ARTnews

Louise Nevelson Exhibition Alights in Venice, 60 Years After the Iconic Artist Represented the U.S. at the Biennale

By Sarah Douglas
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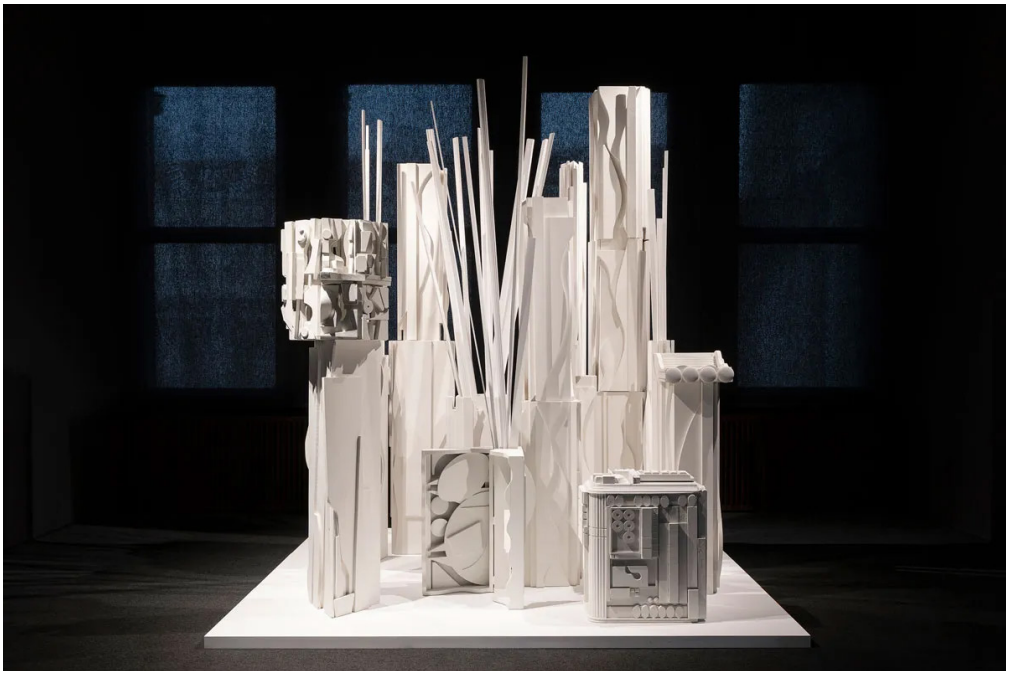

Installation view of "Louise Nevelson: Persistence," 2022, at Procuratie Vecchie, Venice.

Currently, all around Venice during the Biennale—plastered on walls, on the sides of water buses as they float down the Grand Canal—is a commanding photograph.

In it, the artist Louise Nevelson, imperious, gazes out implacably through her signature heavy-lashed, smoky eyes. Standing in front of one of her sculptures, Nevelson wears a riding cap, an intricate brocade vest, and a silk shirt.

Pace Gallery's founder Arne Glimcher commissioned this portrait of Nevelson, whom he has long represented, from photographer Lynn Gilbert in 1976. As Gilbert has recalled, Nevelson refused to take off her riding cap. The artist's sense of independence so struck Gilbert that she ended up doing an entire series of powerful women of the time, including Susan Sontag and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Gilbert's image of Nevelson has become something of a symbol for this year's Biennale, which, for the first time in the event's 127-year history, consists of over 90 percent of artists identify as female or gender-nonconforming.

Artistic director Cecelia Alemani has included a large sculpture by Nevelson in the Biennale, but the posters are for a different exhibition: A survey of more than 60 works by Nevelson in the Procuratie Vecchie, a building on St. Mark's Square parts of which are being opened to the public for the first time in the 500 years since it was built. (David Chipperfield Architects has done an interior renovation.)

The setting is a fitting one for Nevelson: at once old and new, stately and determinedly modern. Nevelson, who died in 1988 year at age 89, was known as a force of nature: an immigrant from Ukraine whose family fled to the United States when she was five years old. She grew into a woman whose artistic ambitions led her to make imposing wood sculptures and lead a fiercely independent life in New York.

The exhibition at the Procurataie, curated by art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson, celebrates the 60th anniversary of Nevelson representing the United States at the 1962 Venice Biennale. Bryan-Wilson is also at work on a monograph on Nevelson, forthcoming from Yale University Press, that aims to bring the focus more squarely onto Nevelson's work rather than her myth.

To learn more about the exhibition and why Nevelson continues to be relevant, *ARTnews* spoke with Bryan-Wilson and Glimcher by Zoom.

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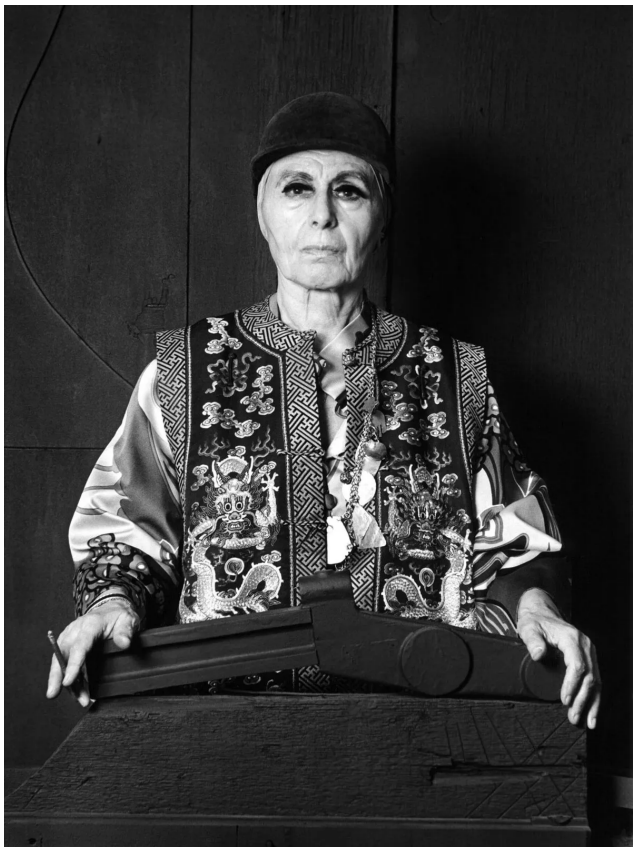
ARTnews: Arne, you and Nevelson did an interview in 1977 with historian Barbaralee Diamonstein. At a certain point in the interview, Nevelson says: "Years ago, in New York, someone said to me, 'What are you going to do when you find out that maybe you're a fourth-rate artist?' Well, who's to judge? As far as I'm concerned, I'm an artist and I wanted to live my life that way and I had the courage not to permit—I didn't give

anyone the right to superimpose on what I felt. I claimed my life. I still do. No one is living for me. No one is suffering for me. No one is supporting me. And I think the first thing you should do is stand up on your own two feet and look in the mirror and like yourself and say, 'Sure, this is my life and I'm going to live it.'"

Arne Glimcher: Oh, that's wonderful. It tells you who she was.

I want eventually circle back to who she was. But let's start off with this exhibition in Venice.

Julia Bryan-Wilson: The show came together in part as a marker and homage to Nevelson's appearance in the U.S. Pavilion of the Biennale in 1962. It is an attempt to think back to her as a proto-installation artist, someone who really was interested in a truly immersive viewing experience.



Lynn Gilbert's 1976 portrait of Louise Nevelson. ©Lynn Gilbert

We hear a lot about immersive art experience these days.

Bryan-Wilson: And she really was one of the pioneers of that. Really thinking about lighting, about tone and mood—not just of a single work, but of the entire room. For the U.S. Pavilion in 1962, she used work that happened to already be in Italy for a different show, and she remade it on the spot. She often cannibalized her own work. Her legacy really is about assemblage, and the show tells a story of her interest in juxtaposition: unlikely materials conjoining, bringing things together that are very unlike, but unifying them through a compositional process. She was always making and remaking and being dissatisfied with something, and turning it into something else. She built her whole career with that.

Glimcher: In 1960 she had a wonderful show with a gallery in Paris, and that show was supposed to travel to two or three museums. The United States agency that was funding the pavilion had no money it in 1962. At the last minute they found money, and Dorothy Miller curated the pavilion. Nevelson was one of her favorite artists and they were great friends. So they commandeered the Paris exhibition when it was en route to another museum. But when Nevelson got to the pavilion and the artworks were installed there, they didn't work in the space. So she took them apart created new works out of that.

Something that always strikes me about Nevelson is just how big some of the work

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was. Monumental. It was unusual for a woman at the time.

Bryan-Wilson: She played with scale in all kinds of ways, and she was super fearless about occupying space, and about making things big. The sexism she had to face and the persistence that she had in opposition to all that was remarkable.

Glimcher: When she had her first exhibition in New York, in 1941, there was a review in one of the New York newspapers that said something along the lines of: We would have hailed this artist as a new master. And then we found out that the artist was a woman.

I recall reading that in 1945, she bought this townhouse in New York's Midtown to use as a home and studio, using money from her parents' estate. To finance fixing it up she got a loan from an art dealer who hadn't sold any of her work but nevertheless loaned her money.

Glimcher: She didn't sell anything until the late 1950s. She made art for 40 years without selling a single work.

It was at the 1962 Biennale that she met Giacometti, who won the Golden Lion award that year.

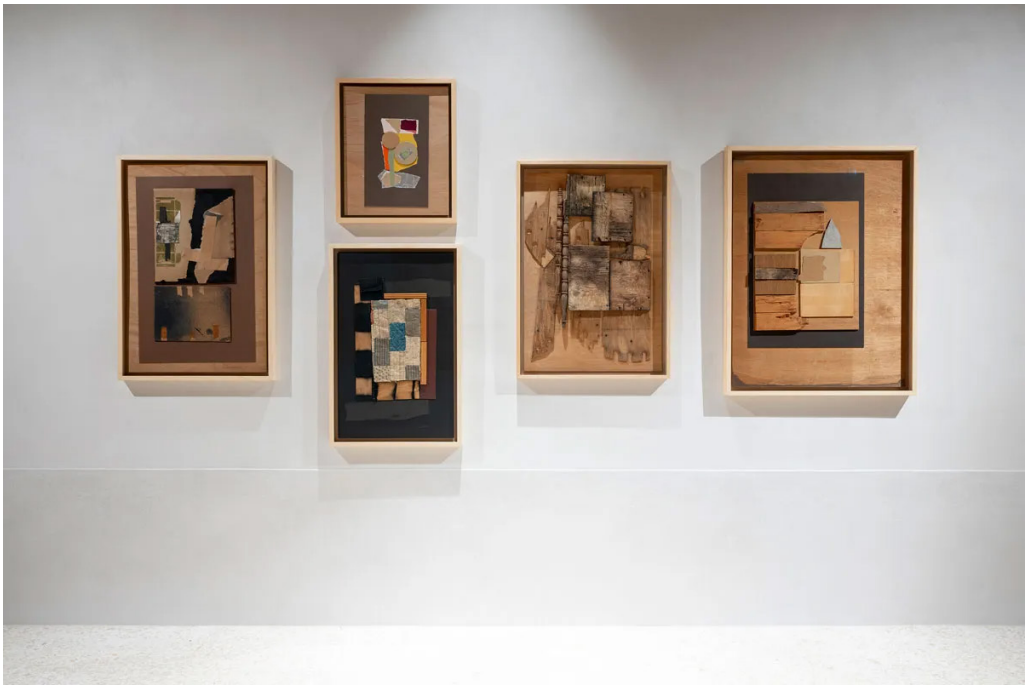
Glimcher: Giacometti actually said to her, "You should have won the prize, not me." It was a very radical show, what she did in the U.S. Pavilion. In America, the whole idea of installation art—which she called environments—didn't exist before Nevelson. And I think that she often does not get credit for that. It was a very profound move in the history of art.

Julia, do you think her Venice Pavilion in 1962 gets overshadowed by the 1964, of

Robert Rauschenberg?

Bryan-Wilson: Absolutely. Nevelson's show had mixed reviews in its own moment. Her work always had very mixed critical responses. But I think that Arne is exactly right. The radicality of the move was not absorbed in its own moment. It could not be appreciated then. The density of the visual environment read as cluttered or obsessive. It was very gendered, a lot of very sexist responses like, "Oh, she's just a compulsive hoarder," or whatever.

Arne, you showed Nevelson at your very first gallery, in Boston, in 1961, the year after you opened.



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Glimcher: Yes. And she invited me to the Biennale in '62. I was 22 years old. She and another friend of mine, an incredible woman who ran the Hanover gallery in London, they sort of shepherded me around. I got invited to all kinds of things with them that I never would have otherwise. It was during that trip to the Biennale that Louise left Martha Jackson gallery in New York for [Sidney] Janis. She could not resist the opportunity to show with the Abstract Expressionist painters. And Janis had never represented a woman artist before. Meanwhile, I was thinking that eventually I would open a gallery in New York. I remember sitting at a party for Louise on a rooftop during the Biennale. Sidney Janis was there. And Louise looked at me and she said, "Don't worry, I will be with you [in New York]." And I don't mean this as an ego thing, but she added, "And you will be king of the world."

She was a strong-willed person, obviously, and a lot of that must have come from her resilience early in her life. Julia, can you tell me more about her early years?

Bryan-Wilson: I've actually been to where she was born near Kyiv. I went in 2019 when I was finishing my book on her. It's a small village about 60 miles from Kyiv, and it is listed in a shtetl finder. It had a heavy Jewish population. She actually was neighbors with Sholem Aleichem, whose writings were adapted for *Fiddler on the Roof*. He was a friend of her family. It was a quite legendary Jewish creative atmosphere. Woodworking ran in her family for several generations. They emigrated because of the pogroms, because of anti-Jewish sentiment. Her dad went first to Maine. He settled in Rockland and the rest of the family joined him after that. He had a lumberyard.

Glimcher: They were refugees. Jewish people didn't live in the city. They were not allowed to. It wasn't allowed in Moscow, either. My paternal grandfather died in the pogrom. My mother came to this country about a year after Nevelson—the two of them didn't know each other back then, but they got to know each other very well, and their origins were so similar that they became the best of friends, and traveled all over the world together.

Bryan-Wilson: Her family spoke Yiddish at home. That was her first language. People often were confused by her accent, a Yiddish Ukrainian accent filtered through Maine.

Glimcher: She and I kept our Yiddish going during her lifetime.

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Her collages, which are included in this exhibition in Venice, and which she began making in the mid-'50s, are maybe a lesser known part of her work.

Bryan-Wilson: There's about two dozen of them in the show, and some of them really blur the line between collage and assemblage, and include all kinds of things, like pressed metal scraps, scraps of paper that she would spray paint on. They are really eclectic in terms of their materiality. She was so canny about textures and textural

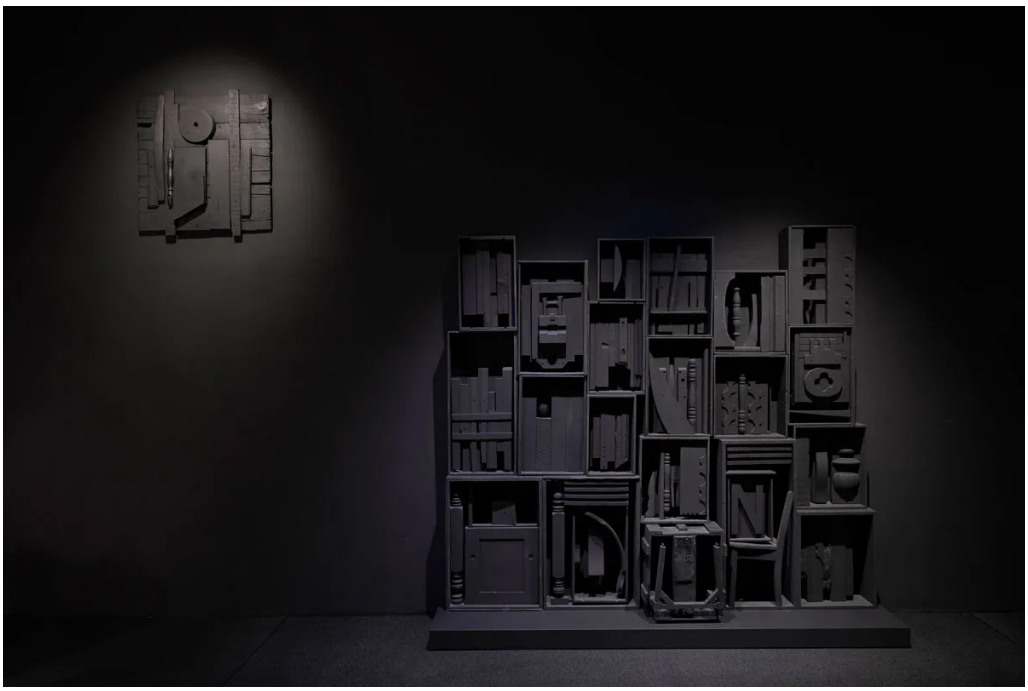
contrast. There are ones with recognizable domestic objects like a bed frame or a broom.

Glimcher: They have a real dimensionality. Some come out two feet-plus into the room. There are old oil cans and objects that are rusting, and they're quite spectacular.

The current exhibition in Venice includes pieces in black, gold and white—but mostly black.

Bryan-Wilson: The majority of them are black. She had a profound allegiance to the color black, and she had all kinds of statements about it. She had a theory of blackness as encompassing all colors. It was a really affirmative theory of blackness. It was all about plenitude. It was all about richness, reality, majesty. It was something that dignified material. You could dignify garbage and that's literally what she was doing.

Glimcher: She often said to me, "Black is the most elegant of colors." She had a piece in gold, and once somebody said to her, looking at where a toilet seat was part of the assemblage, "Is that a toilet seat?" And Louise said, "Is the halo around the Madonna a toilet seat?" She was spinning straw into gold.
So, why Nevelson now? I mean, aside from the 60th anniversary of her U.S. Pavilion, what is important and relevant about her right now? Whether that's to the times we live or to artists who are working today?



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Bryan-Wilson: First of all, I think she as a woman artist who persevered in the face of so many obstacles—sexism and ageism and as a refugee and immigrant. And a Jewish woman who took to scavenging for found objects. She has just been so undervalued and so under-recognized. People are very interested in her life, and I understand why—she was a big personality. She had all these eccentricities, so there have been

quite a few biographies. But I also think that we really need to focus on her artistic achievements, which were many. You look back at the '62 U.S. Pavilion and you realize, Oh, here's someone who has really been setting the pace in a lot of ways around conditions of spectatorship.

Glimcher: Her use of materials is what was so prescient. You see some young artists today that use materials in a similar way. I think her influence, like Rauschenberg's, is felt every day. Louise was one of the most famous people in the world during her lifetime. No one had ever heard of Louise Bourgeois. Nevelson was the star. She was as famous—or more famous—than Andy Warhol. You couldn't walk down the street with her without people asking for her autograph. Her persona was so enormous. When she died, the lights went out for a period of time. She died at a time when the feminist movement was becoming more and more pronounced, and her work didn't necessarily speak to feminism. When I was young—and this is a confession—I saw her work for the first time in the Museum of Modern Art. I was in high school and I was just knocked for a loop by this black wall piece. I looked down at the label, and I thought, Wow, this *Louis* Nevelson is really something. And for years, I thought she was a man. The work was muscular. It was huge. Who thought a woman could have made it? That was not a time that there were women architects who were famous. It was a very different period, and I carried the prejudices of my generation with that thinking.

Bryan-Wilson: Her work is commanding. Arne's word for it, "muscular," is one that I also use. Her work took up space.

Glimcher: And she dressed in a very special way. She introduced this way of collage dressing that became de rigueur in the second half of the 20th century.

Maybe we need to resurrect Louise Nevelson as a style icon.

Bryan-Wilson: She needs no resurrection.