LOUISE NEVELSON

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COLLAGES

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ESSAY BY JUDITH STEIN

Locks GALLERY

600 Washington Square South Philadelphia, PA. 19106 215.629.1000 Fax 215.629.3868

LOUISE NEVELSON'S COLLAGES

The workman on his stuff his skill doth show, And yet the stuff gives not the man his skill.

- Sir John Davies (1569-1626)

I enjoy the fact that a woman artist in America can collect wooden scraps from the street, put them together, and sell them to the Rockefellers for \$100,000.

- Louise Nevelson, 1969

There are a few people for whom life and art merge seamlessly. Such a person was Louise Nevelson. The woman who came to prominence in the fifties with her signature black-painted assemblages, later gloried in wearing a cut-velvet gown that Arnold Scaasi designed for her, replete with Nevelsonian patterns in black. She was as conscious of the shadowy drama of her multiple false evelashes as she was of the dappled recesses of her box modules. She fashioned a wall installation and assembled an outfit with the same fearless energy and aplomb. At the opening of her 1967 retrospective at the Whitney Museum, for example, she concocted a dynamic ensemble of Japanese purple tapestries, an embroidered peasant blouse, and Mexican ruffled skirt, which she topped with a headdress crafted from a turquoise damask napkin.

"I'm what you call a real collage," she told a listener in 1975. On another occasion she reflected: "I love to put things together. I've come to recognize that the way I think is collage." The aptness of the analogy takes on an additional dimension in the view of her longtime dealer Arnold Glimcher: "Through discarding facts, and rearranging chronology, the collage of her life takes form much like the construction of one of her sculptures."

For those who think of Louise Nevelson solely as the creator of monumental, monotoned forms-- "the queen of black black," to quote an evocative phrase in a poem she once wrote--the existence of a body of intimately-scaled, colorful collages may come as a surprise. Too, they often include such seemingly uncharacteristic materials as quilt segments and lace patterns. Yet these previously unexhibited collages embody the essential Nevelson, directly expressing the particular logic and unity of her life and art.

Born Leah Berliawsky in a town 50 miles southeast of Kiev in 1899, Louise Nevelson spoke Yiddish as her first language. The great Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem had a sister who lived next door to the Berliawskys. When the author saw the neighbor's new baby girl Leah on one visit, he was moved to pronounce that she was born for greatness. It was a prophesy her mother often recounted as the future sculptor grew into girlhood. When Louise was five, the family emigrated to Rockland, Maine. Interestingly, one of the only memories that Nevelson retained of her Russian childhood was the vivid image of her grandmother dyeing bright skeins of wool.

Louise's mother had a marked flair for clothing, and jolted the staid streets of Rockland with her fashionable ensembles for herself and her daughters. By the time she was in high school, Louise was improvising her own creations, and trimming hats with handmade ornaments. Her lifelong freedom from conventional dress codes was embraced by age fourteen. As she was growing up, one of the ways her impoverished father supported his family was as a junk dealer who scavenged at the city dump and solicited recyclables door-to-door. Although this humble, immigrant occupation was a source of embarrassment to Nevelson as a young girl, it nonetheless imparted a valuable lesson. People discarded

things that had worth, if you knew what to do with them. The raw materials of art could be anywhere. Nevelson's friend, Los Angeles-based artist June Wayne recalls visiting with Louise in New York during the sixties or seventies. On one occasion, when they walked to a classy restaurant for lunch, Louise poked into piles of refuse on the street and chanced upon a wooden shipping crate that reeked of garlic. When they reached their destination, Louise handed this cherished find to the checkroom attendant, who accepted the odorous object with reverence. They knew their customers.

Nevelson particularly loved fabrics, stuffs of all kinds. She attended auctions and perused secondhand and thrift shops, panning beaded bags, ethnic weaving, lace, crochet and embroideries. In 1971 she told Glimcher that "a white lace curtain on the window was for me as important as a great work of art. This gossamer quality, the reflection, the form, the movement, I learned more about art from that than in school."

The artist commandeered anything pliable for her own garments. In the twenties, as a young matron, she made a dickie out of a napkin. In the thirties, as a single woman, she might attend a party wearing a burlap bag, an artfully draped tablecloth, or a dyed sheet adorned with lace and cinched with a ribbon. Woven fibers held a great power for her. In her late twenties, she was able to pull herself out of a debilitating depression after contemplating a selection of sumptuous Chinese robes then on view at New York's Metropolitan Museum.

Nevelson pressed cloth into the service of her art. In the early fifties, when she worked at Atelier 17, the New York printmaking studio founded by Stanley William Hayter, she devised innovative prints by etching lace and textured rags into copper plates. A decade later, when she arrived in Los Angeles to do a stint at the Tamarind

Lithography Workshop at the invitation of founder June Wayne, she arrived prepared with paper doilies and lace, which she subsequently utilized in her lithographs. In 1980, Wayne made a group of "portrait" prints called *Shortcuts*, dedicated to her friends and using real objects to recreate each personality. For the one in honor of Nevelson, Wayne used false eyelashes and a lace doily in the composition.

Nevelson's small collages of the seventies and eighties do not reflect the notable shifts in her mature work as a sculptor. Although she periodically refreshed and redefined her signature style by changing her all-over color from black to white or gold, and by expanding her materials to include plastics and cor-ten steel, the collages espouse a separate logic. Flatter and more minimal than her more densely-worked walls, the collages were never painted in one unifying color, an option that would have erased the materials' complexions and evidence of wear. In these intimate works, Nevelson let the tones of the original materials speak for themselves. Typically, their plywood backings were fully integrated into the composition.

She had a great eye for visual puns, and often found cardboard components that matched the coloration of these wooden supports. Surely she savored the profusion of woodgrain qua woodgrain, mindful that Picasso and Braque, the founding fathers of collage, had used imitation woodgrain in their earliest Cubistpapier colle compositions. Nevelson's collages gave their components space to be themselves, thereby underscoring their unique materiality. While some of her recycled elements offer visual clues about their origins, others leave the riddle of their first lives unsolved.

In one 1980 untitled collage, a rectangle of electric pink sings out vibrantly in counterpoint to the quiet grey of

adjacent weathered wood shards. We don't normally associate Nevelson with such hot colors. Nonetheless, its presence is quintessential Louise. A lifelong fashion sophisticate, the artist undoubtedly was familiar with French haute couture designer Elsa Schiaparelli's shocking pink creations that date from the thirties. Indeed, sculptor Dorothy Dehner remembered seeing her friend at a New York meeting of Paris expatriates in the mid thirties, when Louise made an entrance wearing a large bright-pink hat and matching ensemble.

Piggy-backing on the work of some thrifty feminine forebears, the artist incorporated substantial fragments of vintage quilts in several small works. Tantamount to found collages, these richly referential textiles encapsule the passage of time in their faded and worn cotton patchwork. In the hands of the savvy Nevelson, their presence in her collages alludes as much to Robert Rauschenberg's well-known painting *Bed* of 1955, as they do to traditional women's work.

Like the ingenious New Englander that she was, Nevelson knew how to squeeze every possible use out of things at hand. The flip side of a tissue box's oval push-out is integrated into the composition of one untitled collage from 1981-82. Strips of masking tape, abrasive disks, patches of dried glue and rusted metal are ingredients in other collages. Like Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetic protagonist, she could "feed on food the fat of heart despise." Wafer-thin slivers of split cedar veneer are a favored material, as are plywood fragments with splintery deckled edges.

The collages constituted a world parallel to her better known assemblages, yet contain broad hints about the creative procedures entailed in the signature work. For example, before assembling her large-scale scrap-wood sculptures, their component parts were laid down on expendable newsprint and sprayed black. One visually compelling byproduct was the newspaper used as a dropcloth, inadvertently ornamented with negative shapes outlined in black. Snippets of these stencil-like shapes turn up in several of Nevelson's collages, as if she were commenting on her own artistic process by literally and figuratively transforming a negative into a positive.

The artist's somewhat mischievous waste not/want not sensibility encompassed her work as a printmaker as well, and fragments of her own prints turn up as design elements in the collages. She was particularly fond of the nubby-textured, Indian red passages of some of the prints she had made at Tamarind. In one collage of 1980, she artfully cut and tore an etching of a wheel-like doily, giving the image center stage.

Obliquely referencing other spheres of her creative life, Nevelson included the circular corporate seal of Iron Crystal Films in several collages. In the early seventies, she and her friend and assistant Diana MacKown had established Iron Crystal Films, under whose auspices Diana had produced a 28 minute film about the artist entitled *Geometry and Magic*. Circles figure in the collages in other ways as well. In Series of an Unknown Cosmos LXX, 1979, a corrugated cardboard disk reads for all the world like the distressed surface of a bronze ball by the sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro, a friend of hers.

During the decades she produced collages, Nevelson lived on Spring Street in lower Manhattan, in three connected, multi-storeyed buildings. According to Diana MacKown, Nevelson worked on the collages more in the domestic quarters than in the studio sections. MacKown recalls that "They didn't take as much room as the larger pieces, on which she worked concurrently, and were easy to move around." Occasionally

Nevelson might work on collages while away from the city, as she did during the mid-seventies when she and Diana rented a house in Stonypoint, New York for three years.

In MacKown's description, the artist would do the arranging of the small parts of the collages while in the country, and then these unfinished works might be brought back to town and glued down all at once, with heavy lead weights laid on them as they dried, to anchor the components of different weight and thickness. Nevelson would have the plywood supports specially cut. Commenting on Nevelson's process of working on many collages at a time, MacKown notes: "She was a multiple lady. It was the way she thought. She liked the energy of doing a great deal of things at once so that they would burst forth into being." In the book published in conjunction with her 1980 Whitney Museum exhibition, there are three photos of Nevelson at work on her small collages, with more than a dozen in progress before her on the work table.

The old saw that holds materialist concerns as antithetical to spiritual values was invalid as far as Nevelson was concerned. Her jubilant materialism nourished her soul. A visual egalitarian, she took delight in finely-wrought objects, and reveled in the beauty and potential of the humblest found materials. In her collages, Nevelson transformed scavenged scraps into art. These collages, created during the artist's eighth and ninth decades of life, directly express her world view: "I feel that what people call by the word scavenger is really a resurrection. When you do things this way, you're really bringing them to life. You know that you nursed them and you enhance them, you tap them and you hammer them, and you know you have given them an ultimate life, a spiritual life that surpasses the life they were created for."

For previously unpublished information regarding Nevelson cited in this essay, I gratefully acknowledge the input of June Wayne and Diana MacKown, with whom I spoke by phone on July 16,1997. For Nevelson's biographical data and direct quotations I consulted Laurie Lisle's Louise Nevelson, A Passionate Life, 1990, Arnold B. Glimcher's Louise Nevelson, 1972, Louise Nevelson, Atmospheres and Environments, 1980, Robert Hughes' "Sculpture's Queen Bee," Time, Jan. 12, 1981, and Jean Lipman's Nevelson's World, 1983.

Judith E. Stein July, 1997