

WOMEN OF WISDOM
TALKS WITH WOMEN WHO SHAPED OUR TIMES



Louise Nevelson

By Lynn Gilbert
with Gaylen Moore



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Dedication

*To the women of the past, who made a difference,
the women of today who keep the goal of equality aloft,
and the women of tomorrow in whom we entrust our future.*

— Lynn Gilbert



Louise Nevelson in her home, photograph by Lynn Gilbert ©1976, as commissioned by the Pace Gallery, New York City.

Louise Nevelson

(born 1900, Kiev, Russia—died 1988, New York City)
was one of America's most distinguished sculptors, whose work helped to elevate sculpture to a place of prominence in our culture. She is best known for her sculpture "environments" in which she used carved pieces and found objects painted a uniform black. Assembled individually or stacked to form sculptural walls, these pieces, rather than standing in space, contain space. She also made use of new developments in technology to create large free-standing metal sculptures for public spaces.

I THINK BASICALLY the whole thing in my life was that I wanted to see the world with more awareness and more harmony. I've been able to do that almost as much as is human.

I knew that I was gifted because from the day you go to school, your teachers know what you have. At least they did in my school. In Maine, over seventy years ago, they felt I was an artist. They just knew it. Something about me projected it, even as a child, and I knew it. Some people are born a certain way. They really are, no doubt about it. Caruso had a voice when he was born. Well, others had voices but he had the combination. Then he built on it. You have something, then you devote your life to building on it. Now I evidently came from a place, maybe it was the home and the environment and all that. It made me feel like a high-powered engine. I had energy. So it does mean that some of us are born with these constitutions from birth. We're born a certain way.

Then also I think being an artist is a state of mind. There were a great many frustrations in my life, too. But the only thing I can say is that I was looking for harmony and I think my long suit was that I was able to remember things and externalize them. I wanted harmony within myself, so I externalized it in my work.

I never used a yardstick to measure anything. It would embarrass me. If I had to measure this to this and I had to stop to measure it with a yardstick, there would already be a question in my mind. My mind would have already gone through something that I don't want. I know where I want it to be. Consequently, I just knew what I wanted out of life. It wasn't easy but I didn't know you could live another way. I didn't know.

When I was about seventeen or eighteen, it was during World War I, I was the most exciting girl in my whole town. I was already studying voice and dramatics and modern dance. I was captain of the high school basketball team, so I wasn't what you call an academic student, but I was out in front in these things. Well, if you were as active as I, you couldn't be an old maid at the time.

The Nevelson brothers had a shipping firm down on Wall Street in New York and they had ships for the government, for Woodrow Wilson. They were playing a big role in the war. They came to Maine because we had shipyards in Maine. And they came for repairs because their ships had been shot at. Anyway, we got acquainted. I was pretty young. I didn't go out much with boys. I was already pretty mature and I wasn't going to go around with those local kids.

I think I was caught. I never solved it but I knew that when the older Mr. Nevelson said his younger brother was coming up, I smelled that they were already figuring things out, and so was I. I had told my mother I wasn't going to get married because I was going to go to Pratt Art Institute in New York and that I'd be an artist. I wanted to go there so I could teach art and be self-supporting. Then I got a phone call, "Mr. Nevelson is coming." Before he even came I said, "You know, Mother, Mr. Nevelson is coming and he's going to propose to me this evening and I'm accepting him." I don't think the poor woman knew what I was even talking about, but it happened that way. He came and he proposed, and said, "Well, you can still go to art school," and he was very sympathetic with me. I've always thought I just superimposed the whole thing on him. See, you want something badly enough, you can just somehow make it happen.

I made a beeline in my life for art. I went to art school all my life. I went to Europe and studied with Hans Hofmann in 1931 before he came to America. It's like the people who swim in the ocean. There are some who swim and some who drown. I never had any problems. When I came to New York I went to the Art Students League. The first week I was there, they put my drawings on the wall. I had 100-plus wherever I went. There's something about me . . . See, you have to have an awareness of where you want to go, who you want to associate with, then you work toward projecting that.

I was the only American artist that Karl Nierendorf showed in his gallery in the thirties. He said, "Look, Nevelson, with your sensibilities, you'd be great in Paris." That's where Picasso and all the boys, Matisse . . . he knew them all. And I said no. I was brought up in this country, this pioneer country, it's still a young

country, and I like the feeling of being a pioneer in this country, and I am. I think I made some rather good choices. Right along they worked for me. New York was right for me, because I had all this energy.

I didn't go away summer or winter. I happen to like warm weather here so I never went away, I never went to an art colony to stay. I didn't want that because, well, I'd already lived in a very expensive way and they were struggling, and it just didn't fit me. When I first came to New York, if you were an artist you lived in Greenwich Village and you were a bohemian. That meant free. What did you do? You lived down there and you put on a beret. Wasn't that a uniform? That didn't appeal to me. I did it my way, I guess. I didn't want to be part of a community of artists. It didn't interest me.

I dressed like a queen. Even then. I always dressed, and my family always saw that I could have very beautiful clothes. People thought if you looked like that and you already had expensive and gorgeous, expensive clothes and jewelry and everything, how could you use old woods in your work? There probably wasn't one person on earth that understood what I was doing. At the time, you see, the work was different, old wood, nails, mirrors and glass, all the goddam things.

After my first exhibition was over I destroyed all the work I'd done. What else could I do? I didn't have a nickel. I had no place to store it, I never sold anything, so what was I to do? Kill myself? I had no choice at that time. I guess it was nearly forty years ago. I never would ask anyone for anything, so it was a struggle. Anyway, I did destroy them. All I have are a few photos of the work.

It wasn't too long after that that I began showing at Nierendorf. I still struggled. No one knows how much I struggled. The work was all right. I could do that but, yes, there were depressions . . . "At sea, at sea, what can it be that I remain so long at sea?" Yes, but I pulled out. I hunted and found a few notes that have sustained me for the rest of my life.

I had a son. The agonies were economic, guilts about motherhood . . . I think the greatest guilt of all is having children without thinking too much. I was thinking

but we didn't have the Pill. I did everything . . . but I think I was too healthy. And you pay a price. Some of us are not ready to be mothers. I've never been ready. My son is fifty-six and I still feel guilty, but I've done a great deal to overcompensate him for this. I was young. I hadn't had any experience with sex. Well, it was just difficult for me to confront this. I wouldn't and I had a cesarean because I couldn't face it.

The point is that even to this day, who has the courage to really give life to another person? Don't you think that's a great responsibility? People have said to me, "Well, aren't you glad that you were born?" and I'll say, "Well, if I wasn't I wouldn't know the difference."

What I see about humanity makes me a pessimist. But in my work I'm an optimist. Look at humanity, look at what's happening on this earth. I think anyone who takes the attitude that they can do something that will change the world is very naive. For instance, I've taught art. I'll say to my students, "Well, what do you want?" "I want perfection," they say. I say, "Well, who in the hell do you think you are that you can demand perfection?" It's nonexistent anyway.

Words like *ruthless* and *sacrifice* are kind of false judgments. You don't do it that way. When you have labor pains, you don't say, Could I have done it this way or that way? You go into labor. Those words belong to what we call three dimensions. I didn't think like that. Living the way I did . . . see, I broke all the traditions. If I wanted a lover, I had a lover. I didn't have to get married again. So I had courage to live as I understood it. I thought that art was more important than other things. I work for myself. It was only because I had so little confidence in the world that I wanted to build my own world, not the world, my world.

When I found the cube, it stabilized me. I didn't have to flounder. And really it's not fashionable at this moment to give credit to the cube, but having studied metaphysics, and recognizing the cube, it gave me my terra firma because I can understand the cube in space. It has been said that Picasso discovered the cube. Now, if you study metaphysics, it has its own symbols. And the cube is the highest

form that the human being has come to. First in consciousness you have a dot, then you have a line, then you have the square. Then you project it into a cube. That is as far as the human species can go.

So Picasso, maybe without even knowing metaphysics, still was brilliant enough to move into the cube. Beethoven uses the octave and out of those eight notes he makes a world of sound. Now that's harmony. And that's what "environment" meant to me. I don't need eight notes. Give me one or two notes and I can work on it and I'm satisfied. That gives me my structure. There is no limit to those one or two notes, because there's variation on a theme, unlimited variations on a theme. I can go back to the variation of one theme and that's my consciousness. So I stand on the strength of that. Nothing has been able to shake me. I don't think anything could have stopped me from doing my art. I stopped working for a little while and I'd get abscesses and boils, I'd get sick. See, the machinery—if you're a Rolls-Royce, you can't be walking, you've just got to be riding.

I can't say it's possible to do what I've done without going through periods of despair. I only know I drank and I also knew that somewhere when I would come out, it sensitized me. It often gave me a kind of moment of rest. I don't say that you have to drink all the time but I think without it I would have gone off a little crazy. So it was like you'd fall and there was like a clothesline that kind of kept you from going down.

We hear so much about the material and the spiritual, the soul and the body. I do not want to make a division. I feel it's all one. In oriental philosophy, they say there isn't a world, that we project a world. I needed this philosophy to live or I'd kill myself. I don't give a damn if it's right or wrong. It suits me and I like it. That's enough for me.

Now I don't make moral distinctions like this is a lie and this is the truth. If a lie is going to sustain me I will kiss it and welcome it. I read that Napoleon said, "You stoop to conquer." I always felt like a nice American wooden Indian. My knees

wouldn't give. I always thought it would be easier to steal than beg. That's where your pride comes in. So I got a few keys that have been able to sustain me, and helped. Anyone who's in such despair, I'm sure they will hunt for them. Some people go to religion, some to analysis, some to medicine; I don't care what they go to but if they need it, fine. If it will help them, what's the difference?

So, looking back, I saw that I knew what I wanted and I felt that I had the tools to fulfill it. The work I do I've done basically for me. Why? Because I wanted to give meaning to my life. It's the very best way I know how to live my life. How else could I live it?

I live pretty much as I want to. I don't want to have a lot. I've had all kinds of jewelry, I had diamond bracelets before I was twenty. I've had great collections—American Indian pottery, African art. I've tasted of almost everything on earth. It has not changed my life because it all came at a certain time when I was ready. Do you realize how few rich people create? They don't have to. Art is a struggle. I call it a spiritual labor pain.

When I did the series of etchings called *Essences*, I was already in my late seventies. I went to the studio for two weeks. I was just going to make or two etchings. I was so excited I stayed probably a year and made thirty-six editions. And if someone had come and given me the world, I wouldn't have taken it. It was so exciting to me.

I called them *Essences* because I didn't use the technique of drawing, of painting or any technique. First I had the materials. I've used laces for forty years, but it was the weight and the placement that were new. So in other words, my technique had nothing to do with the concept of what has been done in the past with drawing and painting and sculpture.

I feel that the *Essences* are like a breath. Now, darling, we have our body but it's the breath . . . you know, people die because their lungs get filled with water and they can't breathe and that is the end. The *Essences* gave me probably the closest

feeling of where I wanted to go. It's like perfume. Think of what we have to do to get an ounce of perfume. That is what these Essences are to me. They're as close . . . it's almost all consciousness, and you see . . . it's kind of a bouquet to myself. Did I take this breath yesterday or a minute ago? Look. It's a new breath, it's always new, and you do add, from minute to minute, you do add a little more awareness, yes, as long as you live. Otherwise we'll cease living.

In those Essences, I wanted to get a quality, something like ethereal, and I did to a point. Now I want to carry it to a whisper. Because I think a whisper can be stronger, an atom can be stronger than a whole mountain.

Now when you're eighty, no matter how you slice it, things have happened. I'm living my life pretty much as I wanted to. Nevertheless, you know nature is very bright, and when you get to be this age, it plays its part, too. Nature is still a mystery.

I didn't see too much happiness. I lived alone almost my whole adult life. Now that doesn't mean alone. I've always had help around me. But I mean marriage, it's difficult without that. It's a partnership. Of course, one always has friends and the older I got the more interesting friends I had, still have. I really don't regret too much. I've been too busy. It's been constructive, so how can I regret anything? I give myself a 100-plus for the way I've lived my life, the choices I've made, what has come out of it. Every day I've lived I wanted to flower more and more and more.

We don't have everything. I thought my mother was the most beautiful woman on earth but she shouldn't have been married. She was totally misplaced. She used rouge in Rockland, Maine, when no one rouged. She used to wear feather hats when no one wore them. She was misplaced and unhappy. I thought, when I was growing up, with my abilities and appearance and everything, that I should have a place that would suit me. It's like a setting you want. It's the harmony I'm looking for. Well, I never had that. I've never lived in a place that I really want, even now. Now it's too late and I don't want to bother. So I made Mrs. N's Palace. I just projected that and I created my world.



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