

Louise Nevelson: Light & Shadow

Excerpt: Chapter 14

In the first months of 1969 Louise began to prepare for an upcoming exhibition that spring, *Recent Wood Sculptures* at Pace Gallery. As the Pace show approached, Nevelson finally tackled the ground-floor studio she had been avoiding for almost a year. It was the room she traditionally used for large-scale work. For months she had been opening the door, taking a look at the accumulation and shutting it quickly saying, “No, no, not today.” Having claimed a few months earlier that she would not do any more large walls, she proceeded to make her longest one yet, *Nightsphere-Light*, and included it in the Pace show.

The huge piece (forty-eight feet wide by eight and a half feet high and eleven inches deep), which had its own room in the gallery, was set up in a gigantic arc against three walls and lit with a mysterious blue light. The Pace catalogue placed Nevelson’s words from an interview (done two decades earlier) next to the illustration of *Nightsphere-Light*: “There are laws that we have to concede are standing in step with our time. Since we have them, I use them: light and dark, day and night, time and space. Maybe fifty thousand years from now they will not be needed. They are apparently necessary at our present time of evolution. I don’t say they’re the ultimate. They may be, but I don’t think they are.”

Every one of the twenty-four new, black-painted wood sculptures in the show was sold. The Lipmans bought *Nightsphere-Light*—one masterpiece from a year of many masterpieces—and gave it to the Juilliard School to be installed in the lobby of the Juilliard theater at Lincoln Center. It takes up the entire west wall of the lobby’s upper tier, for which it seems to have been specifically designed.

The president of Juilliard observed that *Nightsphere-Light* was musical “in that its rhythmical forms express variations on a major theme.” In her 1982 book on Nevelson, Jean Lipman introduced photographs of the Juilliard wall with a Nevelson quote: “I use action and counteraction, like in music, all the time. Action and counteraction.” After the work was installed in her characteristic debunking manner, Nevelson remarked: “I don’t have any ideas about its being musical. Everything that I understand about the basic things of life has gone into it.” However, as anyone with a sense of rhythm or melody can see, the composition is undeniably musical. The contrapuntal themes and variations combine baroque and classical musical styles, and are composed of shapes that echo silhouettes of musical instruments. Formal reversals of figure and ground shimmer across

the length and breadth of the work—sometimes they are phantom undulating female shapes. They can also be jagged triangular teeth, which sharpen the eye’s journey across what would otherwise have been a sensuous sweep across the long rectangular wall. James Mellow, writing in *Art International*, refers to *Nightsphere-Light* as “a marvelous orchestration of forms...a beautiful piece of night-music; handsomely proportioned, calm, complex within its ordered simplicity.” John Gruen, writing in New York magazine, compared Nevelson’s new works to the organ music of Bach: “Both are brilliantly contrapuntal, both are based on elaborate architectonic concepts of abstract form, both are imbued by a dark, austere lyricism, and both are nourished by strong spiritual beliefs...Her works have an intense residual of sound in them.”

In her book on Nevelson, Jean Lipman pairs the illustration of *Night-Focus-Dawn* with the artist’s words: “Art is as alive as our breathing, as our own lives, but it’s more ordered.” It was a happy choice of words. The sculpture seems to breathe, and yet it is highly structured. The energy comes from the subtle variations that range across the four rows of boxes, which seemingly contain identical elements—two or three long, thin triangular wedges on top of a rectangular slab of wood. At one corner of each box is a large triangular wedge whose long curve frames the composition inside the box. The pattern created by the large wedges is almost hypnotic and carries the eye along akin to the sweeping power of a rhythmic musical line.

With her two most musically attuned works—*Night-Focus-Dawn* and *Nightsphere-Light*—Nevelson had carried the somber promise of *Silent Shadow* and *Dark Sky* to new heights, depths—and lengths. Though these works were done at about the same time, they are vastly different in feel, yet most critics saw their essential musicality.

No matter whether they praised or panned her, the critics concurred on one aspect of Nevelson’s career: whatever she created was uniquely her own. She was the grand mistress of transformation. She could take the bric-a-brac detritus of civilization and make it look fresh and vital. Just as easily, she could take freshly cut wood bits and make them look timeless. She could be an artist straight out of the romantic and highly subjective abstract expressionists or an emerging figure of the new technologically taut Minimalists. She was always herself, never just one of a group.

Excerpted from Louise Nevelson: Light and Shadow, by Laurie Wilson

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