HYPERALLERGIC

Louise Nevelson's Graphic Imagination

Nevelson used drawing as a creative bridge back and forth into the making of sculpture.

By Tim Keane
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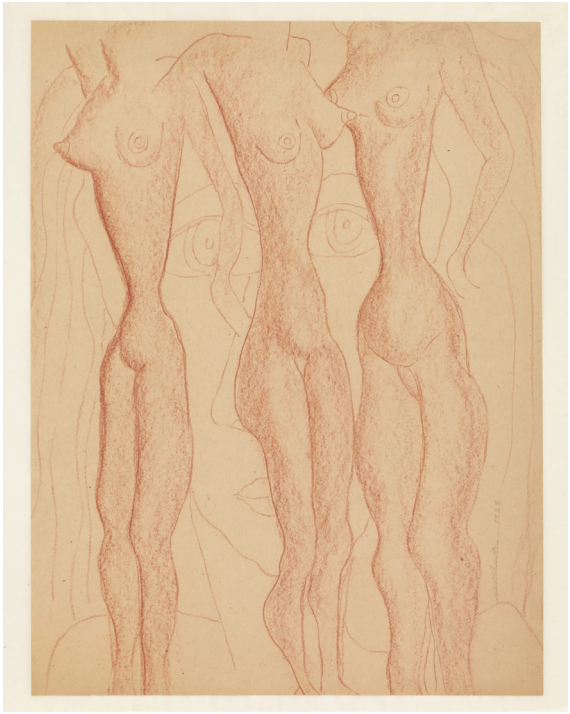


Louise Nevelson, "Untitled" (1928), fabricated red chalk on paper, sheet: 17 5/8 × 13 3/8 inches (image courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art)

In the late 1930s, artist Louise Nevelson was talking sculpture with men. One of them warned her, "Louise, you've got to have *balls* to be a sculptor." Her reply was self-possessed and curt: "I *do* have balls." That insult, recalled in her memoir *Dawns & Dusks* (Scribners, 1980), further emboldened her. It is one of many such episodes in which Nevelson describes plowing through roadblocks on her way to becoming a prolific artist.

During her lifetime, Nevelson's unapologetic ego and her regal public bearing made her famous, even infamous. Playwright Edward Albee immortalized that flamboyant mettle in his play *Occupant* (2001). But in Dale Schierholt's thoughtful documentary *Nevelson: Awareness in the Fourth Dimension* (2008), the artist savors her favorite phrase, "self-centered," explaining that it means being led by an inner compass rather than living scattershot by unreliable cultural guideposts. If she was imperious, her close friend, artist Robert Indiana, says, she was a queen without subjects other than her art; in his words, she was "her *own* goddess."

Nevelson's self-glorification served a long-term, counter-cultural mission. By avowing her destiny as a great artist early and often, she was rejecting comfort and middling conformity to claim a vocation that, the record proves, involved scrupulous, uncompromising experimentation. Her public profile, including her cowboy hats, headscarves, stoles and long coats — the trappings of a *doyenne* — was cultural armor with semi-ironic subtext: having ground it out and gone hungry when she needed to, she came to be known later in life as the Queen of Spring Street during New York's bad old days. When friends worried about her safety near the Bowery, she assured them that the proud local mafia men, who knew her by face, would be humiliated were anyone to harm her.

Fittingly, in New York City, Nevelson's legacy lives in her public installations, such as the white woodwork wall reliefs, altarpieces, and columns that form the meditative Nevelson Chapel of the Good Shepherd on Lexington Avenue, and the copses of tall black steel sculptures in Nevelson Plaza, a park in the busy corridors of the Financial District.

Her predestination proved well-founded. By the 1980s, before she died at age 88, Nevelson's ever-evolving work had won worldwide recognition, something unusual for a living American sculptor.

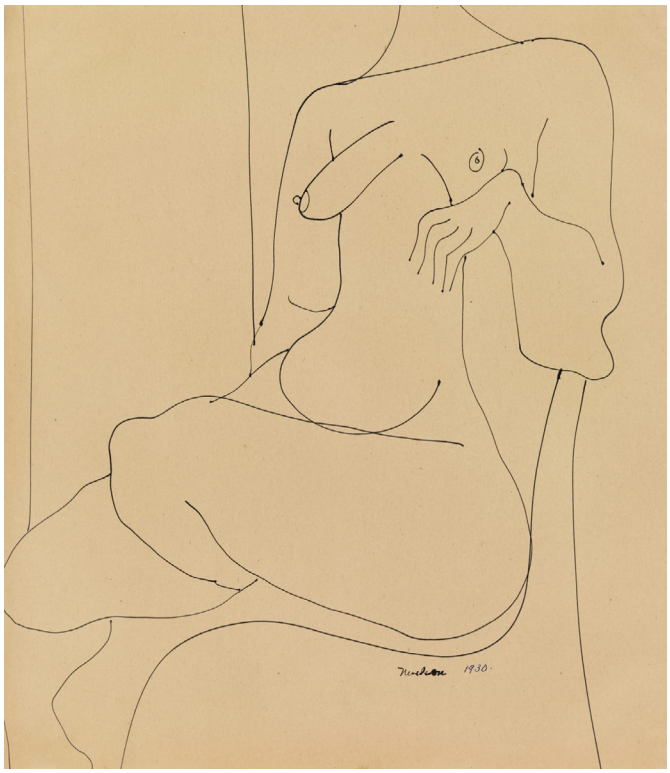
Nevelson Plaza (photo by the author)

Now that intervening decades have cooled off that white-hot zenith, *The Face in the Moon: Drawings and Prints by Louise Nevelson* at the Whitney Museum, like last spring's exhibition of her relief sculpture at Pace Gallery, speaks to her considerable craftsmanship, as well as the range of her imagination and her risk-taking. This exhibition's cross-section of 26 prints, engravings, etchings and collages positions Nevelson's rare pencil drawings from the 1920s as her first stabs toward the poetic heights she reached with more multilayered works from the 1950s and '60s, before her turn to a more geometric abstraction in the 1970s.

Along the way, drawing led her to monochromatic techniques and quasi-iconographic abstraction. As she drew, she subsumed avant-garde art styles that came and went during her formative years. In the long run, this discipline tempered those outside influences, so once she hit her stride as a sculptor, she had solidified her aesthetic signature through the art of drawing.

Like the drawings on view, the famous large sculptures that sealed her reputation, such as "Sky Cathedral" (1958) and "Dawn's Wedding Chapel" (1959), achieve mythic atmospheres and tranquility through architectural densities, compounded infrastructures, and monochromatic silence. Often made from found wood — carpentry tools alternate with wooden *relica* — those works are painted entirely black or white so their minutiae coalesce

and, fully integrated, the objects ascend like postindustrial totems or statuary for a bygone religious sect. Their abstract innerworkings — resembling crates, joints, banisters, handles and pilings — seem embedded into one another, as if supernaturally unified.



Louise Nevelson, "Untitled" (1930), pen and ink on paper, sheet: 14 3/4 × 12 13/16 inches (image courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art)

Looking at the drawings in *The Face in the Moon* might remind the visitor that Nevelson's relief sculptures have the horizontal and vertical constructs found in builders' blueprints and engineers' designs. That synchronizing of the gnomic with the recognizable — we can call it her transparent opacity — animates these graphic works, too.

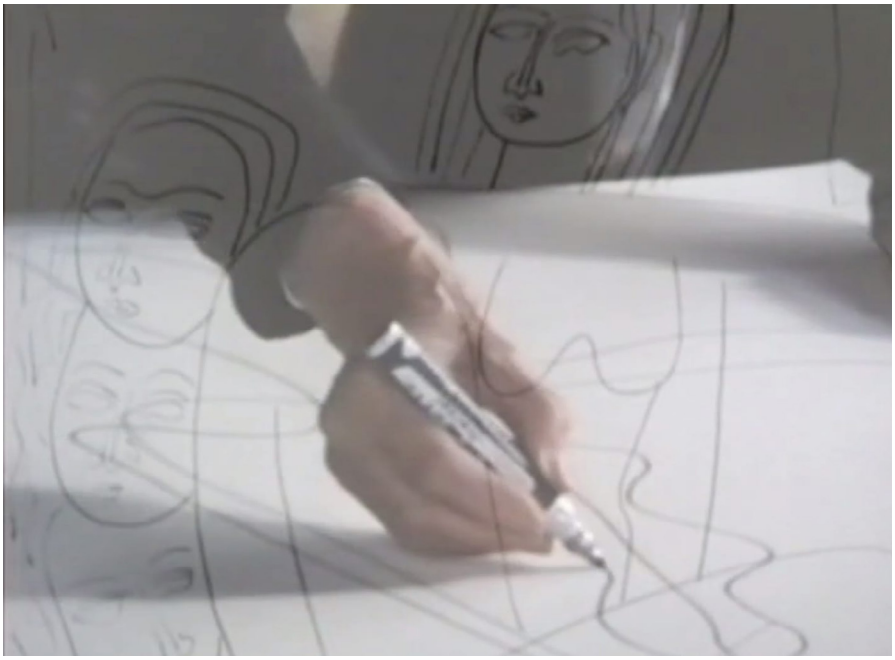
In contrast to her art, Nevelson's life is, on its surface, far less enigmatic. It reads like Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* and John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* reimagined through the no-nonsense cadences of Grace Paley. Born in the Ukraine in 1899, she immigrated as a young child with her Jewish family to the insular coastal community of Rockland, Maine. As the story goes, though her father made a solid living in the timber business, the family's status as immigrants set them apart. While biographers have made hay out of that outsider status, it does not seem to have fazed Nevelson, who appears temperamentally inclined toward never quite belonging.

She informs biographers that her teachers in Maine immediately recognized her artistic talent and that businessmen traveling to Maine regularly courted her. In 1920, she married a shipping magnate and moved to New York City, where she became an unhappy young mother. Interested in art rather than domesticity, she bristled at the predictable lifestyle of affluence and left married life, as it turned out, permanently.

Early on, she practiced her art mainly through work with private teachers and at the Art Students League. Seeing Marcel Duchamp's "A Nude Descending a Staircase, Number 2"

(1912) and Pablo Picasso's "Guernica" (1937) in New York inspired her to do semi-abstract renditions of the human figure. Her earliest drawings in *The Face in the Moon* explore that expressive potential.

"Untitled" (1928) is a trio of headless nudes rendered in vivid red chalk. These tapered female forms seem semi-linked, their long limbs and hyper-extended torsos forming lattice-like vertices behind which a foregrounded pair of oversized eyes stare. Those eyes — that outsized gaze hidden behind the sinuous nudes — capture Nevelson's faith in the primacy of drawing. Seeing, she believed, was itself an act of drawing. "Without drawing," she tells biographer Diana MacKown, "you couldn't do anything [...] With your eye you are drawing to define the object. That same line that goes through a pencil is [...] the same line as consciousness."



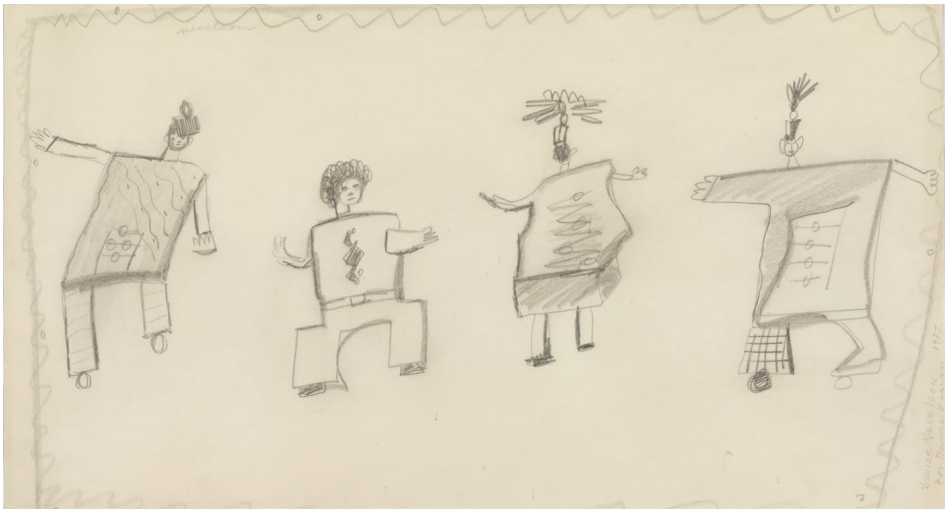
Nevelson drawing, from the film Louise Nevelson: Awareness in the Fourth Dimension (2008) (image courtesy Dale Schierholt, © 2018 Estate of Louise Nevelson / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

She practiced what she preached, using drawing as a creative bridge back and forth into the making of sculpture, the latter freeing her to make "every line build into the other." In 1931, she went to Europe and studied with Hans Hofmann in Munich; the series of drawings from the late 1930s entitled titled *For Dance Design* exemplifies what she reports that she deduced from Hofmann's lessons, namely the block-form being a "space of for light" and a "space of shadow," such that, in her words, the Cubist's cube "translates nature into a structure." One such "For Dance Design" drawing features marionette-like human figures in dynamic stances and playful poses, accentuated through torque and angularity.

Exactly how drawing and printmaking informed her sculpture would require a multimedia exhibition, much larger than *Faces in the Moon*. As it is, there are significant gaps, with the 1940s largely unrepresented. It was during those years that Nevelson's life toggled between grinding struggles and revitalizing interactions with other arts and artists.

Following her time with Hofmann in Munich she detoured to France to work briefly in films. There, she fell into an uneasy, short-lived relationship with the French novelist — and virulent

anti-Semite — Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Nevelson rejected his marriage proposal. In New York, she studied the eurythmic elements of dance with Ellen Kearns and attended the late career performances of Isadora Duncan. Later, she befriended painters Diego Rivera and Frieda Kahlo; a short visit to Mexico led to an interest in Mayan aesthetics.



Louise Nevelson, "For Dance Design" (1937), graphite pencil on paper, sheet: 9 1/4 × 17 1/4 inches (image courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art)

Though art-making remained a constant presence, her resources were inconsistent. Her family in Maine helped a good deal, and for a time, she was saved by teaching work offered through the Works Progress Administration. She found relative security soon after a critically acclaimed solo show of her sculpture at the prestigious Nierendorf Gallery on East 57th Street.

In her memoir *Dawns and Dusks*, she says, that, starting in the 1940s, sculpture "gave [her] the feeling that there was a subterranean world, even if it was a dreamworld, where those bodies had a life of their own." That dreamworld informs the strongest drawings in *The Face in the Moon*.

Working exclusively in grayscale and black-and-white, Nevelson's midcareer drawings and prints surpass figuration even as they retain vestiges of the human. "The Garden" (1951) features glyph-like forms etched inside a gray grid. The overall composition resembles a tablet of ancient runes and a circuit board — thin ghosts within her fine machine.

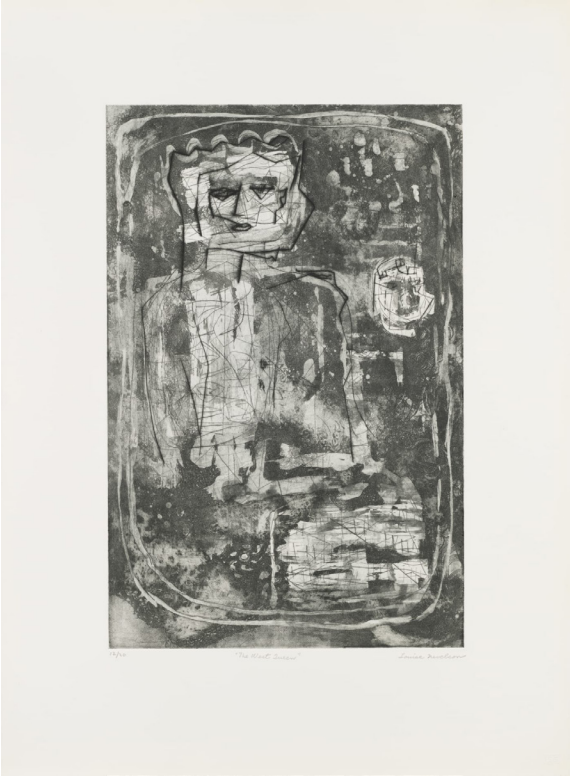
Other drawings and prints are not as conceptual and instead rely on organic, free-flowing imagery. *The Magic Garden* series (1953-1955) features a black-and-white female figure whose embodied form floats in divided segments against a black backdrop. The hallucinatory dismemberment also suggests a curious resurrection, or psychic revelation through breakdown.

Of all these fantastic images, "The West Queen" (1963) is unquestionably the exhibition's centerpiece. While its regal title might be Nevelson's sly autobiographical nod to her self-professed status as the monarch in her own expansive artistic domain, the picture's force comes from its penetrating mythic textures, as distanced from history as a sphinx.

The figure's cubist head and ethereal torso seem excavated from desert sand. Inspected more closely, the royal figure appears preserved under a glass plate pockmarked by centuries

of scratches, additional outlines, and over-drawing. “The West Queen” speaks to both the ancient and the immediate with unnerving force.

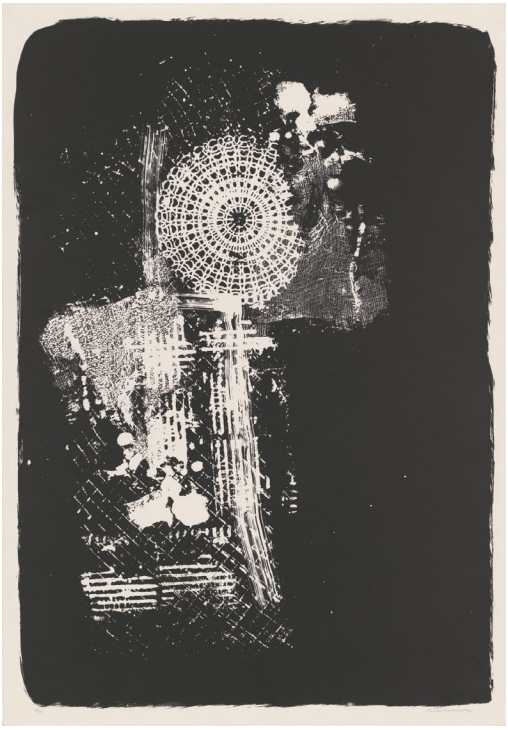
Many of Nevelson’s drawings imitate, in the planes of that two-dimensional medium, the way that her sculptural assemblages create a sense of integrated elegance out of bric-a-brac material. In an untitled black-and-white lithograph from the 1960s, a random lace medallion seems almost like a circular saw as its fine radiating edges collide with and shatter against the edges of other patterned fabrics and meshwork. Yet instead of forming an obtuse mélange, the torn and tattered fabrics shimmer like a constellation against the picture’s black backdrop. This is drawing exceeding its very genre; the overall abstract skeletal pattern is clearly a nod to kinetic sculpture and the viscous threads, fissures and dots summon the spontaneous glory of post-Pollock action painting.



Louise Nevelson, “The West Queen” (1953-1955, printed 1965-1966), etching, aquatint, and drypoint, sheet: 29 7/8 × 22 inches, plate: 20 3/4 × 13 5/8 inches (image courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art)

By the 1970s, the dynamism and poetic reveries yield to a sparer, but no less intense formalism, exemplified by Nevelson’s rectilinear collages in which thick, orderly brown and black borders draw the viewer’s gaze deeper into miniaturized, highly geometric patterns, some formed from colored embossed paper and bright foil. These inner perpendiculars and stacked squares parallel the woodwork-and-metal assemblages made from warehouse crates and discarded tools and furnishings that dominated the artist’s final years.

Perhaps most affectingly, these late period collages speak to Nevelson’s premise, stated in the opening of the film *Louise Nevelson: Awareness in the Fourth Dimension*, that the materials and medium of art reflect on “how we [as human beings] are made and put together — the rest [art] is an extension [...] the livingness of life.”



Louise Nevelson, "Untitled" (1963), lithograph, sheet: 34 × 23 9/16 inches (image courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art)

This "extension," afforded through art, might be that fourth dimension that she referencess. The materials and the body of the artist cooperate toward an intensification that can best be thought of as ontological — art as a eurythmic, responsive mode of being alive. In this regard, the regal Nevelson, the self-professed "grandmother of environments," might have also been leveling hierarchies, including those between the gestures involved in art-making and the concentrated motions of any focused physical labor. After all, in that fourth dimension, consciousness and its found objects — other bodies, the natural world, and cultural detritus — cannot be separated. "We are a composite," Nevelson declares, "of everything we are aware of."

It is this hyper-consciousness synthesized to receptive motion that she pursues, in drawing as much as in making sculpture. In those insightful late career interviews, she links that commitment to an ethics around authenticity, that existentialist challenge which her work answers affirmatively on her behalf. "How many people on earth face themselves anyway?" she asks, "How many dare to look in the mirror and say they have lived according to their own being?"

The Face in the Moon: Drawings and Prints by Louise Nevelson, *curated by Clémence White, continues at the Whitney Museum of American Art (99 Gansevoort Street, Manhattan) through October 8.*