

# Abstraction, Color, Politics: Docent CE

Louise Nevelson

## Trajectory as an Artist

- Biography: Born near Kiev, Russia, 1899. Emigrated to Rockland, ME. Father in lumber business. She was too big for Maine. Moved to NYC, married Charles Nevelson. Studied voice and had son. Mixed messages on motherhood. Separated from Charles after 10 years.
- 1930s: Traveled. Hans Hofmann / very important years for Bauhaus before it closed. Diego Rivera, Precolumbian Mexico and Guatemala
- Phase 1: Early, small scale constructions, presented on base. Sometimes in colors (like green)
- Phase 2: Started wooden assemblages in 1954. Sky Cathedral, Dawn's Wedding Feast, Royal Tide

## Where this specific work fits into the broader trajectory and style

- *Dark Presence III*, 1971. 2016/2.119
- Fits in the middle. She had been working in assemblage for almost 20 years.
- Contrast: between smooth and jagged lines and textures. Between solid and air.
- Structure: NYC skyline. "When I look at the city from my point of view, I see New York City as a great big sculpture." — *Dawns & Dusks* by Diana MacKown, 1976, p.111
- Rhythm and movement: linear, curved bottom right. Jagged teeth. Structure out of chaos.
- Balance: weighted bottom lighter top, horizontals and verticals (Hofmann). Penetrated spaces and raised.

## Working methods

- Action and Counteraction: "I go to the sculpture, and my eye tells me what is right for me. When I compose, I don't have anything but the material, myself, and an assistant. I compose right there while the assistant hammers. Sometimes it's the material that takes over; sometimes it's me that takes over. I permit them to play, like a seesaw. I use action and counteraction, like in music, all the time. Action and counteraction. It was always a relationship – my speaking to the wood and the wood speaking back to me." — *Dawns & Dusks* by Diana MacKown, 1976, p.120
- Carefully selected items that recalled forms of city, nature, celestial bodies. Intimate scale of small pieces but became monumental in environment.
- She filled rooms. Bathtubs. Her walls were covered. Two separate studios: one for black, one for white.

## Abstraction

- Question of the exhibition: Why choose abstraction when other approaches were possible?
- Movements: Often referred to as an assemblage artist, which is true. But that "overlooks her importance as Ab-Ex and Minimalist. The mammoth scale, bold composition, strong texture and non-figural approach = ab ex. By painting finished pieces a single color, she created her own brand of minimalism, making HER the link between three important movements in modern art." Philip Berger, Journalist.
- Influences: Duchamp readymades, Hofmann paintings, precolombian forms
- Black: Unification and transformation. "But when I fell in love with black, it contained all color. It wasn't a negation of color. It was an acceptance. Because black encompasses all colors. Black is the most aristocratic color of all. ....You can be quiet and it contains the whole

thing. There is no color that will give you the feeling of totality. Of peace. Of greatness. Of quietness. Of excitement. I have seen things that were transformed into black, that took on just greatness. I don't know a lesser word." — Dawns & Dusks by Diana MacKown, 1976, p.126  
"...black creates harmony and doesn't intrude on the emotions." — Atmospheres and Environments, C.N. Potter and Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980, p.174. Black obliterates past histories of objects and connects them in the present.

- Sidenote: spray-painting our pumpkins transformed them.

### **How is it political? Environment around it? How did it charge this object?**

- Dramatic: she saw herself as part of the art. "Everytime I put on clothes, I'm creating a picture." — Dawns & Dusks by Diana MacKown, 1976, p.187. Her strong will put her at the forefront of feminist movement. Not doing work like Judy Chicago or Cindy Sherman (what she could have chosen). Honorary degrees from: Smith, NYU, Columbia, Harvard, Tufts . . . and National Medal of Art from Ronald Reagan. Nationally celebrated female artist. She did not mind being center stage or going first (Sidney Janis gallery, first Am. sculptor and first female exhibited)
- Scale: Challenged the notion that only men's work could be large-scale. The materials she used could be considered masculine. Not watercolor. Wood, then later plexi and metal.
- Content: urban. Women's life history had become suitable subject matter.

### **Approach to the work - how would you teach it?**

- Boxes!
- Ask students to identify one shape and count how many times it appears. How many variations / flips?
- Generate, Connect, Sort, Expand: Cultures of Thinking. A way of compartmentalizing ideas, seeing connections and patterns between them.

[http://www.pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/VT\\_GSCE.pdf](http://www.pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/VT_GSCE.pdf)

Links:

**Nevelson Foundation website**--good links to resources, wonderful selection of quotes by Nevelson  
<http://www.louisenevelsonfoundation.org/index.php>

**Nevelson page from "The Art Story."** The Art Story website includes good summaries of the contributions of individual artists, short bios, introduction to key works. Cliff Notes of art history.  
<https://www.theartstory.org/artist-nevelson-louise.htm>

**PACE Gallery 2018 exhibition** includes many good pix of her work, useful press release  
<https://www.pacegallery.com/exhibitions/12905/black-white>  
...and artist page  
<https://www.pacegallery.com/artists/327/louise-nevelson>