

Lee Bontecou | Drawn Worlds

JUNE 28–SEPTEMBER 21

Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled (a study of fish), ca. 1958

Charcoal and graphite on paper

25.4 × 33 cm (10 × 13 in.)

Collection of the artist



Bontecou's early life studies reflect the instruction she received at the Art Students League in New York in the early 1950s. One of her first courses revolved around a methodology developed by the school's former instructor Kimon Nicolaïdes. He believed that drawing requires "physical contact with all sorts of objects through the senses," and he encouraged students to look into the world, rather than to art history and art theory, for inspiration. Students were prompted to make "fresh" and "vivid" contact with actual objects through touch and smell. Bontecou's drawings are emblematic of this directed and sensorial approach.

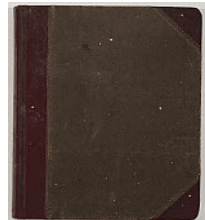
Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled (Ledger), ca. 1958–60

Clothbound with maroon spine and corners

26.7 × 21.3 cm (10 1/2 × 8 3/8 in.)

Collection of the artist



Bontecou used this found ledger, with accounting notations and calculations, as a sketchbook when she was living and working in lower Manhattan in the late 1950s and early '60s. Nearly all of its 140 pages are filled with drawings, many of them serving as preparatory steps for her large-scale sculptures. Author Joan Banach has described the ledger as a "protean first monograph" and has discussed these "delicately and helically spiraled" drawings as anticipating "the invertebrate chambers of the marine and web-like forms in Bontecou's work of the 1980s."

Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled (cricket), 1957

Graphite, ink, and wash on paper

21.3 × 45.4 cm (8 3/8 × 17 7/8 in.)

Collection of the artist



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, ca. 1962

Soot on handmade paper with deckle edges

25.4 × 33 cm (10 × 13 in.)

Collection of the artist



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

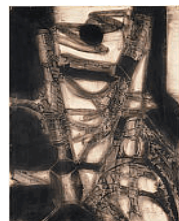
Untitled, 1958

Soot and graphite with areas of erasure and resist on cream wove paper

sheet: 99 × 69 cm (39 × 27 3/16 in.)

frame: 118.4 × 88.5 × 3 cm (46 5/8 × 34 13/16 × 1 3/16 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum, gift of Dr. Alvin E. Friedman Kien



Bontecou discovered that the saturated black pigment produced by an acetylene torch creates the illusion of receding space: "I could create a beautiful black line or mass by moving the torch very quickly across the paper or canvas. I used the black soot in many forms, and did quite a few soot drawings in conjunction with the pencil—but most important I found a real black that one could sink into or enter."

Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1958

Soot on paper

sheet: 68.6 × 99.1 cm (27 × 39 in.)

frame: 93.3 × 122.6 cm (36 3/4 × 48 1/4 in.)

Collection of the artist

This drawing epitomizes Bontecou's revolutionary technique of using an oxyacetylene (or welding) torch to draw. While studying in Rome on a Fulbright scholarship in the late 1950s, Bontecou discovered that when she turned the torch's oxygen supply off, she produced an acetylene flame, which has a lower temperature and does not set the paper on fire. This flame also generates copious amounts of carbon-based powder. Bontecou repurposed this powder as her medium, creating deposits of soot. She then dug into, erased, and removed the soot particles with brushes, razor blades, and even her fingertips.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1961

Graphite on paper

sheet: 57.5 × 73 cm (22 5/8 × 28 3/4 in.)

frame: 78.6 × 93.8 cm (30 15/16 × 36 15/16 in.)

The Menil Collection, Houston

Gas masks first appear in a small group of Bontecou's drawings from 1961, when many, under the growing threat of nuclear destruction, were preparing for an inauspicious fate. In this year, American involvement in Vietnam escalated, construction began on the Berlin Wall, and the United States government dramatically increased its efforts to prepare Americans for atomic war. Here, faces with wide eyes grow into uncanny creatures that seem to have emerged from a dystopian future.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1961

Graphite on paper

sheet: 68 × 99 cm (26 3/4 × 39 in.)

frame: 88.6 × 119.7 cm (34 7/8 × 47 1/8 in.)

The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of the Society for Contemporary American Art, 1963.550

In this drawing, Bontecou plays with scale: the drawn worlds are both miniscule galaxies and sprawling landscapes that, through their unsettling sense of space, belie a clear narrative reading. The artist hopes that her drawings remain mysterious and thus produce diverse responses. Because she does not want the viewer to be bound by anyone's interpretation of her works' meaning, including her own, Bontecou leaves all of her pieces untitled.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1961

Graphite on paper

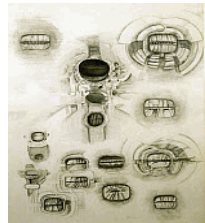
sheet: 72.4 × 57.2 cm (28 1/2 × 22 1/2 in.)

frame: 93.8 × 78.6 cm (36 15/16 × 30 15/16 in.)

Private collection, Courtesy Lawrence Markey, San Antonio, Texas

This work is among a group of drawings and sculptures from the early 1960s that contain multiple circular orifices, many bearing rows of sharp teeth. Of the political events during and following the Second World War the artist wrote,

I was angry. I used to work with the United Nations program on the short-wave radio in my studio. I used it like background music, and, in a way, the anger became part of the process. During World War II we'd been too young. But at that later time, all of the feelings I'd had back then came to me again. Rockefeller was trying to push bomb shelters on us. Africa was in trouble and we were so negative.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1961

Graphite on paper

sheet: 57.2 × 72.4 cm (22 1/2 × 28 1/2 in.)

frame: 65.1 × 80.3 cm (25 5/8 × 31 5/8 in.)

Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Tucker in honor of the graduation of Sally Ruth Tucker, class of 1967

Like many contemporary sculptors, Bontecou takes a traditional approach to drawing, using the paper as a space to plan and consider the forms of her three-dimensional work. The flat surface of the paper support is not only a preparatory staging ground but also the point of origin for her imagery. Such drawings reveal acute observations of the living, breathing world that are the generative sources for her work.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1963

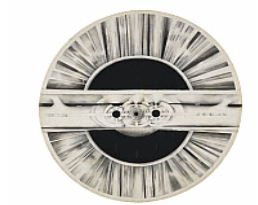
Graphite and soot on circular-shaped stretched muslin

stretcher: 207.7 × 196 cm. (81 1/2 × 77 1/4 in.)

frame: 219.5 × 207.3 × 11.4 cm. (86 7/16 × 81 5/8 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum, Museum purchase, Laura P. Hall Memorial Fund

One of Bontecou's largest drawings, this work is made from pieces of muslin that were stitched together. Reflecting the physically commanding scale of many of her sculptures, the circular piece is also evocative of the famous *Bocca della Verita* (Mouth of Truth) in Rome, which Bontecou visited as a student. The marble relief of the river god Oceanus has a gaping hole as a mouth. According to legend, if you put your hand into the mouth and tell a lie, the sculpture will bite.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

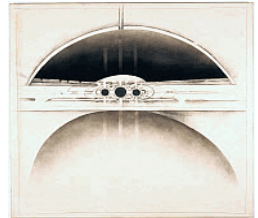
Untitled, 1963

Graphite and soot on muslin

sheet: 91.6 × 92 cm (36 1/16 × 36 1/4 in.)

frame: 98.1 × 98.1 cm (38 5/8 × 38 5/8 in.)

The Menil Collection, Houston, gift of Adelaide de Menil Carpenter



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

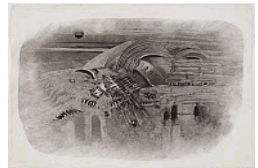
Untitled, 1963

Graphite and soot on paper

sheet: 25.4 × 33 cm (10 × 13 in.)

frame: 44.9 × 52.1 cm (17 11/16 × 20 1/2 in.)

Collection of the artist



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

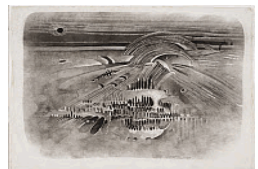
Untitled, 1963

Graphite and soot on paper

sheet: 25.4 × 33 cm (10 × 13 in.)

frame: 45.1 × 52.1 cm (17 3/4 × 20 1/2 in.)

Collection of the artist



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1963

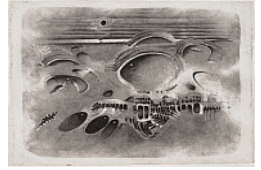
Graphite and soot on paper

sheet: 25.4 × 33 cm (10 × 13 in.)

frame: 45.1 × 52.1 cm (17 3/4 × 20 1/2 in.)

Collection of the artist

The horizon lines that Bontecou includes in many of her drawings serve as optical devices that both attract and displace the viewer. The smudged graphite and web-like forms in this particular drawing would hardly constitute a recognizable scene if not for slight indications of horizon lines. This spatial perspective generates a picture plane that allows the imagery to operate both microscopically and macroscopically. The image can be read as both a strange cellular organism and the sprawling panorama of a lunar landscape, the eye of an insect and a vast, starry sky.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1963

Soot and aniline dye on muslin

sheet: 98.4 × 91.4 cm (38 3/4 × 36 in.)

frame: 112.1 × 104.8 cm (44 1/8 × 41 1/4 in.)

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, gift of Katherine Komaroff Goodman

In this soot drawing, made after her move to New York in 1959, Bontecou used heightened modeling to create the illusion of space; budding forms do not recede but emerge from the dark. The artist's subtractive method of removing soot created rippling convex ovals that appear to push through the darkened muslin support. This dramatic effect is similar to that of chiaroscuro, a technique involving the play of contrasts between light and dark.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1963

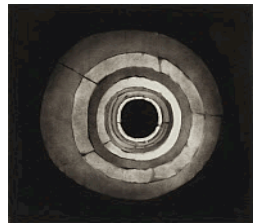
Soot, graphite, and aniline dye on muslin

sheet: 46.4 × 46.4 cm (18 1/4 × 18 1/4 in.)

frame: 63.7 × 63.5 cm (25 1/16 × 25 in.)

Private collection

Part of a generation defined by the space age, Bontecou often has discussed her art in cosmic terms. Many of her works, like this drawing with undulating circles and orb-like forms, relate to her fascination with Sputnik, the first artificial satellite, which launched in 1957. This event coincided with new discoveries in technology and science—including Black Holes—that greatly expanded our understanding of the unfathomable limits of the solar system. The artist reflected, "I had joy and excitement about outer space—nothing was known about the black holes—just huge intangible, dangerous entities, and I felt great excitement when little Sputnik flew."



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, ca. 1970

Colored pencil, graphite, and white charcoal on black paper

sheet: 58.4 × 89.5 cm (23 × 35 1/4 in.)

frame: 81.8 × 112.1 cm (32 3/16 × 44 1/8 in.)

Private collection, New York

Bontecou has aptly been called a "strange naturalist." This drawing of imaginary aquatic creatures reflects her interest in looking closely at objects of the natural world in such diverse locations as the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, aquariums, bogs, and tide pools.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

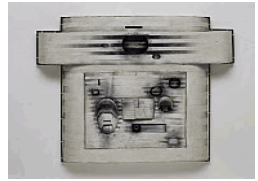
Untitled, 1966

Welded and painted steel, horseshoe crab shells, pipe fittings, velvet hooks, saw blades, epoxy, velveteen, and soot

181.6 × 222.9 × 22.9 cm (71 1/2 × 87 3/4 × 9 in.)

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, gift, Mr. and Mrs. Leo Castelli, 1974

Tension between feelings of liberation and captivity, as well as between representations of the natural and the man-made, are found in many of Bontecou's drawings. They are particularly visceral in this work, the only sculpture on view. Here, bands of soot and graphite are rendered in gradations that exaggerate the degree of curvature of the metal support, which swells out from the wall. Like a drawing, the white surface becomes a flat picture plane. The pierced holes in the metal, together with horizontal rows of small saw blades, comingle with fragments of spray-painted horseshoe-crab shells. Encrusted in and around the toothy indentations, hybrid beasts are ensnared in the drawn lines.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1967

Graphite and felt-tip pen on flocked paper

sheet: 50.7 × 66.1 cm (19 15/16 × 26 in.)

frame: 63.8 × 80.3 cm (25 1/8 × 31 5/8 in.)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Wilder Green, 1970



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

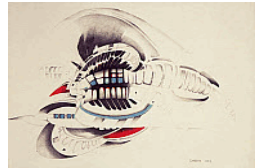
Untitled, 1967

Ink and graphite on flocked paper

sheet: 50.8 × 66.1 cm (20 × 26 in.)

frame: 57.6 × 73 cm (22 11/16 × 28 3/4 in.)

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest, 1981



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1968

Soot and graphite on paper

sheet: 72.4 × 57.1 cm (28 1/2 × 22 1/2 in.)

frame: 76.2 × 61 cm (30 × 24 in.)

Private collection



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1970

Colored pencil, graphite, and pastel on black paper

sheet: 51.1 × 66.4 cm (20 1/8 × 26 1/8 in.)

frame: 72.4 × 87 cm (28 1/2 × 34 1/4 in.)

Collection of Agnes Gund, New York

This drawing relates to a series of vacuumed-formed sculptures of fish and flowers that Bontecou fabricated beginning in 1967. To create the sculptures, she stretched heated transparent plastic over carved Styrofoam armatures. The rigid plastic material endows the sculptures with a quality of weightlessness and the capacity to catch light. Because the forms resemble the protective hard outer layer of a cocooned butterfly, the group has become known as the Chrysalis series. The related drawings capture a sense of the artificial that is as luminous as it is haunting. Here, a fish, seen through its plastic skin, seems to ache for oxygen and sun.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1970

Graphite on paper

sheet: 73.3 × 58.1 cm (28 7/8 × 22 7/8 in.)

frame: 103.5 × 78.1 cm (40 3/4 × 30 3/4 in.)

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, purchase with the Aid of Funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Susan Morse Hilles Matching Fund

In 1970, Bontecou made many drawings of flowers and fish that resemble and advance the forms of her evolving three-dimensional work with plastic. Drawing attention to the fabrication process of her sculptures, she often included representations of the mechanics of the joinery. In this drawing, the flower stems and petals are held in place with tiny bolts. An extension of Bontecou's environmentalism, the artificiality of the flower is an ominous warning. As the artist once commented about such works, "If you don't watch out, this is all we'll have to remember what flowers used to look like."



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

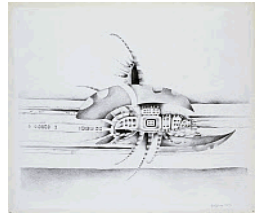
Untitled, 1972

Graphite and gouache on prepared paper

sheet: 61.3 × 63.5 cm (24 1/8 × 25 in.)

frame: 73.8 × 76.7 cm (29 1/16 × 30 3/16 in.)

Collection halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1974–75

Graphite on prepared plastic paper

sheet: 96.5 × 63.5 cm (38 × 25 in.)

frame: 116.7 × 83.7 cm (45 15/16 × 32 15/16 in.)

Arkansas Art Center Foundation Collection, Little Rock, purchase, Tabriz Fund and Museum Purchase Plan of the National Endowment for the Arts

In the early 1970s, Bontecou began a group of sculptures and drawings that would become known informally as the Prison series. In them, she introduced vertical and horizontal bands that surround and capture her voids and humanoid forms—creatures with teeth and open mouths, eyeballs with eyelashes, and gas masks. While the vertical lines in the works tend to suggest prison bars, and thus suffocating entrapment, the horizontal bars also evoke open landscapes and spatial freedom.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1974–75

Graphite on prepared paper

sheet: 109.5 × 194.9 cm (43 1/8 × 76 3/4 in.)

frame: 119.5 × 205.1 cm (47 1/16 × 80 3/4 in.)

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

These compressed humanoid figures, entangled in horizontal bands that link stacked vertebrae, are as humorous as they are frightening—a dark duality that Bontecou often explores. The artist primed the paper support for this drawing with white paint; the resulting smooth surface allowed the graphite to be applied softly and precisely. Small, intricate lines further the work's contradictory play with bold subject matter and delicate technique.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1976

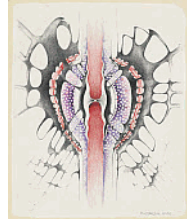
Graphite and colored pencil on prepared plastic paper

sheet: 38.1 × 27.9 cm (15 × 11 in.)

frame: 58.1 × 47.6 cm (22 7/8 × 18 3/4 in.)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift

Bontecou considers the process of drawing a metaphoric journey into an alternate and intangible realm. She explains, "You can travel miles within a drawing and not have to take all the baggage along. I always envied poets because of that fact. They can take the pencil in their head." Even in small works like this one, the composition opens, offering the viewer a chance to take his or her own voyage.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1976

Graphite and colored pencil on prepared paper

sheet: 23 × 28.3 cm (9 1/16 × 11 1/8 in.)

frame: 42.9 × 47.6 cm (16 7/8 × 18 3/4 in.)

Collection of the artist



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1982

Colored pencil on colored paper

sheet: 61 × 91.4 cm (24 × 36 in.)

frame: 82.2 × 112.2 cm (32 3/8 × 44 3/16 in.)

Collection of the artist

The voluptuous forms in Bontecou's series of wave drawings swell in repeating bands of colored pencil and graphite. They have been compared to *écorchés* (from the French word for "flayed" or "skinned"), anatomical drawings that depict the underlying human corporeal structure. It is as if Bontecou has peeled back a watery skin to uncover rippling muscles and tendons.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1982

Casein on wood

sheet: 30.5 × 38.1 cm (12 × 15 in.)

frame: 42.9 × 50.5 cm (16 7/8 × 19 7/8 in.)

Collection of the artist



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1982

Casein on prepared paper

sheet: 48.3 × 50.8 cm (19 × 20 in.)

frame: 69.2 × 71 cm (27 1/4 × 27 15/16 in.)

Collection of the artist



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

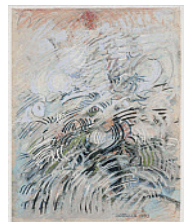
Untitled #16, 1983

Pastel on paper

sheet: 31.7 × 22.9 cm (12 1/2 × 9 in.)

frame: 52.7 × 42.9 cm (20 3/4 × 16 7/8 in.)

Collection of the artist



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1985

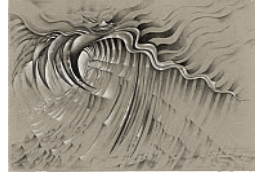
Charcoal, graphite, and colored pencil on colored paper

sheet: 55.9 × 76.2 cm (22 × 30 in.)

frame: 81.4 × 97.2 cm (32 1/16 × 38 1/4 in.)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection
Gift

Throughout her life, Bontecou spent many summers on the Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia, home to the most dramatic tidal variations on earth. Enchanted by the power, beauty, and danger of the natural world, Bontecou was an avid swimmer and diver in the Canadian water. Many of her forms and textures derive from her study of the sea and the surface of the sand and the water.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1987

Printer's ink on prepared paper

sheet: 29.2 × 26.4 cm (11 1/2 × 10 3/8 in.)

frame: 49.1 × 44.8 cm (19 5/16 × 17 5/8 in.)

Collection of Agnes Gund, New York



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1987

Printer's ink on prepared plastic paper

sheet: 45.7 × 39.7 cm (18 × 15 5/8 in.)

frame: 67.9 × 61.3 cm (26 3/4 × 24 1/8 in.)

Collection of the artist

As a young teenager, Bontecou was deeply moved by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's presentation of the drawings of Vincent van Gogh, whose influence can be seen in her expressionistic marks and use of high horizon lines. Bontecou employs slick, smooth surfaces to manipulate paint strokes, working on primed plastic or preparing the paper support with gesso, a white underpaint.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled #8, 1990

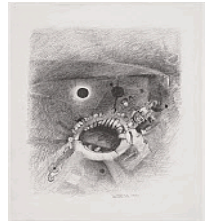
Graphite on paper

sheet: 35.6 × 28 cm (14 × 11 in.)

frame: 56.4 × 48.3 cm (22 3/16 × 19 in.)

Collection of the artist

Bontecou's strange worlds harken back to the Surrealists, whose work engaged with themes of the subconscious and responded to the destruction of the First World War. A 1960 article compared the "unfathomable" depth in Bontecou's work to "black bile," thought to be the root of melancholy according to ancient medicine. The term was also used by the poet André Breton to describe the Surrealists' affinity with comic irony, the absurd, the grotesque, and the subversive. "Black bile" is an apt description of the gaping mouth in this unsettling landscape.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

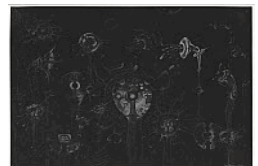
Untitled, 1993

Colored pencil on black paper

sheet: 45.7 × 61 cm (18 × 24 in.)

frame: 65.6 × 80.3 cm (25 13/16 × 31 5/8 in.)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, purchase, 2002



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1996

Pastel and colored pencil on black paper

sheet: 50.8 × 66 cm (20 × 26 in.)

frame: 72.4 × 87.2 cm (28 1/2 × 34 5/16 in.)

On loan from John McEnroe

This drawing represents a moment when nature and the man-made meet. The ominous exaggeration of the birds' skeletal anatomy and the stylized spinal cord lead to larger questions about the future of life on earth. Birds are an important source in Bontecou's work because of their association with flight, which relates to not only her fascination with outer space and airplanes but also her belief in limitless possibility.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 1998

Pastel, colored pencil, and graphite on black paper

sheet: 75.2 × 50.8 cm (29 5/8 × 20 in.)

frame: 98.7 × 79.2 cm (38 7/8 × 31 3/16 in.)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection
Gift

Even in her invented landscapes, Bontecou first turns to the natural world as a point of departure. The colorful and porous forms of foliage that inhabit the dark space in this drawing are based on the shapes of a lotus seed pod.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 2008

Colored pencil on black paper

sheet: 45.7 × 56.2 cm (18 × 22 1/8 in.)

frame: 59.5 × 69.5 cm (23 7/16 × 27 3/8 in.)

Collection of the artist

Imaginary sea creatures are a recurring subject in Bontecou's work; other drawings include hybrid sea monsters with reptilian scales, feathery, floating beings that look like elaborate lionfish, and spongy, anemone-like plant forms with porous skins. They reveal the deep, dark heart of her oeuvre: a pulsing reverence for the biological world and the uneasy, treacherous convergence of the organic and the artificial.



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 2010

Colored pencil on black paper

sheet: 46 × 62 cm (18 1/8 × 24 7/16 in.)

frame: 59.8 × 74.6 cm (23 9/16 × 29 3/8 in.)

Collection of the artist



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 2011

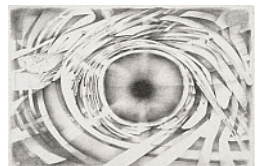
Graphite on paper

sheet: 58.4 × 76.5 cm (23 × 30 1/8 in.)

frame: 75.6 × 93 cm (29 3/4 × 36 5/8 in.)

Collection of the artist

This recent drawing testifies to the artist's ongoing work in her Pennsylvania studio. As seen here, Bontecou continues to circle around her fascination with the void. According to art historian Dore Ashton, the "the reigning image" in Bontecou's work is the deep, dark hole, a shape that "can be seen as an inspired evocation of a deep-seated human hunger of the axis mundi, the central point around which the cosmos operates."



Lee Bontecou, American, born 1931

Untitled, 2011

Graphite on paper

sheet: 76 × 111.8 cm (29 15/16 × 44 in.)

frame: 98.9 × 134.5 cm (38 15/16 × 52 15/16 in.)

Collection of the artist



One the most recent works on view, this drawing reveals the evolution of Bontecou's use of the void. This mysterious form has appeared in a variety of manifestations in the artist's work, from anthropomorphic black holes to spheres with teeth, eyeballs, and eyelashes to seedpods, portals, and dark worlds. They are unlikely anchors, with sails billowing from their cores, orbs of light, or suns rising over the horizon. Here, a grid of voids summarizes the different iterations of the motif as it has appeared in Bontecou's drawings over the course of more than five decades.