished at the Art Students League, Bontecou studied at the Skowhegan School in Maine to learn sculpture. In 1956, she won a Fulbright Scholarship that allowed her to study sculpture in Rome from 1956 to 1958.

Historically, sculpture has been considered a specifically “male” medium, while women have been encouraged to take up painting, specifically watercolors, and depict

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46 Launius, 282.
47 Riley, 35.
48 Ibid.
landscapes or domestic scenes. According to Nochlin, women, especially aristocratic women, “were often encouraged to dabble in the arts and even develop into respectable amateurs.” However, this was generally restricted to Salon-style painting, and women, aristocratic or otherwise, were not encouraged to make sculpture. Art historian Elyse Deeb-Speaks says of the sculptural process:

At a fundamental level, carving constituted the bulk of the labor of constructing sculpture throughout the nineteenth century and before, and it was both a very physically demanding process and one that was generally executed by male artisans or craftsmen.

Italy was the place that the few aspiring female sculptors went during this era, “as much for the able bodies as for the marble.” Prior to the 1950s, sculptors, such as Auguste Rodin, generally developed the idea for the work and left the physical labor to studio assistants. A sculpture was at times valued more for the idea behind it than for the technical work that went into its creation. Deeb-Speaks feels that, “Sculpture’s ultimate function thereby derived doubly from its division in making and its ultimate function: it was a public act that was physically demanding, performed collaboratively by multiple persons and hands, and intended for public places.” As women were encouraged to remain within the domestic sphere, the idea of a physical work product displayed in a public arena was indeed a very masculine one.

Art, particularly sculpture, underwent an important set of changes after 1950. Bontecou’s forerunners include the Abstract Expressionist sculptor David Smith.\footnote{Elyse Marie Deeb-Speaks, “The Architecture of Reception: Sculpture and Gender in the 1950s and 1960s” (Ph.D. Diss., Brown University, 2005), 16.} \footnote{Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists,” Amelia Jones, ed., \textit{The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader} (London: Routledge, 2003), 232.} \footnote{Deeb-Speaks, 16.} \footnote{Ibid., 16-17.} \footnote{Ibid., 17}
1965). Smith sculpted objects using welded metal, bringing the art of sculpture to a place between fine art and industrial process.54 In Smith’s work, much as in Bontecou’s, “the artisanal and the figurative [did] battle with the industrial and the abstract throughout...his career.” 55 Julio Gonzalez (1876-1942) also employed welding as a sculptural technique. Both of these artists had ties to Surrealism, like Bontecou herself, but industrial technique also came into play. Gonzalez described his sculptural process as “drawing in space” and used found objects with welded metal, similar to Bontecou’s assemblage technique.56 Although Bontecou’s immediate forerunners and contemporaries were primarily male, the gendered reception of sculptural works changed dramatically after World War II. Eleanor Munro calls the female artists of this era the “Women of the First Wave: Elders of the Century,” and argues that they were “raised to be winners...the girls went to special schools, top art schools, colleges.”57 Munro cites World War II and the reactionary social climate of the 1950s as the impetus that led to “a true revival of the camaraderie of pre-World War I Paris,”58 but this time a camaraderie between men and women. Several women of this era were sculptors, including Louise Nevelson (1899-1988), Louise Bourgeois (b. 1911), and Jeanne Reynal (1903-1983).

Lee Bontecou’s early work, along with that of Barbara Chase-Riboud (b. 1939), belongs to Munro’s Third Wave, “Sisters of the Crossroads,” which took place during the 1960s, the decade before the feminist movement would reach its maturity. Process was and remains of utmost importance to Bontecou. She had learned to weld at the

55 Ibid., 333.
56 Ibid., 332.
57 Munro, 39.
58 Ibid.
Skowhegan School and created her work in a studio in Manhattan’s Lower East Side without the help of studio assistants. According to Smith, “Bontecou’s use of welding in creating her sculptural forms set the direction of the work she continued to make throughout much of the 1960s.”\(^59\) Welding, an industrial technique, has long been associated with the masculine.

In 1960, Bontecou joined the group of artists represented by the Castelli Gallery and had a solo show at the gallery the same year. The exhibition proved to be her ticket to New York art world success, and her work “provoked extensive interest on the part of critics, collectors, and museum curators.”\(^60\) Smith comments that: “As much as the arresting character of her sculptures, Bontecou’s gender prompted much attention at this early state of her career.”\(^61\) Bontecou, like many well-known women during the 1960s, fell victim to a media portrayal that focused largely on her physical attributes: her “tomboyish figure,” “button nose,” and her “cropped hair,”\(^62\) despite the revolutionary nature and power of her artwork. In fact, critics and journalists continue to give this treatment to not just Bontecou, but other notable women.

In spite of media sexism, Bontecou flourished as an artist during this period. The nature of Bontecou and Castelli’s working relationship remains unclear. Riley reports:

> Curators were quick to spot the promise of the innovation, and she made her debut in 1957 at the renowned Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto. Within three years, she would be exhibiting at the Leo Castelli Gallery, where Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg were also on the roster. Later in her career, she could recall with some bitterness how Castelli was more inclined to push forward the “boys” instead of her when a big collector showed up at the gallery.\(^63\)

\(^{59}\) Smith, 172-73.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 173.
\(^{61}\) Ibid.
\(^{62}\) Tomkins, 36.
\(^{63}\) Riley, 35.
Riley indicates that the chauvinism Bontecou encountered at the gallery is a reason why she abandoned the New York art scene in the late 1970s.

Calvin Tomkins presents a different view of Bontecou at the Castelli Gallery. “Leo Castelli was very fond of Lee,” Tomkins writes. “According to Frank Stella, who joined the gallery in 1959, she was sort of the ‘gallery pet’; it surprised Stella to discover that she was a few years older than she was.”⁶⁴ Even if this was the case, Bontecou never fully joined the art scene and did not generally take inspiration from or collaborate with other artists, male or female, of her generation. Bontecou’s husband, the artist William Giles, agrees with the assessment of Castelli provided by Riley: “Giles thought Castelli was promoting Johns and Rauschenberg at the expense of the gallery’s other artists [including Bontecou]. His feelings about Castelli…are still extremely bitter.”⁶⁵ Whether he is bitter about the lack of promotion of his own work, his wife’s, or both is unclear.

**Succubus Myths and “Angry Protofeminism”**

During the 1960s, Bontecou’s early reliefs were interpreted as psychosexual and threatening. I have discussed the black expanse, an essential element in her early canvas assemblages, as a possible representation of vaginal dentitia. Although early critics favored this explanation of these works, Bontecou has steadily maintained that she intended no such thing when creating these works of art. She never wanted to be thought of as a “woman artist,” but simply an artist. Although the term “woman artist” is passé today, in the 1960s it was acceptable to gender professions, i.e. “lady doctor” or

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⁶⁴ Tomkins, 37.
⁶⁵ Ibid.
“fireman.” Bontecou’s sculptures, not traditionally feminine, defy this type of categorization.

In her essay “Lee Bontecou’s Worldscapes,” Mona Hadler introduces the idea of the “mouth of truth,” a common reading of Bontecou’s black expanses, which can be tied to succubus myths. The succubus, which originated in medieval Christian lore, is an evil she-demon that preys upon sleeping men. According to feminist author Barbara G. Walker,

[The succubus] copulated with men in their dreams and sucked out the essence of their souls (semen). Nocturnal emissions were always attributed to the attentions of she-demons who cause men to dream of erotic encounters with women, so the succubae can make a new emission and make therefrom a new spirit.66

Succubae are often associated with vaginal dentitia, though legends about toothed female sex organs are much older than the succubus myths.

Feminist film and culture scholar Barbara Creed discusses the vagina dentata from a psychoanalytic standpoint: “The myths about woman as castrator clearly points to male fears and fantasies about the female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces.”67 Bontecou’s Untitled (1961) is an example of the black void without “teeth.” There is simply a black hole in the center of the work. Untitled (1964) features four openings with jagged, metal, open zippers placed in the middle of each. Hadler’s idea of the “mouth of truth” explores the meaning behind these openings, and the theory originates with Bontecou’s time in Italy. Bontecou became enthralled with a fountain found in the Church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, Rome that

features a sculpture of a river god called Bocca della Verità (The Mouth of Truth). Hadler quotes Bontecou on the local legend behind this sculpture, which is, “If you put your hand in and tell a lie, something would bite it off.” This could be relevant to succubus myths in which men were punished by succubae for evil deeds. Although the succubus myths eroticize the punishment, the idea of having an extremity bitten off for committing a wicked deed is similar.

Although this reading is certainly probable, it does not take into consideration all the factors in Bontecou’s biography that led her to create the black void, such as her fascination with space and black holes. The “vagina dentata” reading, in fact, was that of male critics, such as Donald Judd. Critic and artist Miriam Shapiro offers another interpretation for the “toothed” openings in Bontecou’s reliefs:

[Bontecou’s sculptures] were not sexual in the ways the men were then saying. Many of these works were about living in the world and being menaced by war. It was unusual at the time she produced them for women to express anger and rage in art. Women’s rage is frightening to men, and so they metamorphosed it into the conventional idea of a vagina dentata, creating a myth that could contain the power of women’s rage.

Many critics, therefore, disregarded Bontecou’s intended meaning and multilayered symbolism and distilled her work to fit into a comfortable stereotype. It is possible that they feared “castration” at some level when confronted by such powerful sculpture created by a woman, and these fears resolved themselves in such criticism. Critics of that time did not take into account Bontecou’s connections with the Cuban Missile Crisis, although she was not the only artist working during the 1960s to create work that reflected that event. Pop artists James Rosenquist (b. 1933) and Andy Warhol (1928-...
1987) were Bontecou’s contemporaries. Rosenquist’s large-scale painting *F-111*, completed in 1965, is an overwhelming image of a tactical strike-bomber aircraft.\(^70\) Warhol, although he disavowed political ties in his work, created politically charged portraits of Mao Zedong in the early 1970s that incorporated powerful Cold War symbolism.\(^71\) Because Bontecou is female, however, her work was not given the same critical treatment as her colleagues’.

Most critics today agree with Shapiro. Smith mentions Bontecou “taking issue with these interpretations of her sculpture either as products of…protofeminism or as ‘visual metaphors of the secrets and complications of the eternal Eve.’”\(^72\) Smith feels that the void has nothing to do with sexuality, but with mystery and the unknown. Riley says, “…Bontecou has pointedly maintained that she does not want her work to be ‘read’ anatomically or as a feminist manifesto.”\(^73\) He quotes Bontecou as saying “I just wasn’t there. I had no community spirit. I haven’t that many friends in the art world. And I’m not really involved with the Women’s Movement; it’s nothing new to me.”\(^74\) Nothing new, perhaps, because Bontecou has always sought individuality and freedom, and has always rejected gendered readings of her work.

Although Bontecou denies that her work is sexual or feminist in nature, elements in *Untitled* (1961) and *Untitled* (1964) do evoke the human body. In the essay “Lee Bontecou’s Worldscapes,” Hadler suggests a fusing of human and machine later characterized by Donna Haraway in “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.” In this essay, Haraway

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\(^71\) Ibid., 257.
\(^72\) Ibid., 257.
\(^73\) Ibid., 173.
\(^74\) Ibid., 35-36.
describes the “cyborg,” “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” as existing in “a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity.”75 Though Haraway wrote her essay after Bontecou created these sculptures, Hadler suggests that perhaps the canvas reliefs “anticipate Haraway’s cyborgs who exist in a post-gender world.”76 This theory is probable, especially as Bontecou has remained relatively unconcerned with gender.

Unexamined Work of the “Middle Period”

Bontecou’s best-known sculptures of her “middle period” are the vacuum-formed plastic pieces. However, she created other work during this period that has rarely been discussed by critics. This is a series of sculptures characterized by *Balsa Wood Sculpture* (Figure 10),77 and created from wood and paper. *Balsa Wood Sculpture* is a brown and tan ovoid suspended in an open wooden frame. Inside the open center of the ovoid is an intricate webwork of fine wire that forms a design of rectangles at the top and opens into a smaller teardrop-shaped suspended piece in the middle. The bottom of the central opening of this piece contains two small hooks.

The sculpture is suggestive for some reviewers of the female anatomy, and although it contains hooks, it is not a particularly threatening piece. It is unlikely that Bontecou was trying to evoke the *vagina dentata*, but it’s also difficult to deny the extent

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77 Descriptive title used for clarity. Actual title is *Untitled* (1967).
to which the sculptures evoke the female body. The female was, perhaps, a concern for Bontecou in 1967. Bontecou was married and a mother by this time, which I will discuss more fully in the following section.

In addition to sexual orifices, it is possible that sculptures such as *Balsa Wood Sculpture* are intended to evoke shells, sea life, or fossils like trilobites. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, Bontecou was fascinated by biology, natural history, and life cycles. *Balsa Wood Sculpture* seems representative of two types of life cycles: marine or insect life cycles and the human life cycle that had recently become more immediate to Bontecou.

Critic Charlotte Willard calls these pieces as “chrysalis forms,” a term that refers to the *pupa* (youthful) stage of a butterfly.78 Willard says, “In a new series of small chrysalis shapes…her sculptures have the quality of having been born rather than made,”79 but she does not comment on the apparent anatomical imagery. Smith argues that the sculptures’ “ballooning forms…appeared more rounded, finished, and protective [than Bontecou’s earlier work].”80 These suggestions of birth and protectiveness can be construed as further evidence that Bontecou was, at least in part, influenced to create such work by the birth of her child.

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80 Smith, 176.
Marriage and Motherhood

In the spring of 1965, Bontecou married the artist William Giles, “the only other artist of her generation whom she felt an affinity with.”\footnote{Tomkins, 36.} Bontecou and Giles both value “complete freedom” as they told Calvin Tomkins in 2003, which is an especially important concept to Bontecou. As she mentioned to Eleanor Munro in 1979, “My parents began to be worried [about my artistic career], because they didn’t know where I was going. Obviously, I wasn’t interested then in getting married. I wanted to do something!” Bontecou eschewed traditional expectations of women in both her life and art.

Critics have portrayed Giles as jealous of Bontecou’s success – far greater than his own, but it is doubtful that he forced Bontecou to abandon her place at the Castelli Gallery and leave the art world behind. According to art critic Stephanie Buhmann, Bontecou “left the gallery to avoid the pressure of constantly having to produce art for new shows.”\footnote{Stephanie Buhmann, “Lee Bontecou,” \textit{The Brooklyn Rail}, April 2007): Arts section.} In addition, Bontecou had begun teaching art at Brooklyn College in 1970, and she and Giles had purchased a home in Orbisonia, Pennsylvania, a rural area forty-five minutes outside of Harrisburg. Smith characterizes this period of Bontecou’s life thus: “For a period of approximately fifteen years, while teaching and together with her husband raising their daughter and caring for her aging father, Bontecou continued working in both sculpture and drawing…”\footnote{Smith, 178.} Bontecou had simply put her family and teaching before art world success. Also, as Bontecou and Giles had both isolated themselves from other New York artists, it is more likely that they were continuing this
isolation than it is that Giles dragged Bontecou to rural Pennsylvania. In fact, Tomkins quotes him as saying, “Lee and I disagree all the time about things like [the Castelli Gallery]. If you insist on total freedom, you’ve got to give it.”

The sculpture *Untitled* (1967) can be read as a representation of Bontecou’s new experiences with motherhood. A vacuum-formed plastic sculpture of Bontecou’s “middle period,” the sculpture depicts a large, white flower in full bloom standing beside a smaller flower still in bud. By 1967, Bontecou had given birth to her only child, a daughter named Valerie. Sussman argues, “On the most literal level, the mature plant and the bud could be portraits of Bontecou and her child, and could embody growth, life cycles, rootedness, and entanglement, some thoughts she could have harbored as she assumed the duties of motherhood.” Bontecou’s work is so multilayered that it is impossible to discount this theory entirely. Sussman herself goes on to say, “…motherhood is not a subject Bontecou would openly undertake to make the subject of her sculpture. She was not a protofeminist.”

**Post-1980**

By 1980, Bontecou was living permanently in rural Pennsylvania and teaching, but had not stopped creating sculpture. Her most recent work does not evoke the female body or the human body in general, but rather insects, nebulae, and spacecrafts. Although the “orifice” remains central in her works, it is not the inky black, mysterious, toothed opening of the early canvases. Instead, the opening resembles an eye.

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84 Tomkins, 40.
85 Sussman, 9.
86 Ibid.
Other aspects of Bontecou’s latest sculptures do evoke the idea of the feminine in terms of the craft methods and materials she uses. Similar to her canvases, Bontecou has sewn panels of fabric together, this time silk, as seen in *Untitled* (1980-1998) (Figure 11). Sewing has been traditionally associated with women, and Bontecou’s sewn panels in a traditionally masculine medium have been theorized as a subtly feminist process. This theory is especially interesting in light of her work’s material shift from canvas to silk because silk is generally thought of as a more delicate fabric. In fact, *Untitled* (1980-1998), *Untitled* (2001), and other later sculptures, are made from far more delicate materials than their earlier counterparts, and many of these materials can be considered traditionally feminine: beads, jewelry wire, silk, and ceramic. Although Bontecou’s materials have become more traditionally “acceptable” from a traditional standpoint, along with her imagery of fanciful creatures like the “sea monster” of *Untitled* (2001), as well as birds, fish, and flowers, the subject matter at the heart of her work has not changed.

Bontecou’s material choices, of course, have nothing to do with becoming “acceptable” or “feminine.” Her use of more fragile materials is likely to do with her exploration of delicate microcosms or planetary models. As art historian Donna De Salvo suggests, “[Bontecou’s] hanging sculptures, which developed later in her career, are constellations that point us elsewhere.” Therefore, Bontecou has merely continued her explorations of “the unknown,” begun by the black void in her early assemblages.

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Conclusion

The gendering of Bontecou’s art by critics has been problematic throughout her career. Despite the artist’s protests that her intentions were anything but specifically feminist or essentialist, critics have long searched for examples of female anatomy or feminine themes in her art with limited success. The label “woman artist” is a problem faced by all female artists, especially in the 1950s and 1960s before feminism became a household word. Male critics attempted to reduce the anger in her early work to representations of the she-demon, the *vagina dentata*, or “visual metaphors of the secrets and complications of the eternal Eve.”89 The threat of female anger and implied castration to the male viewer was the primary cause of such viewings, the male tendency to distill female emotion down to biology. Biology is not an important factor in Bontecou’s work; rather Cold War events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis have proved to be far more influential.

Bontecou’s insistence on freedom is relevant to both her tenure at the Castelli Gallery and her marriage to Giles. Not only did Castelli promote male artists ahead of Bontecou, but she was often asked to change her work to suit collectors, to cut it to lay flatter on the wall, as though it was a decoration.90 She was also treated as the “gallery pet.” It is unclear what Stella means by that exactly, whether Bontecou was patronized or catered to. Although Giles was often at odds with the Castelli Gallery, he is not the jealous husband as journalists often portray him. In fact, he and Bontecou are so like-

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90 Tomkins, 38.
minded on the concept of freedom and individuality, they isolated themselves from the art world to pursue their own interests.

Motherhood, though clearly important to Bontecou, is not an important theme in her work. Vestiges of this theme certainly exist, for example in *Balsa Wood Sculpture* and *Untitled* (1967), but Bontecou’s art has remained more socio-political than personal throughout her career. Although Bontecou left the fast-paced art world and the demands of making new work for gallery shows to focus on raising her daughter, she did not abandon her career.

Bontecou’s work has been “dismissed as an inability to see the world through any other than the gendered eyes of a woman, specifically through the social guise or a wife or a mother,”91 but most critics, especially after 1980, have seen her work as complex, intricate, and multilayered. Bontecou’s sculpture is a multifaceted web of social commentary, political context, and biographical events that certainly involves the feminine to an extent, but is based more on the anger and fear that Bontecou felt as a result of World War II and the Cold War, her interest in space exploration and “the unknown,” and a long love of natural history.

91 Estrada-Berg, 13.
Chapter 3
Silk, Wire, Beads, and Sea Monsters: Lee Bontecou’s Work after 1980

“I tried to get away from myself, but it didn’t work.”92
--Lee Bontecou

Introduction

Never completely comfortable participating in the New York art world, Lee Bontecou ceased exhibiting her work publicly in the late 1970s. She severed ties with the Castelli Gallery in 1977.93 Although it is widely believed that Bontecou immediately retired to her rural home in the mountains of Pennsylvania, she remained in New York as an instructor at Brooklyn College, moved several times to various homes in New York City and Pennsylvania, and continued to create sculpture. In fact, Bontecou’s body of work from the past twenty years of her career is at least as large, if not larger, than her creative output of the 1960s and 1970s. After 1980, Bontecou began to experiment with different materials, leaving behind the vacuum-formed plastic that she had used during the mid-1970s. Bontecou turned to silk, wire, and handmade ceramic beads, which allowed for more complex structures that retain the diaphanous qualities of the vacuum-formed plastic work. This chapter will focus strictly upon Bontecou’s later sculptures, and I will read the duality present in the work’s imagery, its ties to Sputnik and later Cold War events, Bontecou’s studio practices and artistic process, her interest in natural history, and the works’ ties to Surrealism, especially the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966). As in the past, Bontecou created several groups of similar sculptures from these new materials. I will discuss only the sculptures that best represent each group.

93 Tomkins, 42.
Duality of Images

Though Bontecou was dissatisfied with the art world and did not involve herself in most of its social events, she told Karen Wright in 2004: “It was not a conscious thing – ‘I am leaving the art world!’ – I mean, I was working. I just wasn't involved in the political side of the art world. But the real art world, which is the studios of all the artists, I never left. Seems to me that's the real art world.”\(^9^4\) Bontecou considers the process of art marking and the life of an artist to be the true art world, not the constant stream of gallery openings and parties that most people associate with the New York art scene. Additionally, it was not the bad reviews of her vacuum-formed plastic sculptures that drove her from New York. Bontecou says of reviews: “I never really had a problem with the critics. I just felt like it's their prerogative if they don't like it.”\(^9^5\)

Bontecou began her study in image duality with her vacuum-formed plastic works. There is a clear distinction between the materiality of Bontecou’s plastic works and the subject matter she undertakes. Plastic is an environmentally detrimental material, but Bontecou chose to make traditionally “beautiful” flowers by carving Styrofoam and molding plastic around these carvings. As well as plastic, Bontecou’s gas masks are a significant part of this duality. She has subverted the traditional idea of a flower as a thing of beauty and made it into something warlike and threatening.

Bontecou also achieved a great lightness and fluidity from a very rigid material, plastic.\(^9^6\) She turned to the plastic when she felt that she had exhausted the canvas and steel assemblage form. Though she has said that she would continue creating the vacuum-

\(^9^4\) Wright, 71.
\(^9^5\) Ibid.
\(^9^6\) Sussman, 7-8.
formed pieces if she had the proper equipment, she turned to a new material after 1980. This new material continued the duality of Bontecou’s imagery from her work of the late 1970s. Smith says of the most recent sculptures: “The majority of her recent…pieces are suspended sculptures, which, in contrast to the brutal appearance of many of her early works, are highly delicate…”97 Despite the delicate nature of these new works, Bontecou has continued to explore sinister themes, such as in *Untitled* (2001). Clearly, the creature is a threatening, jagged-toothed, almost nightmarish piece of sculpture, but she rendered it in silk and ceramic, traditionally “beautiful” or “feminine” materials. Hadler says of these works: “For all its gentle poetry and freshness, this period of her production, too, has an underbelly.”98 Despite the lightness of the materials, the work retains its ominous undertones.

This duality is also evident in *Untitled* (1994) (Figure 12), part of the insect series. Although not threatening like *Untitled* (2001), the subject matter is not traditionally considered beautiful. The sculpture consists of an insect-like body made of wire mesh from which wire legs and antennae protrude. The creature’s legs are made of two strands of wire connected by white silk, and the wings on the insect’s back are constructed from several strands of wire joined together with small threads, silk, and ceramic beads. Bontecou has not indicated what type of insect this is, but the idea of an insect rendered in silk seems to continue the beautiful/ugly duality of her vacuum-formed plastic work.

Bontecou also experimented with the duality of nature and machine. *Untitled* (1994) and *Untitled* (2001) are significant examples of this second duality as well. Smith

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97 Smith, 178.
calls *Untitled* (1994) “something between a helicopter and an insect”\(^99\) because it is both organic and mechanical. Here also Bontecou’s materials are significant to the dual nature of her work. *Untitled* (2001) is a sea creature made of industrial materials: welded steel, wire mesh, porcelain, and wire. The pieces share a materiality in part with computers and cyborgs, but represent part of the natural world. Bontecou has clearly continued this theme into her most recent work, but has made the connection to the animal world more obvious. Smith says of these sculptures:

> She has labored on a series of more representational sculptures…in effect, coming full circle to the subject matter of some of her earliest pieces…but with a markedly different expression that is both graceful and surreal, comical and frightening, and compellingly intricate as opposed to the monumental, rough-hewn quality of much of her earlier sculpture.\(^{100}\)

Whereas the earlier sculptures were abstract and more indicative of the machine, Bontecou’s later work is representational and focuses more on the organic side of the animal/machine duality.

**Sputnik, Détente, and the Berlin Wall**

The United States and the Soviet Union were still waging the Cold War in 1980 when Bontecou began to create her most recent set of sculptures. During the 1970s, the United States under Richard Nixon and the Soviet Union under Leonid Brezhnev reached an agreement to peacefully coexist known in Russian as *détente*, but this was short-lived.\(^{101}\) In the late 1970s and early 1980s, both sides became increasingly militaristic and hostilities re-escalated. United States president, Ronald Regan, and British Prime

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99 Smith, 178.
100 Ibid., 178-179.
Minister, Margaret Thatcher, engaged in an arms race with the Soviet government during the early 1980s and worked to build their respective arsenals. In 1985, however, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the USSR and introduced the policy of glastnost (openness) between Communist and non-Communist nations. Regan and Gorbachev reached an agreement to reduce the size of their countries’ arsenals, and in 1989, the Cold War ended when George H.W. Bush and Gorbachev signed the START I arms control treaty and Gorbachev announced the reunification of Germany. This announcement was symbolized by the destruction of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989.

Bontecou left the art world behind, but she did not seclude herself from news of political events. The work that Bontecou created after leaving New York is charged with Cold War symbolism just like her earlier art. The Cold War was very much in the media in the 1980s and 1990s, when Bontecou made most of her recent work. Specifically, the mobiles relate to the launch of Sputnik. Sputnik opened the door to the arms race of the 1970s and 1980s by initiating competition on military and exploratory fronts and the fear that the “other side” had greater technology. Soviet missile launch technology, as evidenced by the Cuban Missile Crisis, was a result of the Soviet space program, and Soviet cosmonautics, or space explorations, were a direct result of the Sputnik launch. Bontecou, who has said, “I felt great excitement when little Sputnik flew,” was fascinated by the idea of space exploration and simultaneously repulsed by the idea of

102 Ibid.
104 Brzezinski, 199.
105 Smith, 178.
military conflict. The mobiles, for example *Untitled* (1980-1998) – a sculpture during the height of the arms race and completed after the Cold War, evoke both the spherical shape of the physical spacecraft and the constellations that it explored.

The green, tan, and navy blue colors of the silk, as well as the fabric’s diaphanous quality, suggest a nebula, or colorful ball of gasses in space. The large, white, ceramic sphere at the center of the sculpture with its dark, eye-like opening, suggests the shape of the Sputnik spacecraft. Additionally, the “eye” in the sphere could be a reference to the possibility of Soviet spying via the satellite. The ceramic object placed within the web of silk suspended on wire is at once a constellation, a spacecraft, and a spacecraft among the stars. The sculpture appears less threatening than Bontecou’s early canvases, although the black void remains, and the reason for this may be that “around 1992…the final development stage of Soviet cosmonautics set in, the period of dying, of agony.”106 The threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union had disappeared, by the time Bontecou completed the sculpture, which accounts for the relative peace it evokes. However, Americans had lived with the fear for so long that it was not simply displaced from the collective consciousness, as evidenced by the small, but persistent, reminder of the black void.

**Studio Practices after 1980**

Though many artists such as Walter De Maria and Robert Smithson abandoned the studio space during Bontecou’s time in New York in favor of creating work outdoors or in the gallery, Bontecou has placed great importance on the studio as the site of art making throughout her career. Not just the indoor studio space, but the geographic

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106 Launius, 286.
location of the studio building plays a key role in Bontecou’s art. For example, the castoff belts from the laundromat below her first New York studio inspired her early canvas assemblages, and the aquariums and potted plants in her second studio on Wooster Street inspired the vacuum-formed plastic pieces. Bontecou’s studio at present is a converted barn on her property in rural Pennsylvania.

Bontecou has long filled her studio with objects that interest her, both personally and artistically. Her New York studio was decorated with models of miniature balsa wood airplanes and aquariums of plants and fish, which I will discuss more thoroughly in the next section. These objects helped provide the inspiration for much of Bontecou’s work – the balsa wood chrysalis forms, the vacuum-formed plastic sculptures, and the many warplane inspired canvas wall reliefs of the 1960s. The light that flowed into the studio windows also inspired Bontecou. According to Sussman: “The studio conditions of light flowing through materials… appealed to her.”107 Bontecou’s Pennsylvania studio is also an open, light-filled space, and her post-1980 work, particularly the mobiles, reflects that.

Art critics frequently refer to Bontecou’s later work as “obsessive” because of its fine detail and meticulously crafted pieces. Bontecou creates all of the ceramic beads, large and small, by hand in her studio and sews the silk panels on the works by herself. In fact, she never bothered to wear gloves when welding. The artistic process for Bontecou, then, is a tactile, personal development of a piece for her own satisfaction. The fact that she did not show this painstakingly created work to the public until 2003 is testament to

107 Sussman, 10.
that. Bontecou’s current studio displays a mishmash of her art, both old and new, for her own enjoyment and inspiration.

Drawing has been a significant step in Bontecou’s artistic process since the late 1950s, beginning with the canvas assemblages and the soot drawings made by her welding torch. Bontecou has created more drawings and preliminary sketches for her later work than at other stages of her career. Curator Donna DeSalvo discusses the importance of Bontecou’s drawings in an essay entitled “Inner and Outer Space: Bontecou’s Sculpture Through Drawing.” Bontecou generally investigates a theme or idea for a single sculpture or sculptural group through not only preliminary sketches but also finished drawings. For example, Bontecou began to conceive of the vacuum-formed plastic works while she was still exhibiting canvas assemblages at the Castelli Gallery: “The forms that appear in Bontecou’s sculpture of the late 1960s were already present in her earlier drawings.”¹⁰⁸ Bontecou focused a great deal on drawing throughout the 1990s, and her finished sculptures of this period directly reflect these drawings.

The materiality of the works on paper also parallel Bontecou’s shift toward diaphanous and lightweight materials. DeSalvo argues that the “tentative and fragile nature of chalk” helps to convey the delicate character of the finished sculptures and that the copper and silver pencils on black paper allude to the luminescence of both the plastic and post-1980 pieces.¹⁰⁹ Bontecou’s choice of paper, generally black, white, or an undyed natural fiber, also reflects her intentions for the finished sculpture. Themes sketched in white on black paper generally become airy and light-filled sculptures made of silk while drawings on white or natural paper become opaque ceramic and metal pieces. For

¹⁰⁸ DeSalvo, 218.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid.
example, a drawing of a creature covered with spines, executed on black paper with pearlized colored pencil, was finished in 1997 and clearly evokes the later “sea monster” piece *Untitled* (2001). A drawing of orbs with spikes protruding from the centers of each (Figure 13) is reminiscent of *Stabile*, one of Bontecou’s ceramic and wire stabiles and one of the few Bontecou works mounted on a permanent base.

**Natural History**

From her childhood summers spent in Nova Scotia, Bontecou developed a deep love of nature and natural history. Bontecou told Munro, “I’d whittle lots of things. Little ox carts…little hay carts, and then I went into the pine-cone business, making animals out of them, reindeer and farm animals.”\(^{110}\) As Bontecou grew older and moved to New York City, she retained her love of the natural world. Sussman describes Bontecou’s studio on Wooster Street: “Natural light (though it may be a grim, New York light) pours through the windows. The electrically illuminated aquariums reveal a miniature aquatic life, waving plants and bright, darting fish.”\(^{111}\) Bontecou first undertook naturalism as a theme in the late 1970s with her vacuum-formed fish and plants. Sussman says, “Remember the woman, savoring nature in her urban studio, staring deeply into her fish tanks. She would have embarked on the plants because she was interested in looking closely at them, in the studio, in her garden, in botany books.”\(^{112}\)

The vacuum-formed plastic sculptures opened the door for representation for Bontecou, and she continued to create representational works depicting natural subjects after leaving New York. In fact, with her rural surroundings and the wealth of organic

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\(^{110}\) Munro, 379.

\(^{111}\) Sussman, 7.

\(^{112}\) Ibid, 9.
forms there, Bontecou created this type of work even more prolifically after her move. *Untitled* (1993) (Figure 14), *Untitled* (1994), *Untitled* (1986-2002), and *Untitled* (2001) are examples of this later work involving natural history. *Untitled* (1993) the “sailboat,” as well as *Untitled* (2001), continue Bontecou’s fascination with water imagery and the sea. *Untitled* (1994), seems to complete the chrysalis forms of the late 1970s, and *Untitled* (1986-2002) is an example of Bontecou’s fascination with flight and avian shapes.

“I used to go to museums a lot, the Museum of Natural History and the Met… I’d still rather take from what’s around me… Like when you walk down the beach and the shadow hits the sand,”*113* Bontecou told Munro. Rather than visiting art museums, Bontecou focused primarily on the Museum of Natural History and drew much of her inspiration from the objects there. As she mentioned to Karen Wright, “I saw enough art [in Europe]. I never went to another gallery when I got back to the city and for a while not even museums.”*114* Bontecou was not concerned with the work of other artists of her generation and preferred to create work that did not fit into a movement or category. Instead, she focused upon the world at large.

Clearly, the sea was important to Bontecou both in her personal life and her career. The profusion of sea life, the freedom of the sea, and the idea of the unknown were especially significant factors in Bontecou’s work of the late 1970s to the present. Riley discusses the natural history of the sea in Bontecou’s work:

In case one misses the veiled allusions to seashells and ocean forms in the finished work, the drawings of Bontecou… include a number of delicate studies of crab claws, mollusks, and whorls that point quite directly to the

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*113* Munro, 386.
*114* Wright, 69.
observations she made over the years in the salt marshes at False Harbor in Yarmouth [where Bontecou summered as a child].

Bontecou’s drawings are an important part of the development of her later work. *Untitled* (1993) is less a study in natural history than in the freedom of the sea, although its billowing silk panels call to mind lightweight, buoyant forms, and its pointed protrusions at times resemble the crab claws mentioned by Riley. *Untitled* (2001) is both a study in the fantasy and horror of the unknown, and an examination of evolving life during the geological periods of the Earth, another of Bontecou’s scientific interests. The creature evokes both legendary sea monsters and the skulls of the dinosaurs that Bontecou encountered at the Museum of Natural History.

The insect sculpture, *Untitled* (1994) is an example of Bontecou’s love for “the great diversity of life forms.” Bontecou has long held an interest in the microcosm of insect life, and so much so that Hadler says “working in the garden one summer as an adult, she counted sixty varieties of insect life.” Bontecou’s many drawings of insects became studies for the final sculptures in the series to which *Untitled* (1994) belongs. Additionally, Bontecou created the balsa wood and paper chrysalis forms, an early stage of an insect’s life cycle, when she first began to explore natural themes. It would seem that she brought the insect life begun at this stage to maturity by sculpting fully-grown insects at the latest stage of her career.

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115 Riley, 34.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
119 Bontecou did not denote these works as a series; rather I am grouping these works as a series for the purposes of my discussion.
*Untitled* (1986-2002), a bird’s head fashioned from white ceramic, is another of Bontecou’s avian forms. It is also a sight Bontecou has certainly encountered in Orbisonia, Pennsylvania, where creeks, rivers, and lakes fill the landscape. The work also calls to mind the prehistoric bird specimens in a natural history collection. As Hadler says, “The wealth of natural forms in prehistory…is never far from Bontecou’s formal imagination.”120 The precision of the ceramic pieces in the sculpture and the manner in which it is wired together and placed on a wire base is evocative of a prehistoric museum piece.

**Ties to Surrealism**

Bontecou did not take an interest in works by other artists of her generation, but she was not immune to influences of other artists in general. Though Bontecou had studied Surrealism while at the Art Students League, she began to explore it in her work beginning with the vacuum-formed plastic pieces. Sussman says,

> She has also said that she admired Surrealism in general. It is worth noting that in 1968, while Bontecou was working on the plants and had begun to work on fish as well, The Museum of Modern Art presented the major exhibition *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*. Although Bontecou undoubtedly already knew Surrealist art, this exhibition would have brought it once again to her attention…121

Though Bontecou did not visit art galleries, she has said that she occasionally attended shows at art museums such as the Museum of Modern Art.

Surrealism, an art and literary movement that began in the years following World War I, stressed psychic automatism. The poet Andre Breton (1896-1966) describes psychic automatism as “dictation of thought, in the absence of any control exercised by

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120 Ibid.
121 Sussman, 15.
reason an beyond any aesthetic or moral preoccupation.”122 Surrealist artists placed great emphasis on dreams and the subconscious mind. Bontecou’s *Untitled* (2001) certainly points to dreams, especially nightmares, and *Stabile*123 (Figure 15), a ceramic landscape of porcelain figures calls to mind Max Ernst’s (1891-1976) collages. Ernst’s work is often linked to Bontecou’s vacuum-formed plastic works. Mona Hadler mentions the connection, especially in reference to *Untitled* (2001), but it might be seen in relation to other post-1980 pieces by Bontecou as well: “Like Max Ernst’s predators that emerge from the haunted forests of his imagination, this strange work surfaces from the toothy visions of her black drawings…from 1996.”124 Ernst’s frightening works of monsters such as *The Horde* (1927) (Figure 16) are visually similar to Bontecou’s preliminary sketches for her later works.

The Surrealist artist most often associated with Bontecou’s work is the sculptor Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966). Giacometti was born in the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland and studied painting first in Italy and later in Paris, where he joined the Surrealist movement. He created Surrealist work until he was expelled from the movement in 1935, and “the sculptures that he produced during these years are among the masterpieces of Surrealist sculpture.”125 Hadler draws connections between Giacometti’s wood, glass, wire, and string sculpture, *The Palace at 4 a.m.* (1932-33) (Figure 17) and Bontecou’s *Untitled* (1980-1998) and *Untitled* (1986-2002). *Untitled* (1980-1998) is a suspended mobile. Hadler references a series of sculptures Bontecou

125 Arnason, 321.
made in the late 1950s in which “a barely visible sphere…hangs between two boxes as a tiny, encased globe.”126 Bontecou continued the hanging sphere forms with the series that includes *Untitled* (1996). These works, according to Hadler, “evince the sense of marvel central to the worldscape but are also reminiscent of surrealist works such as Giacometti’s mysterious suspended forms…”127 Though it is certainly reminiscent of the hanging forms, such as the bird skeleton, in *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, *Untitled* (1980-1998) seems visually closer to Giacometti’s *Suspended Ball* (1930-31) (Figure 18), in which the suspension is the focal point of the work. *Suspended Ball* also is strikingly similar to *Balsa Wood Sculpture*, as they both employ a rectangular, open frame from which a suspended object hangs.

Giacometti’s work also appealed to the Minimalists because of the “idea of an expansive horizontal intervention in space, work that was ‘open and extended.’”128 Richard Serra and Donald Judd in particular admired Giacometti’s work, and Judd “singled out Giacometti as one of the few exceptions to the general tendency of modern sculptors to focus on the solid and monolithic, making space ‘primarily negative.’”129 Giacometti’s work, according to Judd, was art that began to consider the work spatially, as an “activating and articulating space.”130 Although Bontecou claims that Judd, with whom she maintained an acquaintanceship, did not influence her art, it is noteworthy that he and his colleagues dealt with the same issues as Bontecou and took their inspiration from the same sculptor.

127 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
The avian forms in Bontecou’s early work have been compared with Surrealism. In a review of the exhibition *Fiber and Form: The Woman’s Legacy*, a group show from 1996 that included Bontecou’s assemblages, art critic and historian Virginia Pitts Rembert notes, “The cage from which [the work] protrudes is covered with blackened pieces of canvas layered like the feathers of a monstrous bird, conveying more of a surreal, organic feeling than the artist's typical works.”\(^\text{131}\) It is not clear which specific piece Rembert is discussing, but it is certain that Bontecou carried these associations into her figurative work. *Untitled* (1986-2002) is perhaps the most strikingly Surrealist of Bontecou’s later sculptures. The ceramic bird’s head evokes the suspended “pterodactyl” in the upper right section of *The Palace at 4 a.m.* Giacometti’s bird-form is reduced to bones just like Bontecou’s. Giacometti described the avian creature in his work as one of “the skeleton birds that flutter with cries of joy at four o’clock.”\(^\text{132}\) Bontecou’s evocative bird’s head, with its intense stare, calls to mind the mysterious and haunting elements of Giacometti’s work.

**Conclusion**

Bontecou’s sculpture after 1980 is clearly some of her most personal and complex work. This work is just as difficult as the canvas assemblages and plastic pieces to assign meaning or categorize. Instead, Bontecou’s work after 1980 layers the duality of images and materials upon a deep love of nature and sea life as well as clear ties to Bontecou’s predecessors, the Surrealists. The work, as evidenced by the continuity of many of


\(^\text{132}\) Arnason, 322.
Bontecou’s studio practices, has not changed in meaning and allusion so much as it has materially. As Bontecou told Karen Wright, “I tried to get away from myself, but it didn’t work.”\textsuperscript{133} Though the artist has tried at times to reinvent herself and the meanings of her work, she has only changed the material nature and instead is “going back to the sea again and again.”\textsuperscript{134} Bontecou’s work continues to be intimate, deeply personal, and highly reflective of her past.

The Bontecou literature is contradictory. Riley posits that Bontecou loved gallery hopping and performance pieces, but did not enjoy the political side of the art world.\textsuperscript{135} Karen Wright reports that Bontecou tired of art in Europe and never went to galleries in New York.\textsuperscript{136} This contradiction and Bontecou’s own reticence on her art and her personal life makes it difficult to discern her true motivations for leaving the art world and not exhibiting her work during the 1980s and 1990s. Just like the meaning of her sculptures, the decision seems to be a complex and multifaceted one, a combination of her discontent with the Castelli Gallery, the birth of her daughter, her desire for a rural setting, and her interest in teaching. Also important to note is Bontecou’s deep belief that the art world is not just the collection of museums and galleries and their associated critics, gallerists, and audience. Rather, to Bontecou, the art world is anywhere that artists choose to place their studios and work. For Bontecou, the “art world” is simply about creating art.

\textsuperscript{133} Wright, 71.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{135} Riley, 32.
\textsuperscript{136} Wright, 70.
Conclusion

Though Bontecou chose to leave behind public life for over twenty years, her sculpture has nonetheless been highly influential, and critics have acclaimed her sculptures and drawings since her debut in the early 1960s. The Bontecou oeuvre, as I have demonstrated, is best read as a linked web of meanings that often transcend material shifts. Bontecou’s childhood experiences with natural history, aviation, and sea life, in addition to her strong reactions against the horror of World War II and the uncertainty of the Cold War have created a complex and many-layered set of readings. The importance of the studio in her art-making practice, especially the location and contents of the artist’s space, are also significant to the multifaceted character of Bontecou’s work and have informed the material shifts her work has undergone.

Bontecou’s twofold attitude to the United States’ involvement in the Cold War influenced each period of her work. Though Bontecou felt the fear of nuclear war common to most Americans of the time, she was also angry about the senselessness of war and somewhat skeptical of the US government’s claims. Reaction to the Cold War informed each period of Bontecou’s career, beginning with the canvas reliefs that incorporated military equipment, later in the gas masks affixed to the vacuum-formed plastic pieces, and finally in the highly detailed, nebulous mobiles that recall the Soviet Sputnik satellite.

I discussed the gendering of Bontecou’s work as well as its biographical and iconographical themes, particularly the tendency of critics to ascribe feminine symbolism to work that has none because Bontecou is female. Despite the fact that Bontecou has not “openly undertaken” feminism or female subjects, it is important to explore such issues in
light of the fact that critical reception has focused heavily upon them. Because of the
cultural context surrounding women and their art, Bontecou’s early work, created when
she was the first and only female showing at the Castelli Gallery, was more heavily
gendered by critics of that time period. Though this is less of an issue with the criticism
of her current work, as it was written after 2003, there is still a search for feminist subject
matter in works of art that draw more heavily from other aspects of Bontecou’s life and
cultural context.

In light of the lasting impact of Bontecou’s early life and the enjoyment and
independence she had during her mostly rural childhood, it is somewhat unsurprising that
she chose to retreat from public life. Tomkins and Smith continually emphasize the
artist’s independent nature and the feelings of alienation and disinterest she experienced
while part of the New York art scene. Recently, Bontecou suffered a rare blood disease
that nearly took her life and forced her to consider her legacy.137 It was in part because of
this illness that Bontecou agreed to the retrospective show in 2003 and showed her post-
1980 work to the public. Despite this renewed desire to exhibit work, publicly Bontecou
grants very few interviews in a bid to maintain her privacy.

Bontecou’s most recent work can only benefit from further critical and scholarly
examination. The rich variety of writings that discuss her early work are helpful in
understanding later sculptures, but by no means provide a complete picture of the
complicated themes and subtexts of Bontecou’s work. This thesis, along with Smith’s and
Tomkins’s essays, can serve as a jumping off point for future Bontecou study and further
in-depth analyses of her sculptures from 1980 to the present day.

137 Tomkins, 32.
Figure 1

Lee Bontecou

*Untitled*

1964

Plexiglas, canvas, steel, soot, epoxy, leather, and wire

79 x 119 x 31 in.

Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, New York
Figure 2

Lee Bontecou

*Untitled*

1961

welded steel, canvas, wire, and rope

72 5/8 x 66 x 25 7/16 in.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
Figure 3

Lee Bontecou
Untitled
1959
welded steel and plastic
9 x 27 x 7 in.
Private Collection
Figure 4

Lee Bontecou
*Untitled*
1970
vacuum-formed plastic
30 x 57 x 21 in.
Private Collection, New York
Figure 5

Lee Bontecou  
*Untitled*  
1967  
vacuum-formed plastic  
27 x 15 x 9 in.  
Private Collection
Figure 6

Lee Bontecou
*Untitled*
1969
vacuum-formed plastic
11 ½ x 15 ½ x 6 ½ in.
Collection of Peggy Brooks, New York
Figure 7

Lee Bontecou
*Untitled*
1998
welded steel, porcelain, wire mesh, canvas, and wire
7 x 8 x 6 ft.
Private Collection
Figure 8

Lee Bontecou
Untitled
1986-2002
welded steel, porcelain, and wire
13 x 20 x 16 in.
Private Collection
Figure 9

Lee Bontecou

*Untitled*

2001

welded steel, wire mesh, porcelain, and wire

45 x 47 x 21 in.

Private Collection
Figure 10

Lee Bontecou

Untitled

1967

dpaper and wood
35 x 13 x 12 in.

Collection of Tony and Gail Ganz, Los Angeles
Figure 11

Lee Bontecou

*Untitled*

1980-1998

welded steel, porcelain, wire mesh, silk, and wire

6 ½ ft x 8 ft x 5 ½ in.

Private Collection
Figure 12

Lee Bontecou
*Untitled*
1993
welded steel, wire mesh, porcelain, epoxy, and wire
31 ½ x 22 x 13
Private Collection
Figure 13

Lee Bontecou
*Untitled #3*
1998
silver and bronze pencil on paper
dimensions unknown
Courtesy of Knoedler Gallery
Figure 14

Lee Bontecou
*Untitled*
1993
welded steel, porcelain, and wire
8 ½ x 9 ¾ x 7 in.
Private Collection
Figure 15

Lee Bontecou

*Untitled*

1994

welded steel, wire mesh, porcelain, silk, and wire

22 x 29 x 17 in.

Private Collection
Figure 16

Max Ernst

*The Horde*

1927

oil on canvas

65 x 81 cm

Collection Wurth, Kunzelsau, Germany
Figure 17

Alberto Giacometti
*The Palace at 4 a.m.*
1932-1933
wood, glass, wire, and string
25 x 28 ¼ x 15 ¾ in.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Figure 18

Alberto Giacometti
*Suspended Ball*
1930-1931
mixed media
height 60 cm
Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Kunsthau, Zurich
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Email from Carnegie Museum of Art to Sara Mastbaum, 10/30/2009.