Bonnie Bronson: Works 1960–1990

Sipping Rum on the High Meadow

High morning tea on the white rock
While an eagle swooped toward the rock
Flapped once, circled, soared away.
Camp robbers cry across the clearing
While we watch for the return of the eagle or elk.

We wait for the sun to set over chosen stones,
Sipping rum on the high meadow,
Time to take another picture of Jason's rock.
Get more snow, be sure to pick out
The pine needles this time.

Sun setting on the far ridge.
Long since I was a herdsman.
We wait for the sunset with a few mosquitoes,
Rum and a lot of laughter.
When she laughs all the old stories
Make sense. Still waiting for the big elk
Sipping rum on the high meadow.

Lee Kelly
From a backpacking journal,
Salmon River, Idaho, July 1978

Below the high bridge
Over the Dudh Khosi,
We fashion a small leaf boat
And send her ashes to the sea.

Some mornings, now able
To wake up with new memories

Lee Kelly
Khumbu, Nepal, 1997

Bonnie Since 1990

In 2006, my friend Randal Davis came to visit me in Oregon City. I took him around the property—the creek, tree house, fish ponds—and we ended the tour at Lee's studio. This building, a converted dairy barn, was the reason Bonnie and Lee left Portland in 1963—not the acreage or the house. Lee has maintained a sculpture studio on the lower level all these years, and at the time of her death in 1990, Bonnie had a drawing studio and sheet metal shop here.

When I showed Randal around the place sixteen years later, most signs of Bonnie's studio activity had been shuffled into storage in another building—except for one painting, hung high on the wall in her old sheet metal studio.

"Who did that?" he asked.

I looked up at the painting, some eight feet from the floor. It was too high for me to move without help and there it had remained all these years.

"Bonnie. I'm not sure of the date. Middle 1960's, maybe."

Randal looked at the painting for a long time. It was shadowed with metal grit and dust, but even so the uncompromising palette was clean and penetrating. I remember feeling sad that the painting was so alone up there. Randal said, "That painting is completely different from your father's paintings. It's like she came from an entirely different generation." A long pause. "That's a great painting."

I looked closer at the dominant colors, layers of white and brown over black that always felt jarring to me. Another thought came to mind, this time from a wise friend, Adriene Cruz, who once reminded me that beauty is many things, none of them obvious. There it had been all this time, a work of art that pushed back at me, insisting that beauty lived in the uncomfortable moments as well as the easy ones.

So like Bonnie, the woman I knew.

When I thought about writing an essay for this catalogue, I considered starting with the line: "We were often lost together." Bonnie was very dyslexic and through some strange anomaly, I grew up with one dyslexic variant—the inability to tell my left hand from right. My daughter, Lucy, has the same trait. Bonnie's methodology for traveling in the world was one of unshakable faith—we'd get there somehow. The rest of the world was wrong about left and right. All we needed to do was use other words.

I remember being lost with Bonnie in Nepal. We were lost all the time in Kathmandu, on treks, once famously and for hours on the trail to the mountain fortress of Gorkha. I used to ask her how it worked, this getting around thing, when Lee wasn't there with his rock solid certainty about compass points, and magnetic north, and left and right. Bonnie didn't give it any thought, in fact I think she was often very happy when she was lost—"We'll get there. It's not hard. Don't worry."

Not until my daughter was learning to drive did I understand how it worked. Lucy wouldn't allow anyone to use the words 'left' and 'right' when she was in the car. I watched the road with her while her brother, Carter, groaned in the back seat, repeating for the hundredth time: "I don't understand how you can't see it. One hand is left and the other is your other left." Lucy flew by instinct, sensing the place she wanted to be and somehow, bat-like, she found it. Her confidence in the *findability* of the world was so like Bonnie's.

Looking up at Bonnie's painting that day, I recognized it. My mother was alone much of the time, probably never more so than when she made art, but she continued on her path without hesitation. It must have hurt sometimes when her work was left stranded at the high tide line, but she never talked about it; she simply moved on to the next idea once the old ideas were played out. Maybe that was why so much of her artwork never made it into the archive. Once it was done, it was done.

Many people made this retrospective of her work possible: Randal who saw when no one else was looking, Joan Shipley who never forgot, Melody and Mark Teppola who are both here in spirit, Ann and Dave Bronson, Margaret Bronson, Kathy Bronson Dull, Elizabeth Leach, Lee Kelly, Susan Hammer and Bonnie's alma mater, the Pacific Northwest College of Art, who undertook this project with great generosity.

I would like to say it for all of us—Bonnie, we got there.

Kassandra Kelly

Randal Davis

This is not a story

"When one tells a story, there has to be someone to listen; and if the story runs to any length, it is rare for the storyteller not sometimes to be interrupted by his listener. That is why (if you were wondering) in the story which you are about to read (which, is not a story, or if it is, then a bad one) I have introduced a personage who plays as it were the role of listener. I will begin."

Denis Diderot, "This is not a story"[1]

Well, of course, Diderot was right. And wrong. This is how I begin, and it is also how "all of this" began, which is to say a process of investigation and reflection led to this moment. When I first began thinking seriously about Bonnie Bronson's work and developing this project, I had the unshakeable conviction that there was "a story to be told." I thought so then, and I think so now. What has changed though is that the "story" has multiplied, fractured, bifurcated—and so I, too, have become several, both teller and interrupter.

Jacques Derrida, in a note to one of the *envois* of *The Post Card*, describes a similar interruption, the receipt of a "collect call"—the disembodied presence of "voices that I thought I recognized on the other end of the…line, listening to me and watching my reaction."[2] For Derrida, it was the ghost of Heidegger, and he chose not to accept the charges, at least for that call. But that is not to say the obligation was thereby nullified: "On the contrary, the network of my hookups… is on the burdensome side, and more than one switchboard is necessary in order to digest the overload" (21).

My fascination with Bonnie Bronson's work is precisely that it does indeed require more than a single switchboard; a complex "network of hookups" in her work figure key questions about what constitutes modernisms and postmodernisms. A contemporary of Postminimalist artists such as Jennifer Bartlett, Robert Smithson and Richard Tuttle, she brought to her work, like them, an abiding love for the sheer beauty of materials and a fascination with unusual structures and systems—what critic and curator Lucy Lippard famously called "eccentric abstraction." That is, art that "refuse[d] to eschew imagination and the extension of sensuous experience while [also refusing] to sacrifice the solid formal basis demanded of the best in current non-objective art."[3] In so doing, Lippard saw the emergence of an aesthetic proposing the reconciliation of the conflict between "the rigors of structural art" and any "aberrations toward the exotic" (99).

I would say almost exactly that for Bronson, at least of the work from the mid-1970s on. Beneath the superficial eclecticism of a body of work that includes cardboard reliefs, watercolors and drawings as well as her signature enameled steel pieces, a relatively tiny handful of structural devices recur throughout Bronson's work, connecting seemingly unrelated pieces and series.

Foremost in the particular connectivity, and one could almost say continuity, of her work is the grid, a structuration common to both Modernism and Postmodernism. This device first appears in her Abstract Expressionist paintings of the early 1960s and remains visible in the flamboyant coloristic effects of the works made in the last few years of her life. This aspect of Bronson's work recalls Hanna B. Higgins' recent observation that "the persistence of grids demonstrates that once a grid is invented, it never disappears."[4] The history of the grid, Higgins goes on to argue, "is nothing less than "a living history of crafted things–from the handmade object to the World Wide Web… endowed with a most human contradiction: a vigorous free spirit and a propensity to control" (11). And again, it seems to me that Higgins could as well have been writing specifically of Bronson's work.

Recently, in remarking on the development of Brice Marden's work from austere monochromes to its present vivid calligraphy, Ken Johnson asked, "who, back then, would have thought such a lyrical sensualist would eventually emerge from that Minimalist cocoon?"[5] To consider the work of Bonnie Bronson, also a contemporary of Marden, poses an important reinterpretation of that question. Johnson refers, of course, to the changes in Marden's work over several decades, and similar changes can be observed in Bronson's case. But I want here to take Johnson's question, *pace* Lippard on "rigors" and "aberrations," in the sense that John Ashbery remarked on Marden's monochromes, that "rather than reducing the complexities of art to zero, he is performing the infinitely more valuable and interesting operation of showing the complexities hidden in what was thought to be elemental."[6]

1 Denis Diderot, *"This Is Not a Story" and Other Stories*, edited & translated by P.N. Furbank (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1991): 17.

2 Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 21.

3 Lucy Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," *Changing: essays in art criticism* (NY: EP Dutton, 1971): 99. Originally written for an exhibition curated by Lippard at Fischbach Gallery, New York City, in October, 1966, and reprinted in *Art International* X:9 (November 1966).

4 Hanna B. Higgins, *The Grid Book* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009): 4.

5 Ken Johnson, "Brice Marden: 'Letters,' and 'Paintings 1961-1964'" *The New York Times* (12 November 2010): n. pag. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/12/arts/design/12galleries-003.html>.

6 John Ashbery, "Brice Marden," *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957-1987* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989): 213. Originally published in *Art News* (March 1972).

Untitled [black]
1963
Oil on canvas
62 x 52 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

Untitled [cream]
1963
Oil on canvas
48.25 x 47 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

Untitled [sketchbook painting]
1964
Oil on paper
14 x 11 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled [sketchbook painting]
1964
Oil on paper
14 x 11 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled
1965
Oil on metal collage
41.5 x 36 in.
Private collection
Photo: David Browne

For Merge I
Oil & graphite on board
10.5 x 9 in.
Collection Kassandra Kelly
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

For Merge III
Oil & graphite on board
10.5 x 9 in.
Collection Kassandra Kelly
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

Rankin House [detail]
1972
Collaboration with Lee Kelly. Sculptural core of residence, enamel on steel tile. Work subsequently destroyed.
Photo: Lee Kelly & Bonnie Bronson

Untitled [triptych]
1971
Enamel on steel, mounted on wood 3 panels, each 5 x 6 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

"For this is action, this not being sure, this careless
Preparing, sowing the seeds crooked in the furrow,
Making ready to forget, and always coming back
To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago."

John Ashbery, "Soonest Mended"[7]

A work from Bronson's student years is charged with all the feeling of someone ready for change. A large (34 x 22in) charcoal and graphite study of a standing figure, drawn on inexpensive Kraft paper, was nearly completed before being partially eradicated by bold splashes of color, decisively leaving behind the anonymous proficiency of student work. "Action painting" enacted.

It is not so surprising, however, that her works of the early 1960s, and from her first one-person show at Mt. Angel College in 1964, are clearly indebted to Abstract Expressionism. As Bruce Guenther observed, "although Abstract Expressionism was just another style by the late 1950s, it represented a quickening spirit in the air on the West Coast, a new path that gave young artists a footing in avant-garde painting."[8] By that time, Bronson's husband, Lee Kelly, was gaining increasing recognition throughout the Northwest for his abstract painting and polychrome sculptures, both of which were, at that time, also within the idiom of Abstract Expressionism.

One of Bronson's earliest surviving sketchbooks, begun in 1961, features several loosely improvisational renderings of Kelly's sculptures of the period, but a series of small paintings on paper from the same time reveal that Bronson's somewhat precocious mastery of the idiom also took place in terms distinctly different from Kelly's. These small, monochromatic, oil on paper works manifest an awareness of Franz Kline, though less perhaps his paintings than his distinctive studies executed on the pages of discarded telephone books.

Bronson and Kelly's full-scale paintings were rather closer to de Kooning than Pollock, sharing a propensity for distinct forms, often outlined, as in, say, Bronson's earth-toned *Untitled [cream]* (1963) and Kelly's *Innerscape* (1959) or *Gray Blue* (1962). Kelly generally favored a higher-keyed palette, with "roiling surfaces and massing of brushstrokes," Guenther notes, "scumbling veils of pigment [to] build a dense, often opaque surface of condensed forms."

Bronson, for her part, preferred a closely valued palette, relying more on subtle modulations than bold contrasts. In this regard, even these very early works show a characteristic that remained almost constant throughout her work—the exploration of colors, whether vibrant or subdued, within a strictly limited, approaching monochromatic, range, manifesting, as Ashbery put it, "the complexities hidden" in the reductive.

Another, even more telling distinction obtained between Bronson and Kelly at the time: their use of a normative geometry. In Bronson's *Untitled [cream]* (1963), it is not at all hard to see the rectilinear forms, as if the composition is built upon a nascent grid. The smoky and crepuscular ambiance of *Untitled [black]* (1963) might superficially appear a different matter, but it too is rectilinear; divided first vertically and then again on the horizontal, it presents an almost perfectly quadrated image. On the other hand, Kelly's "condensed forms" were typically far less regular and much the more biomorphic. This aspect of Bronson's painting was, of course, prophetic.

7 John Ashbery, *The Double Dream of Spring* (New York: Ecco Press, 1976): 19.

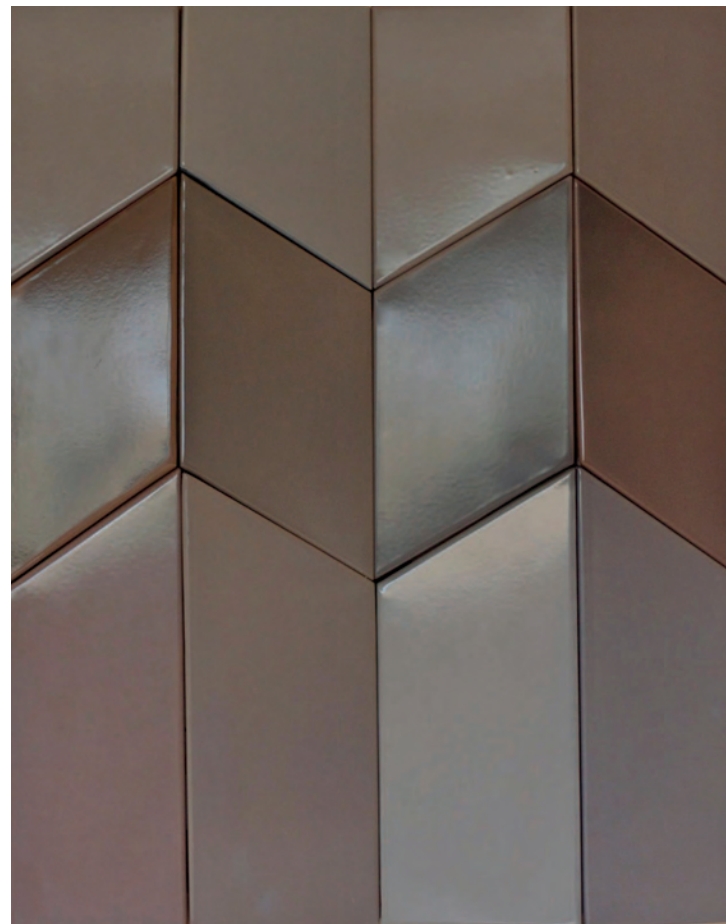
8 Bruce Guenther, "Doubtful Sound / Distant Shore," text for Lee Kelly's *Doubtful Sound* exhibition at Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, 2008. Unpublished, n. pag. See also his *Lee Kelly* (Portland: Portland Art Museum, 2010): 10-13.

Although she did not codify her use of what she called "modulars" until a decade later, with the commissioning of two large pieces by the upscale retailer Nordstrom, a defining, near constant characteristic of her work is its reliance on geometric systems, even if of an idiosyncratic sort.

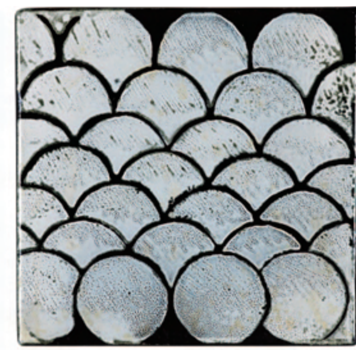
For all their differences though, it is possible to suggest that both Bronson and Kelly had each found themselves at a sort of artistic impasse in the first half of the 1960s. It was surely notable that the circumstances of their lives changed profoundly at this time—their son Jason was born in 1962, joining Kelly's daughter Kassandra (from his first marriage). And, they had settled into their home and studios in North Portland.

During the following year, their home and studios both suffered damage in the Columbus Day storm of 1963 and they decided to relocate. Making what was for the time a conspicuously radical move, they purchased a 5-acre former dairy farm outside of rural Oregon City, some 15 miles southwest of Portland, and they began renovating the large barn, already then in its fifth decade, and outlying buildings to be living and work spaces. They continued to live and work there until Bronson's untimely death in 1990, and Leland Iron Works, named in wry tribute to sculptor David Smith, remains Kelly's primary studio and base of operations.

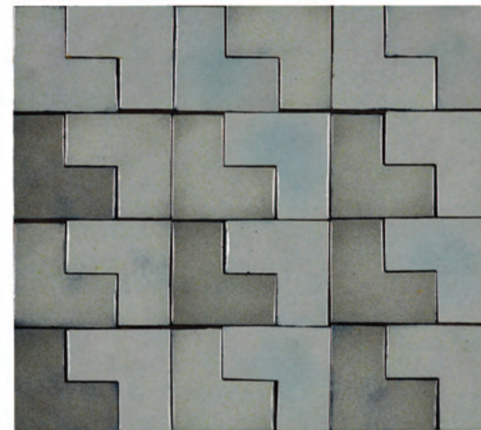
We could drift into that story—of an unusual place and their lives together. "Tell it, then," a listener might say. And, yes, it is a good story, but not the one I will tell. I offer instead a smaller, yet perhaps more resonant story—how Bronson came to abandon the Abstract Expressionist idiom which, until then, had served her well.



Untitled
1974
Enamel on steel
40 x 25 in.
Collection Dave & Ann Bronson
Photo: Dave Bronson



Untitled [black circles]
Enamel on steel
8 x 8 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

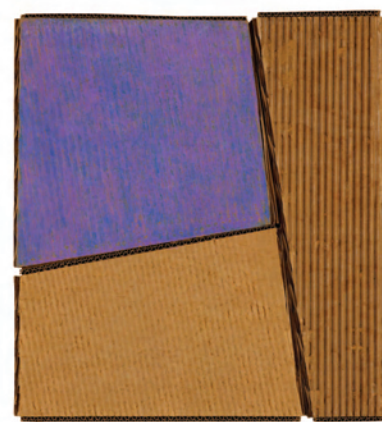


Straight Pattern
1978
Enamel on steel
12 x 13.25 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

Streak o' Lighting
1978
Acrylic & cray-pas on cardboard
19 x 22.5 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

Hooking I
1979
Cray-pas on cardboard
18 x 16 in.
Collection Lucy Stirling
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

Hooking II
1979
Cray-pas on cardboard
18 x 16 in.
Collection Lucy Stirling
Photo: Ben Bright Photography



Seto
1980
Cray-pas on wax paper
11 x 11 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

Jas #3
1979
Acrylic lacquer on etched steel
73 x 134 in.
Collection Mark & Melody Teppola
Photo: David Browne

"Trying to pinpoint the start of cubism…is an illusory undertaking, because cubism is not a reality but rather a concept whose temporal outlines shift with the content imparted to it."

Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, "Periods: Cubism In Its Day"[9]

By the early 1960s, Clement Greenberg found the leading edge of criticism and theory passing over Abstract Expressionism, which "having produced art of major importance… turned into a school, then into a manner, and finally into a set of mannerisms."[10] "Painterly abstraction," Greenberg's preferred term for Abstract Expressionism, was to be succeeded by "Post-Painterly Abstraction," or what was more generally known as color-field painting. By the later 1960s, this development was, we shall see in subsequent parts of this essay, of immense significance to Bronson.

For now, my focus is on the particular turn that Bronson made in her work at this time. Kelly recalled, in conversation with Paul Sutinen, the feeling that there had been a "dissolution…a taking stock and pulling back."[11] Although speaking for himself, recalling what led him to abandon painting for sculpture, it is not hard to imagine Bronson sharing similar feelings, though from a different perspective. Asked by Debra Trione, she recalled the immediacy of these early paintings, but also noted, perhaps a bit ruefully, "I would start with something simple and just start adding things to it and often I would go way too far."[12]

The same year that he announced the coming of Post-Painterly Abstraction, Greenberg amplified his reasoning that "the grafting of painterliness on a Cubist infrastructure was, and will remain, the great and original achievement of the first generation of Painterly Abstraction."[13] This was itself nothing new, as the Cubist revolution had figured hugely in his accounts of Modernism from his earliest writings, as evidenced by his suggestion in 1939 that in Cubism we "witness the birth and death of three-dimensional pictorial space."[14]

What I am especially interested in here is not just Cubism *qua* Cubism, but the more specific question of the relation of collage to Cubism. As Greenberg famously noted, "collage was a major turning point in the evolution of Cubism, and therefore a major turning point in the whole evolution of [M]odernist art in this century."[15]

To this relation, a third term must be added to complete Greenberg's view, adding yet another perspective to the "birth and death" of pictorial space

> Picasso…solved—or rather destroyed—the problem by raising the collage's affixed material above the picture surface, thus going over into bas-relief. And soon after that he subtracted the picture surface entirely, to let what had been affixed stand free as a construction.[16]

Bronson's move from painting to wall-mounted metal collage/assemblage reflects, I believe, something similar to this nexus, which was very much in the air at that time, and perhaps still is.

Sculpture, however, has always occupied an odd place in the Abstract Expressionist canon. Even Lisa Phillips, a very sympathetic interpreter, acknowledged that the "sculptors found themselves outside the rhetoric" of Abstract Expressionism, and that Greenberg, despite his enthusiasms for the lineage, ultimately "relegated most of the sculpture made during that time to a marginal position."[17]

9 Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, "Periods: Cubism In Its Day" in Anne Baldassari (editor), *Cubist Picasso* (Paris: Flammarion SA, 2007): 36.

10 Clement Greenberg, "Post Painterly Abstraction," *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969, Volume 4* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 193-194. Originally written for an exhibition at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, April-May 1964 and reprinted in *Art International* (Summer 1964).

11 Paul Sutinen, "Living in Sculpture: The Studio Work of Lee Kelly," *Lee Kelly: Thirty-five Years of Painting and Sculpture, 1959-1994* (Marylhurst: Marylhurst Art Gym, 1994): n. pag.

12 Debra Trione, "Oregon's Quick-Change Artist," *Willamette Week* (21-27 July 1981):3.

13 Clement Greenberg, "The 'Crisis' of Abstract Art," *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969, Volume 4* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 180. Originally published in *Arts Yearbook* 7 (1964).

14 Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944, Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986):35. Originally published in *Partisan Review* (July/August 1940).

15 Clement Greenberg, "Collage," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (New York: Beacon Press, 1961): 70. Originally published as "The Pasted Paper Revolution" in *Art News* (September 1958), significantly revised and expanded for reprinting in *Art and Culture*.

Bronson's metal works of, roughly, 1965, first seen in her solo exhibition at Mt. Angel College in early 1966, were an almost literal instantiation of the "going over into bas-relief." Bronson never made Picasso's "subtraction"—her work remained consistently oriented to the wall, and, apart from several collaborations with Kelly, notably the "sculptural core" of *Rankin House* (1972) and *Leland #1* (1975), she made only one free-standing work in her career. It is, therefore, her relation to collage that is paramount here. Collage had already played a large part in some of her paintings, notably *Untitled [cream]* (1963), which is worth returning to before going on.

According to William Rubin, "the essence of collage, then, is the insertion into a given context of an alien entity—not only of a different medium, but of a different style or, as the Surrealists would later insist, even of a motif drawn from a different context of experience or level of consciousness."[18] At a glance, it might seem that the genteel harmonies of *Untitled [cream]* (1963) are rather at odds with this definition, but I assert that the structure of the painting is entirely dependent on the possibilities of collage.

There are passages, to be sure, of "pure" brushwork such as the light-grey inverted "L" of the upper-right corner. But the surface, particularly the central (vertical) half is dominated by a dense patchwork of canvas fragments. In some cases, the color and form of the fragments correspond, suggesting a cut-up of other paintings. In most cases though, the color and directionality of the brushwork remain largely independent of this irregular surface.

Two extraordinary series of paintings on paper confirm Bronson's unusual approach to collage; one is a set of seven miniatures, averaging approximately 6 x 9in; the other, though compositionally very similar, is substantially larger, made up of works (typically) 20 x 30 in. What they make clear is the extent to which she apparently regarded collage as a structural device as much as a material effect; a profile and review of her 1966 Mt. Angel exhibition confirms this, at least in general terms.[19]

In these works, Bronson departs from the examples of the two Abstract Expressionists most closely associated with collage, Conrad Marca-Relli and Robert Motherwell. Marca-Relli, who died in 2000, remains a perpetual oddity among first generation Abstract Expressionists. His liminal status within that canon continues, despite periodic encomiums and calls for reassessment, most recently from Donald Kuspit.[20] What separates him most decisively from much of the first generation is less his medium than his figurative bent, manifest in what are, perhaps not coincidentally, among his best-known works, *The Battle* and *The Witnesses* (both 1956).

His more abstract works at times resemble Bronson's use of collage, but with some important

16 Clement Greenberg, "Sculpture In Our Time," *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969, Volume 4* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 58. Originally published in *Arts Magazine* (June 1958).

17 Lisa Phillips, *The Third Dimension: Sculpture of the New York School* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1984): 10.

18 William Rubin, *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989): 38.

19 Beth Fagan, "Artist's New Work at Mt. Angel," *The Oregonian* (20 February 1966):14.

20 Donald Kuspit, "Patching It Over," *Artnet* (30 September 2009) n. pag. <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/conrad-marca-relli9-30-09.asp>.

differences. For example, in Marca-Relli's *Arras* (1955) and *Steel Gray* (1962), the closely valued color schemes recall *Untitled [cream]* (1963), but the identification, the "equivalence," one might say, of shape with color (Kuspit describes this as the way each of the "canvas patches functions as a cut-out painterly gesture"), is very different from the densely imbricated ambiguities of Bronson's painting.

Her small abstracts of the early 1960s were, indeed, quite different; in works such as *Untitled III [small abstract]* (c. 1964-65) and *Untitled VII [small abstract]* (c. 1964-65), it is not so much that each of the elements functions as a gesture, but instead function as discrete, one could almost say "completed" compositions. This is particularly evident in the almost perfectly quadrated *Untitled III [small abstract]* (c. 1964-65).

It is surely more credible that Bronson would have been aware of Robert Motherwell's work of the late 1940s and 1950s than that of Marca-Relli, who remains even today a marginal figure. H.H. Arnason observed of Motherwell's work that his "collages, since they were particularly dependent on accident or automatist expression,…contrast[ed] with the architectural control of the major paintings."[21] Arnason was not altogether wrong about Motherwell, and a glance at such well-known works as the collage *Pancho Villa, Dead or Alive* (1943) and the painting *The Voyage* (1948) shows the simple truth of his distinction. Motherwell himself, in a 1962 interview, likened collage to still life and positioned it in opposition to the "large simplifications" of his paintings, noting that he felt "more joyful with collage, less austere."[22] But the truth is finally not so simple. The relatively stark collages *Mallarme's Swan* (1942-1944) or *Viva* (1946) are clearly much closer in structure to the familiar architecture of Motherwell's painting.

21 H.H. Arnason, *Robert Motherwell* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1982): 73.

22 Robert Motherwell, "Robert Motherwell: A Conversation at Lunch," *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 135. Essay dates from November 1962, originally published in *An Exhibition of the Work of Robert Motherwell* (Northampton: Smith College Museum of Art, 1963).

Yet the Motherwell most clearly invoked by Bronson's use of collage elements in these transitional works are explicitly painterly—for example in *The Voyage* (1948) or the discrete zones of *Room 8, Hotel Flora, Cannes* (1950), where the clear horizontality of the complete "picture" is in fact the result of five distinguishable vertical regions.

In this regard, too, it seems reasonable to suppose that Bronson was aware of earlier work by Alfred Leslie, whose Abstract Expressionist paintings often employed quadratures. His *Four Panel Green* (1957) is an example of this structural division applied to what is otherwise a "continuous" composition, in which the gestures are neither shaped nor confined by the divisions of the panels. In *Quartet #1* (1958), the composition is itself loosely quadrated, giving the four regions of the painting relatively distinct formal identities. Both of these devices are characteristic of Bronson's paintings.

Often, though, Leslie made this structuration far more explicit, and works such as *Four Panel Big Green* (1957), *Yellow 3rd* (1958), and *Arrivato Zampano* (1959) are strikingly similar to Bronson's. The somewhat later *The Black Line* (1961) is perhaps even more akin to Bronson's work with its complex geometry; the lower half of the canvas is divided into two roughly equal squares, the top half into two horizontal bands, one approximately twice the width of the other. The larger band is itself split across the middle by the titular line, almost exactly in the manner of Bronson's *Untitled VII (small abstract)*. Richard Kalina correctly argues that Leslie's practice was less the imposition of a formal redundancy than a defamilarization, in which the viewer is forced to make "a part-to-part, part-to-whole examination, rather than having the painting swirl away into an easily scanned allover field."[23]

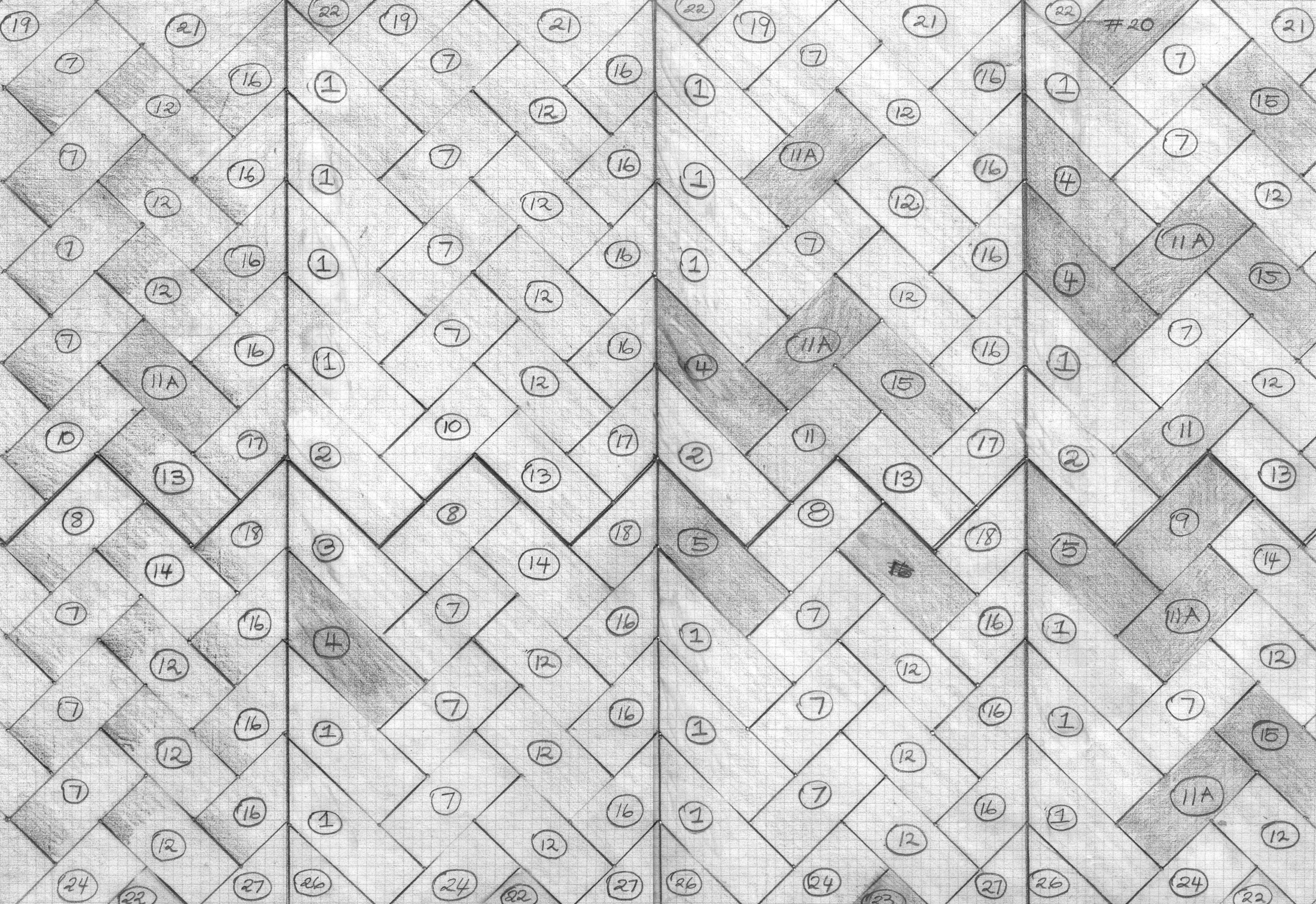
23 Richard Kalina, "The Right Moves: Alfred Leslie in the Fifties," *Art in America* (April 2005):132.

Interestingly though, Bronson's work of this period most strongly resembles Motherwell's of a much later period, namely his *Open* series, which began in the late 1960s. Struck by the fortuitous stacking of paintings, large and small, recto and verso, in the studio, Motherwell saw an unusual potential in this punctuated pictorial space, as Robert Hobbs describes *Open No. 1* (1967):

> Since this rectangular break in the ochre field could be construed as a doorway, Motherwell puzzled over the painting, both excited by its suggestion of an opening and troubled by its closure. Several months later, he reversed the canvas by turning it upside down, thereby transforming the door into a window, which is suspended from the top of the picture. This change released the background from its strict ties to the picture plane, permitting a new reciprocity between it and the rectangle inscribed within its parameters, leaving viewers in doubt as to whether the window, the ensuing coloured field, or perhaps both were hovering in a relatively shallow space.[24]

24 Robert Hobbs, "Motherwell's *Opens*: Heidegger, Mallarme, and Zen," in *Robert Motherwell: Open* (London: 21 Press, 2009): 51.

Doors and windows—as Hobbs correctly notes, Motherwell's *Opens* were indeed a new kind of opening, taking his painting from Abstract Expressionism to something much closer to Minimalism, a movement similar to what we see in Bronson's work.


#20

"The Minimal Art object is usually not found or ready-made, but fabricated and intended for no apparent use. In this sense it functions like Hitchcock's 'McGuffin': a particular prop in a film that is little more than a pretence, a narrative trick to trigger the plot."

Jorg Heiser, "The Dark Side of the Room"[25]

Edward Strickland opens his "prehistory" of Minimalism with the wry observation that "the death of Minimalism is announced periodically, which may be the surest testimonial to its staying power."[26] At roughly the same time that Strickland was charting Minimalism's passage from a "once–subversive style to…part of the *lingua franca*," Lynn Zelevansky advanced a similar claim, arguing that "Minimalism—which has antecedents in various twentieth century art movements, from revolutionary Soviet art to the objects of Marcel Duchamp and the paintings of Barnett Newman—has a place in the second half of our century akin to the one held by Cubism in the first half."[27] Zelevansky traces Minimalism's "staying power" to its offering of "the first really versatile new set of formal strategies since Cubism, one that could tolerate the imposition of many different meanings" (8). Or, as Christine Mehring points out, "all Minimalist artists in one way or another displace or depart from Greenbergian paradigms, but they all do so in different and often contradictory ways."[28]

Allowing for this proliferation, it is not so contradictory to assert that Bronson's work had little to do with Minimalism while also being deeply intertwined with it. To understand how this is possible, though, requires that one be clear about which Minimalism(s) one invokes. Foremost, is the clear realization that Bronson's work was never consistent with the influential models proposed by Donald Judd or Robert Morris.

Bronson's work did not conform with what Morris termed "unitary form"—"the autonomous and literal nature of sculpture demands that it have its own, equally literal space—not a surface shared with painting." Hence, in his view, while "relief has always been accepted as a viable mode…it cannot be accepted today as legitimate."[29] Judd's notion of the "specific object" might superficially seem more accommodating to Bronson's work, particularly his rhetorical gambit that "half or more of the best new work in the last few years has been neither painting nor sculpture."[30] He continues with the somewhat gnomic observation that "the new work obviously resembles sculpture more than it does painting, but it is nearer to painting" (182).

It could be suggested that much of Bronson's work, particularly the metal wall reliefs and at least some of the cardboard works, fit Judd's formulation, in at least general terms; the mosaic-like patterns of her steel reliefs of the mid-1970s, or the subtle texturings of the huge cardboard *Kassandra* (1980), likened, for example, to Frank Stella's *Polish Village* series (1970–1974), clearly suggest works "resembl[ing] sculpture" while remaining "nearer to painting." The relation to Stella is even more apparent in such works as the commissioned pieces for the Multnomah County Justice Center (1982), the Wy'East Day Lodge at Timberline (1983), and the studio work *Parts Leland* (1984). These works can be read in exactly the context of Michael Fried's notion of "deductive structure" in "the relation between depicted and literal shape," which he proposed in the context of Stella's *Irregular Polygons*.[31]

At the same time, it would be difficult indeed to reconcile Bronson's work with Judd's familiar insistence on "non-relational" composition. In 1964, somewhat before Minimalism's ascendancy, Stella and Judd were interviewed by Bruce Glaser on New York City's WBAI radio under the provocative title, "New Nihilism or New Art." Glaser questioned Judd about the seductions of symmetry, and if he was "trying to create a sensuous or an austere effect." Judd shot back, "No, I don't think my work is either one. I'm interested in spareness, but I don't think it has any connection to symmetry."[32]

Stella, openly disbelieving, interjected "actually, your work is really symmetrical. How can you avoid it when you take a box situation?" Even in the face of Stella's incredulity, Judd remained intransigent: "But I don't have any ideas as to symmetry. My things are symmetrical because, as you said, I wanted to get rid of any compositional effects, and the obvious way to do it is to be symmetrical" (151/197). "Those [compositional] effects," he added, "tend to carry with them all the structures, values, feelings of the whole European tradition. It suits me fine if that's all down the drain" (151/198).

It's not difficult at all to see where Bronson departs from these reductive, even somewhat reactionary strictures. Most obviously, her work is almost always asymmetrical, sometimes subtly, as in the pitched planes of the mid–1970s reliefs, sometimes far more aggressively, as in, say, the *Jas* and *Leland* series. And such vivid instances as the small drawings of the *Untitled [grids]* series (1985–86) are nothing if not virtual catalogs of the "compositional effects" possible within a reduced range of formal devices.

There is much more that might be said on behalf of these formal models, but that too is another story. What differentiates Bronson most decisively from Minimalist orthodoxy (or heterodoxy, if you prefer) is the absence of what Michael Fried famously called the "literalist espousal of objecthood [which] amounts to nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theater, and theater is now the negation of art."[33] For Hal Foster, what Fried called "theatricality" was a profound change; "a partial shift in focus from object to subject, from ontological questions (of the essence of a medium) to phenomenological conditions (of a particular body in a particular space as the ground of art.)"[34] This is what Foster memorably noted elsewhere—that Minimal work, "far from idealist…complicates the purity of conception with the contingency of perception."[35] Fried was concerned with the way that Minimal works "confronted" the viewer—"they must," he famously remarked, "…be placed not just in his space but in his way" (154).

If I've emphasized these questions of theory, it is only to show how questionable the application of these definitions are to Bronson's work. Another way of looking at this is to allow that Bronson's questionable "minimalism" retained an essentially pictorial bent; it is worth recalling here that she only realized one work of free-standing sculpture. The high relief of many of her wall pieces certainly contributed to their "objecthood," but this was hardly unfamiliar to anyone who knew Stella's work, in which the use of deep stretchers had begun with his early Black Paintings.

At the same time, it's easy to imagine that Bronson's models, particularly for the *Untitled* reliefs of the early '70's, were quite elsewhere, in a place she could have known only vicariously: the landscape of Picasso's Horta paintings, which Gertrude Stein, famously though controversially, saw as "the beginnings of Cubism."[36] These works, including *Brick Factory in Tortosa*, and especially *Reservoir at Horta* and the spectacular *Houses on the Hill* (all 1909), possess what Christopher Green rightly calls a "rebarbative, angular hardness."

> In both *Houses on the Hill* and *The Reservoir*, Picasso…sharpens edges to build a crystalline structure that has its own integrity. The ridges and spines of underlying structures break through the picture surface. The eye does not slide easily across a continuous, fused picture surface, but rather encounters a resistant architecture bristling with knife-sharp edges and points.[37]

The limited chromatics of Bronson's metal reliefs (monochrome, in the case of the galvanized *Study*) also show some filiation with Picasso's palette, but Bronson as a colorist is a subject I will take up later. I'm not, of course, suggesting that Bronson adopted some sort of very late neo-Cubism but simply that, as was seen in her move from Abstract Expressionist painting to the first metal constructions, her engagement with Modernist compositional devices worked in complex, not always linear ways.

And in this, she was hardly alone. Stella and Judd, in their conversation with Glaser, were at pains to cast their inheritance, from Suprematism forward, as monolithic, but this was simply not the case. As Barbara Rose observed:

> American geometry, in comparison with European purist styles, with their commitment to predictable and familiar forms, is eccentric and expressionist. Jagged planes lock together, not in any classical harmony, but in asymmetric uneasy union. The modernization of classicism and purism is so inimical to the American temperament that even painters working within the strict discipline of geometric abstraction—the classical style of modern art—produced restless, tense, highly activated works.[38]

This is evident in such canonical pieces of American Precisionism as Charles Demuth's *My Egypt* (1927) and Ralston Crawford's *Maitland Bridge #2* (1938). The former bears an uncanny architectural similarity to Bronson's *Color I* and *Color II* (both 1975)—with, it might also be noted, the multiplying reflections of Robert Smithson's *Mirror Vortex* (1964) and *Four-Sided Vortex* (1965) as distant, but cordial, relations.

Another example, and one indicative of why Rose sees "eccentric" as more a matter of "temperament" than a proper lineage, is found in work by one of the Park Avenue Cubists, Charles G. Shaw, who's two-paneled painting *Atomic Flight* (1945/1946) mirrors the same composition, albeit with a displaced palette.[39]

25 Jorg Heiser, "The Dark Side of the Room," *Frieze* 65 (March 2002): n. pag. http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/dark_side_of_the_room/.

26 Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993): 1.

27 Lynn Zelevansky, *Sense & Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties* (New York: Museum of Modern Art/Harry N. Abrams, 1994): 7.

28 Christine Mehring, "Minimalism: Art History as Detective Novel," *Art Journal* 62:1 (Spring 2003): 97.

29 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture I & II," in Gregory Battcock (editor), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: EP Dutton & Company, Inc., 1968): 224. Essays originally published in *Artforum* (February & October, 1966).

30 Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2005): 181.

31 Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 89. Originally published in *Artforum* 5 (November 1966). Also, his earlier, "Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella," also reprinted in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews.*

32 Dan Flavin's participation in this conversation was elided in the most familiar version, edited by Lucy Lippard, published in *Art News* (September, 1966) and reprinted in Gregory Battcock's *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. The full version is in James Meyer (editor) *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon, 2000). Page citations here are in the format Battcock/Meyer.

33 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 153. Originally published in *Artforum* 5 (June 1967).

34 Hal Foster, "The Un/making of Sculpture," in Hal Foster & Gordon Hughes (editors), *Richard Serra* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000): 177. Essay originally published as a catalog essay for *Richard Serra: Sculpture 1985–1998* at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, exhibition dates September 20, 1998 through January 3, 1999.

35 Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998): 40.

36 Gertrude Stein, *Picasso* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1984): 8.

37 Christopher Green, *Picasso: architecture and vertigo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005): 146 & 120.

38 Barbara Rose, "Geometry, American Style," *Autocritique: essays on art and anti-art, 1963-1987* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988): 11. Originally published in *New York Magazine* (26 June 1972).

39 See Debra Bricker Balken & Robert S. Lubar, *The Park Avenue Cubists* (New York: Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 2002) for general background on this overlooked group of artists.

Some shapes remain unchanged in color, some shift to a complement, still others seem to change arbitrarily. This is precisely the structural device that Bronson used to great effect in her 1982 commission for Multnomah County's Justice Center. Its placement on a large curving wall, wrapping around an elevator bay, makes it difficult—impossible, in fact—to see the work "as a whole," so the moment of recognition of this underlying system is all the more surprising.

Allowing what I earlier called the essentially pictorial bent of Bronson's art suggests, at the very least, that her problematic relation to Minimalism remained in painterly terms. It in turn suggests that one look within the domain of what Greenberg called Post-Painterly Abstraction, though the relation is, again, subtle and partial.[40] There are not, for example, strong relations between Bronson and such exemplars as Morris Louis or Larry Poons; Kenneth Noland is another matter, as is Jules Olitski.

40 See Robert Hobbs, "The Term 'Colour Field': A Reframing" in David Moos (editor), *The Shape of Colour: Excursions in Colour Field Art 1950-2005* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2005): 18–23.

Many of Bronson's surfaces, particularly the shaded gradations of sprayed lacquers in pieces like *Landscape through Window* and *Rinpoche's Window* (both 1986) recall Olitski's oft-quoted quest for "a spray of paint in the air that would just stay there." Greenberg's explication of Olitski's "illusion of depth that somehow extrudes all suggestions of depth," which nonetheless contains "a world of color and light differentiations" is apposite, as a consistent aspect of Bronson's work is the increasingly subtle gradations of color as she moves towards monochrome.[41]

41 Clement Greenberg, "Introduction to Jules Olitski at the Venice Biennale," *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969 , Volume 4* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 230. Originally published as catalog essay for the exhibition at the XXXIII International Biennial Exhibition of Art, Venice and subsequent showing at the Smithsonian Institution, exhibition dates June–October, 1966.

Formally, it is not difficult to see the relation of Noland's chevrons to many of the reliefs of the mid-1970s and, most obviously, in the monumental cardboard *Kassandra* (1980). But it is, finally, the example of Ellsworth Kelly who looms largest here. Barbara Rose's assessment of his work, for a 1980 retrospective, as "an amalgam and synthesis of qualities of European, as well as Oriental and primitive art…[that] incorporates elements of Dada and cubo-constructivism in an individual style [with] the large scale of the New York School," is a virtual *précis* of Bronson's work.[42]

42 Barbara Rose, "Ellsworth Kelly: An American in Paris, " *Autocritique: essays on art and anti-art, 1963-1987* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988): 114. Originally published as the catalog essay at the Amsterdam Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1980.

And, the unique properties of Bronson's "amalgam and synthesis" often depended upon the elaborate and idiosyncratic geometric systems of her work. This is most overt in the series of "window" pieces from the later 1980s—the subtle modulations of color I noted above are oddly symmetrical, i.e., directionless. This enables the works to be hung in any of the four available axial rotations, as Bronson's own photographs of the work attest.

The large cardboard wall relief *Kassandra* (1980), the only one completed of a projected series, was one of Bronson's most interesting explorations of structure. Composed of more than 240 individual modules, arranged in 6 panels, *Kassandra* underwent a remarkable formal evolution, as documented in studio photographs. Most conspicuous here was the change from its penultimate state to the final version, as seen at Blackfish Gallery. A photograph of the completed work in Bronson's studio is identical to that subsequently exhibited, but with one difference—the entire 10 x 24 foot work was turned top–for–bottom.

Other photographs, taken while the work was in various stages of completion, also show the panels in different relationships. For example, in the final version, the diagonal vectors of the modules at the seams of the panels are symmetrical, but in–progress photos reveal that this was not always the case. Bronson appears, in this, to have borrowed a formal device from Jasper Johns' cross–hatch paintings of the early 1970s, works such as *Scent* (1973–74) and the *Corpse & Mirror* series (1974–75).

But, this discussion would not be complete without reference to the particular materiality of her work, and its positing of a continual dialog between method and means.[43] In favoring a decidedly impersonal facture, Minimalism, as famously pilloried by Anna Chave, sought "the cultural authority of the markers of industry and technology."[44] This became, in the reception of both Pop and Minimal works the source of some mystification. As Robert Smithson noted in a catalog essay on the work of Donald Judd: "these procedures tend to baffle art-lovers. They either wonder where the 'art' went or where the 'work' went, or both."[45]

43 Wiiliam Chiego, *Bonnie Bronson: Recent Works* (Portland: Portland Art Museum, 1979): n. pag. Catalog essay for mid–career survey, exhibition dates 25 September through 28 October, 1979.

44 Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," in *Power: Its Myths and Mores in American Art 1961-1991*, Holliday T. Day, editor (Indianapolis, IN: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1991): 116. Originally published in *Arts Magazine* (January 1990).

45 Robert Smithson, "Donald Judd," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 4. Originally published as the catalog essay for the exhibition 7 *Sculptors* at the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, 1965.

Bronson's complex interest in non-traditional methods and materials spurred her to research enamelling processes in the early 1970s. And, while capable of producing an almost inhuman perfection, she would also sometimes use techniques that resulted in a more *raku-like* finish—common to both, though, was the absence of the "hand," which really only returned in the works of her last few years.

Smithson continues his essay with a breezy characterization of Judd's process:

> He may go to Long Island City and have the Bernstein Brothers, Tinsmiths put "Pittsburgh" seams into some (Bethcon) iron boxes, or he might go to Allied Plastics in Lower Manhattan and have cut-to-size some Rohm-Haas "glowing" pink plexiglass…. Or maybe he will travel to Hackensack, New Jersey to investigate a lead he got on a new kind of zinc-based paint called Galvanox, which is comparable to "hot-dip" galvanizing (4).

Smithson, too, may not have been the most reliable interpreter; his passing reference to Judd in a footnote to his 1966 article "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space" prompted a terse four-word letter to the editor from Judd: "Smithson isn't my spokesman."[46]

46 Robert Smithson, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 34-38. Originally published in *Arts Magazine* (November 1966). Donald Judd, "Letter to the editor," *Complete Writings 1959-1975* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2005): 217. Originally published in *Arts Magazine* (February 1967).

Perhaps, but Smithson was hardly alone in his sentiments—in a 1966 New York City symposium on *Primary Structures*, the groundbreaking exhibition of Minimal work at the Jewish Museum, sculptor Mark DiSuvero opened by flatly stating: "I think my friend Don Judd can't qualify as an artist because he doesn't do the work."[47]

47 Mark di Suvero, Donald Judd, Kynaston McShine, Robert Morris & Barbara Rose, "The New Sculpture" in James Meyer, editor, *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon: 2000): 220. Unpublished manuscript from the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

If it now seems like DiSuvero was on the losing side of a bet with history, the issue

remains, taken up some four decades later by Kirk Varnedoe who, trying to distance himself from Chave's intense polemic, found an analogous duality in Minimal work—an "oddness."

> Judd's metal works were not mass-produced but fabricated at a kind of mom-and-pop metal shop, Bernstein Brothers in Long Island City, using galvanized iron, stainless steel, aluminum, brass, colored Plexiglas, and the kind of translucent enamel paints used to customize Harley-Davidsons. The results are not overpowering or impersonal; in fact they are often kind of fussy, slick, and decorative.[48]

48 Kirk Varnedoe, *Pictures of nothing: abstract art since Pollock* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006): 54. Originally presented as the 2003 A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

But Varnedoe had some difficulty unpacking the contradiction that grows between mom-and-pop and a Harley-Davidson, between industry and kitsch and he took another approach:

> There is something small-time and peculiar about the fabrication of a lot of [M]inimalist works that suggests not industrial mass production, but old-fashioned craftsmanship. In this sense, [M]inimalism seems to express a nostalgia for small-product America, for chopper shops and body shops or businesses that make metal door frames or install aluminum siding (54).

Better, perhaps, except the materials and processes that he cites are plainly those of industrial production. And there is surely nothing obviously "fussy, slick, or decorative" about aluminum siding.

An altogether more subtle view of Judd's complex relation to materials and process, particularly the delegation of work, was recently suggested by Jeff Jahn, borrowing from Aquinas via Kant the idea of *intrinsic finality*, a reciprocity of means and ends.[49] For Judd, Jahn suggested, "the piece exists to satisfy its own visual/spatial operational end concerns… not as an investment style fetish."[50] In a subsequent note, Jahn treated this idea with a provocative expansion: Judd, he suggested, "delegated the fabrication of his work to get control over it…shrewdly remov[ing] himself so he could see the piece, not the work put into it."[51]

49 Mark C. Taylor, "Refiguring Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77:1 (March 2009): 115.

50 Jeff Jahn, "Intrinsic Finalities," *Donald Judd* (Portland: White Box/University of Oregon, 2010): n. pag. Catalog essay for the April/May 2010 exhibition Donald Judd at White Box Gallery, Portland.

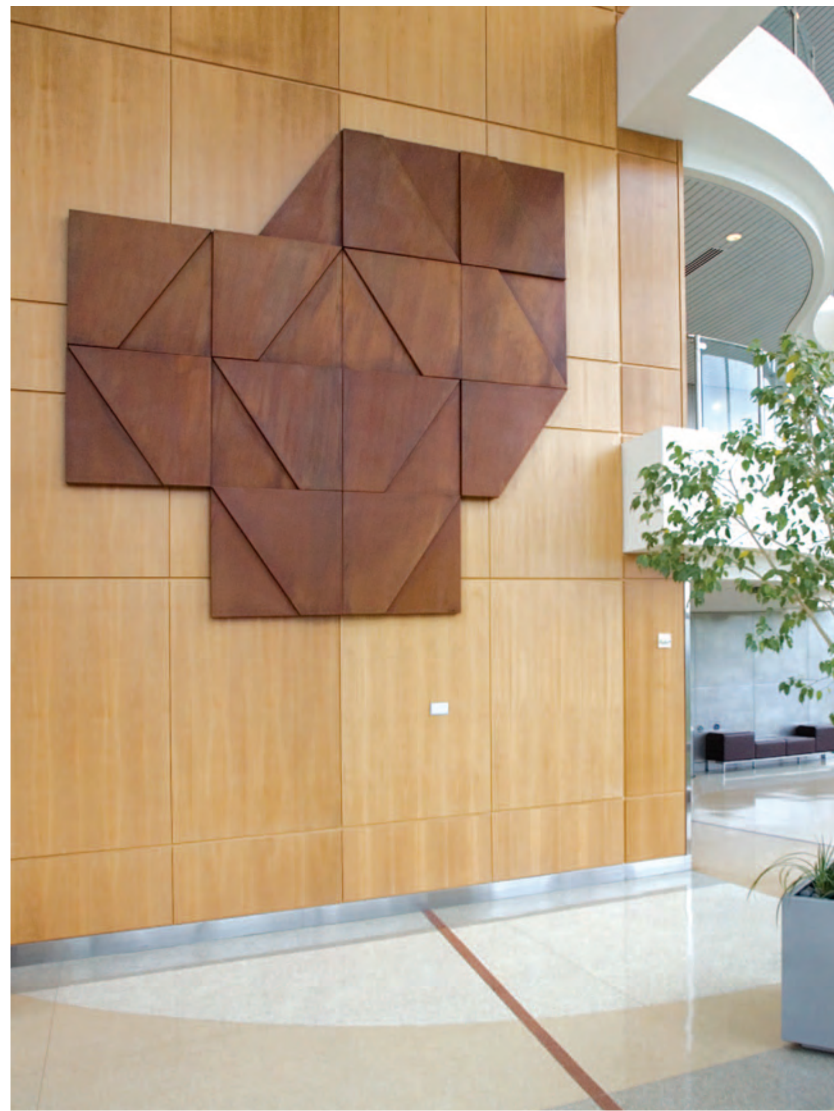
51 Jeff Jahn, "Donald Judd Now," *PORT* (6 May 2010): n. pag. <http://www.portlandart.net/archives/2010/05/donald_judd_now.html>.

What I like about this idea is Jahn's recognition of doubled movements, control and abnegation, presence and distance, and I think something very similar informed Bronson's making, even if in a way different from what Jahn finds in Judd. Specifically, I'm not at all certain that Bronson *didn't* want us to see the work put into it—at least some of the time.

It is true, to be sure, that the slickly reflective enamel surfaces of many of her 1970s reliefs invite at least qualified comparison not only with color-field painting, as I noted above, but also with the "finish fetish" of West Coast Minimalism. What most qualifies that relation, though, is Bronson's embrace of far more mundane materials, most notably cardboard, which she began using, conventionally enough, for maquettes but which soon became a material in its own right.

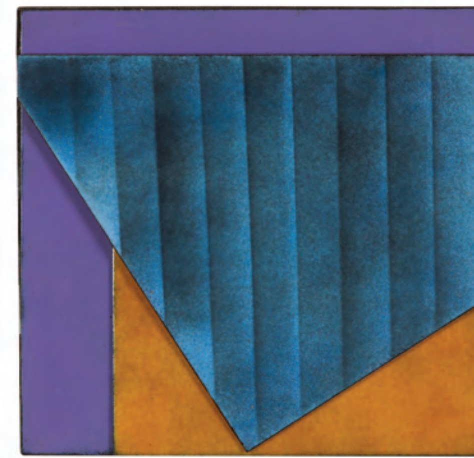
So, yes, a double movement, but one that suggests something more like the eclectic passions of a Rauschenberg. And, too, it should be remembered that many of Bronson's works (not just in cardboard) were explicitly derived from quilting, which puts rather a different spin to ideas about individual and community, authorship and, not least, Varnedoe's "mom-and-pop metal shop."

Untitled
c. 1975-76
Enamel on steel
19.25 x 14.5 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright
Photography



The Doctors
1980
Acid-etched steel
144 x 144 in.
Collection Oregon Health
Sciences University
Photo: Aaron Johanson

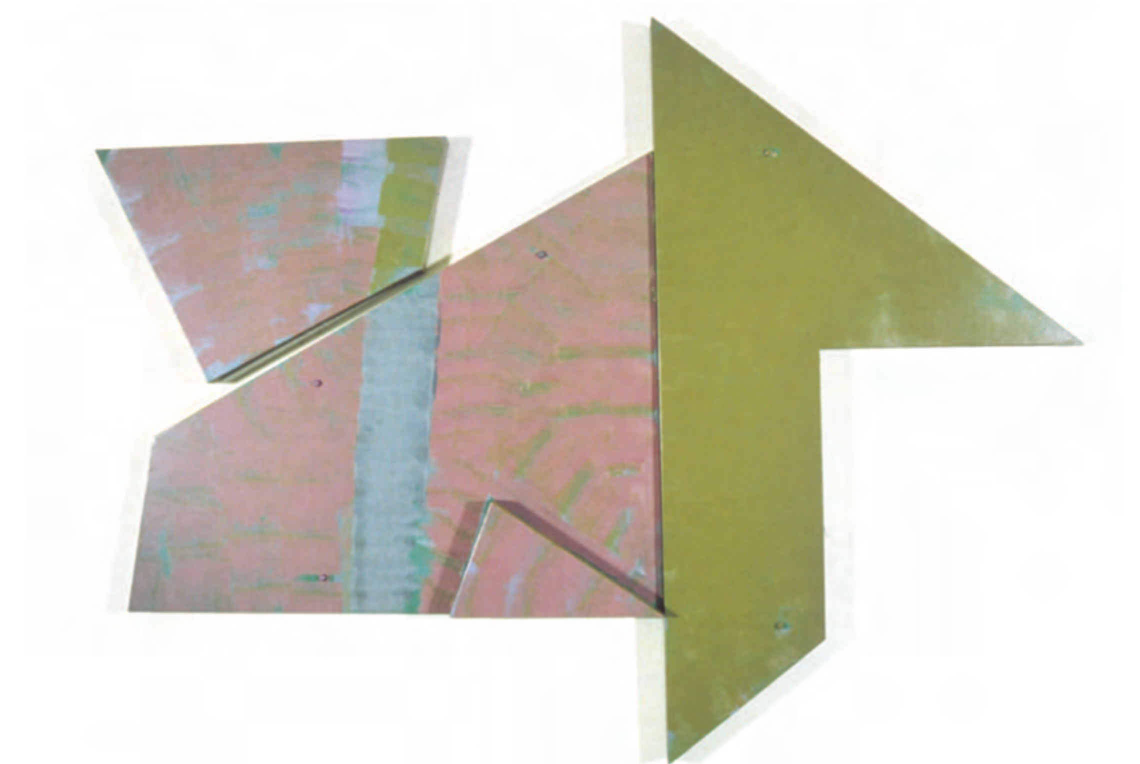
Untitled
1981
Acrylic on paper
20 x 24.5 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright
Photography



Cody II
1982
Enamel on steel
10 x 10 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

Wy'East Day Lodge
1983
Enamel on steel
156 x 264 in.
Collection Timberline
Lodge, Oregon
Photo: Estate of Bonnie
Bronson

Parts Leland
1984
Acrylic lacquer on steel
104 x 138 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Estate of Bonnie Bronson



"When I first made a grid I happened to be thinking of the innocence of trees and then a grid came into my mind and I thought it represented innocence, and I still do, and so I painted it and then I was satisfied. I thought, this is my vision."

Agnes Martin[52]

Marvelous—who but Martin would have been capable of a contemplation so agile as to map this equivalence? It speaks volumes of her remarkable painting and speaks to us here in its very counter-intuitiveness. I began this story with the suggestion that the grid structure occurred throughout Bronson's work, even in the apparent "freedom" of her early involvement with the Abstract Expressionist idiom. And so, I will return to the grid now, by way of conclusion, though it should be no surprise that her use of it, like her relation to the forms and finishes of Minimalism, is complex.

What Hanna Higgins, as previously noted, finds in the "persistence of the grid" was earlier cast by Suzi Gablik in terms that, while at a glance seem overtly scientistic, modulate toward the ineffable:

> The self-sufficient language of the grid—with its indifference to moral, social and philosophical values, its preoccupation with worlds comparable to those the mathematician calls forth when he plays with axioms…remains as nothing less than a kind of Rosetta stone for our age, the significance of whose code has not really been broken.[53]

Most interesting in Gablik's idea is its overlaying and overlapping of metaphors, both message and code, self-referential and "axiomatic," while remaining encrypted.

And so, it is possible, then, that the ubiquity of this structure remains in some way conflicted and contradictory. As Rosalind Krauss notes, the grid remains "emblematic of the [M]odernist ambition within the visual arts."[54] If Krauss is correct, then it therefore becomes necessary to look more closely at the mechanism of those contradictions.

The "Modernist ambition" is drawn from the Cartesian wellspring, in Jack Williamson's reading, where "the grid thus comes to represent not only the structural laws and principles behind physical appearance, but the process of rational thinking itself.[55] Put differently, "the Cartesian program for metaphysics," David Cottingham writes, "begins with a systematic exercise of doubt," but soon ventures into radical denial in which "the torrent of doubt is checked by the rock of certainty…the mediator's indubitable knowledge of his own existence as a thinking being."[56]

In Clement Greenberg's "On the Role of Nature in Modernist Painting," the centerpiece of his theories uncannily restates this notion. Arguing Cubism's "radical denial of all experience not literally accessible to the eye," Greenberg comes to an almost hysterical epiphany: "The world was stripped of its surface, of its skin, and the skin was spread flat, flat on the flatness of the picture plane."[57]

In this respect at least, Krauss remains close to Greenberg, postulating that the grid is "antinatural, antimimetic, antireal […] It is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. In the flatness that results from its coordinates, the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface" (9). Like Gablik, Krauss finds in this an inescapable self-referentiality since, "unlike perspective, the grid does not map the space of a room or a landscape or a group of figures onto the surface of a painting. Indeed, if it maps anything, it maps the surface of the painting itself" (10).

52 Agnes Martin, interviewed by Suzan Campbell, May 15, 1989. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., pp. 10-11. Quoted in Lynne Cooke, *Agnes Martin: "…going forward into unknown territory…" Early Paintings 1957-1967* (Beacon, NY: Dia Art Center, 2004): n. pag. <http://www.diacenter.org/exhibitions/introduction/19>.

53 Suzi Gablik, "Minimalism," in Nikos Stangos (editor), *Concepts of Modern Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc., 1981): 253.

54 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1986): 9. Originally published in October 9 (Summer 1979).

55 Jack Williamson, "The Grid: History, Use, and Meaning," *Design Issues* 3:2 (Autumn 1986): 20.

56 John Cottingham, *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 7.

57 Clement Greenberg, On the Role of Nature in Modernist Painting," *Art and Culture: Selected Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961): 172. Originally published in *Partisan Review* (January 1949).

There are, however, other readings of the device, most notably those proposed by Lucy Lippard, whose 1972 essay on the grid could well have been written with Bronson in mind. "The grid," she writes, "is music paper for color, idea, state of mind….It is a handy but potentially overemphasized instrument by which to control the void…a way to violate the ominously blank surface. For the artist proving him- or herself against order, its perfection is temptingly despoilable."[58]

I'm hardly more convinced that Bronson was "proving herself against order," whatever that means, than I am of some of Lippard's other possibilities. But that is, perhaps, finally the point—that Lippard proposed the grid as a space of possibility, of potential. The space of the grid is clearly one where competing vectors flourish. For Bronson, the grid was a space in which to operate on and around what Hanna Higgins calls those "most human contradictions."

In the most obvious way, it became a vehicle for the generation of large-scale forms through modular repetition, a strategy she first employed in the twin Nordstrom commissions, *Men's Wall* and *Women's Wall* (both 1974) and reached its most dramatic point in the immense cardboard relief *Kassandra* (1980), which seems to at least imply the possibility of virtually endless variation. Krauss recognized at least a qualified affinity with Lippard, terming this the "centrifugal" property of the grid, an "opening to the world beyond the frame" (18).

And similarly, for Bronson, the grid was most often a vehicle to amplify difference, something not unlike what Jasper Johns meant with his oft-quoted remark:

> "It all began with my painting a picture of an American flag. Using this design took care of a great deal for me because I didn't have to design it. So I went on to similar things like the targets—things the mind already knows. That gave me room to work on other levels."[59]

This strategy is seen throughout Bronson's work, but is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in *Seto* (1980), a series of monoprints on waxed paper reminiscent of Johns' ink on Mylar drawings. In the *Seto* works, the ground resists absorbing the ink, and the composition is thus a stochastic field of infinitesimal variations on monochrome, held, though only just, to a grid.

But, more than a mechanism for repetition with variation, the grid in Bronson's work is a means of mediating extremes of order and disorder, chance and causality; *synthetic*, to be sure, but also a vehicle for *synthesis*. In a late series of whimsical watercolor collages, the *Chac Drawings [cut-out]* (1988) the forms are equally suggestive of natural formations and architecture—the latter not only for their means of construction, in which the various elements are often separate pieces of paper. Another series of late "mosaic" watercolors shows a similar technique. Here, though, the grids and grid-like structures do not magnify tiny variations, but work instead to marshal a plenitude; colors and patterns run riot, with each element almost completely autonomous from neighboring regions. These late works certainly indicate that Bronson was moving toward a very different form of expression than what had characterized the preceding two decades, but it is no less striking that its underlying structural principles remained constant.

58 Lucy Lippard, "Top to Bottom, Left to Right," in *Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids Grids* (Phiadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1972): n.pag. Originally published as the catalog essay for the exhibition of the same title, exhibition dates January 27 through March 1, 1972.

59 Unsigned, "His Heart Belongs to Dada," *Time* 73 (4 May 1959): 58.

Landscape through Window
1986
Lacquer on steel
48 x 36 in. or 36 x 48 in. (installation variable)
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

Shown in four axial rotations.

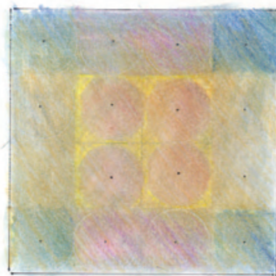
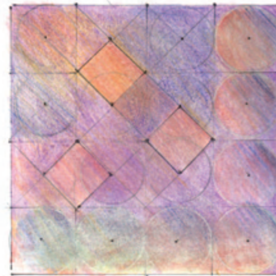
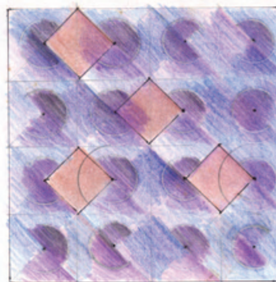
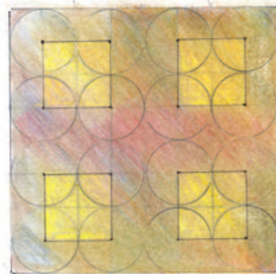
Untitled III [grids]
1985-86
Collection Susan Hammer

Untitled VII [grids]
1985-86
Collection Sarrah & Carlos Torres

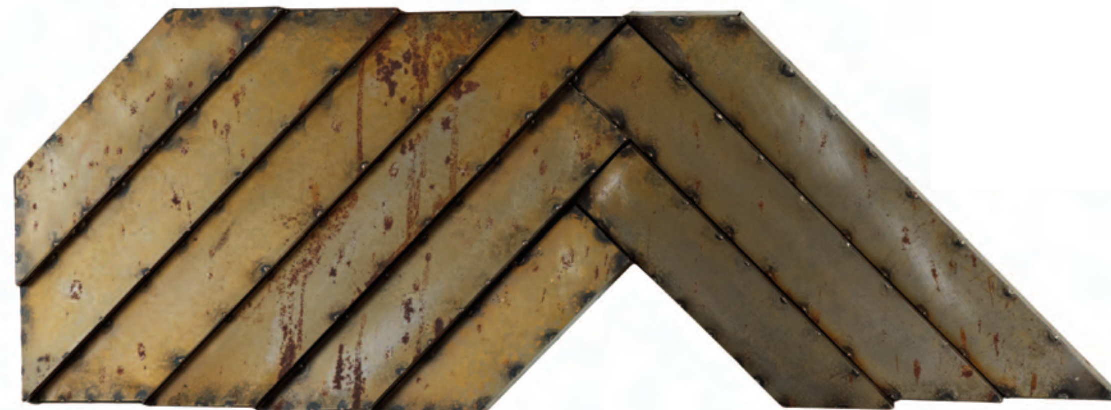
Untitled VI [grids]
1985-86
Collection Theresa & Keith Chipperfield

Untitled VIII [grids]
1985-86
Collection Steve & Gail Ossowski

Colored pencil, graphite and ink on paper
6 x 6 in.
Photo: Estate of Bonnie Bronson

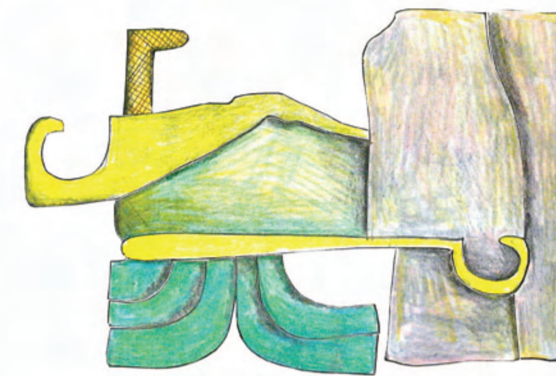
Tuck Welded Kisses I
1987
Welded steel
13 x 36 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright Photography



Serpent Feathers I
1987
Welded steel
25 x 21.5 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Ben Bright Photography

Chac Drawing III [cutout]
1990
Watercolor, graphite & ink on paper, mounted on board
13 x 17 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Chac Drawing VIII [cutout]
1990
Watercolor, graphite & ink on paper, mounted on board
13 x 17 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Estate of Bonnie Bronson



Untitled V [mosaic watercolor]
1990
Watercolor on paper
9 x 12 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled VI [mosaic watercolor]
1990
Watercolor on paper
9 x 12 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson
Photo: Estate of Bonnie Bronson

(....I am in the lake, in the center
of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or how small I am:
the effect of water
on light is a distortion.

but if you look long enough
eventually
you will see me.)

Margaret Atwood, "This is a photograph of me"[60]

This poem made an audacious opening to Margaret Atwood's first collection, *The Circle Game* (1966), a narrative that performs an almost-visual fragmenting and reassembling of subjectivities. Deceased, the eponymous narrator is both subject and object, remarks Marie-Claire Ropars–Wuilleumier on such disembodied voices, "as if the patient work of a hypothetical reconstruction had borne fruit."[61]

So, too, must this story come to an end, in a landscape, as Atwood writes, of "blurred lines and grey flecks blended with the paper." This has already been as many or more words than were written about Bonnie Bronson and her work during her all-too-short career. Necessary, sufficient? It became commonplace after her death to note some essential unity to all aspects of her life, especially her efforts landscaping the acreage of Leland Iron Works with her husband. Prudence Roberts, in her catalog essay for Bronson's 1993 retrospective, could not have been more explicit when she concluded that Bronson's "gardens [were] the ultimate summation of [her] love of materials."[62] Joel Weinstein echoed this hagiography, remarking that "Bronson's artistic routine was entwined with her daily life as a gardener, householder, and citizen."[63]

There's surely no reason to doubt the sincerity of that sentiment nor, *really*, that Bronson shared it, at least to some extent. But, it's not been my story, which should be evident by this time, in no small part because of the way Anne Middleton Wagner takes a fragment of Sylvia Plath's radio play *Three Women* as an ironic epigraph to her own study of Eva Hesse, Lee Krasner and Georgia O'Keeffe: "I find myself again....I am a wife." That is to say, that imagined unity and holism, however well-meant, is no less a partial story, a partial truth. As Wagner observes, "to make art is to signal belonging, as much as difference."[64]

In an interview with Deborah Trione in the summer of 1981, as she was developing the pieces that would ultimately become the *Leland* series wall sculptures, Bronson remarked, "I clearly don't know what direction I'm pointed in at the moment because I'm in the middle of it, and you never know until you get to the other side" (3).

The *Leland* works surely looked back to, for example, the earlier *Jas* series, but they also became a kind of way-station: she was to show them twice, in 1982 and 1984, but with radically different surfaces. And, while developing the *Leland* works, she was also making a series of paintings on paper that explored the extreme angularity that would come to characterize the *Leland* works, but with a strictly reduced palette. She was attempting to make, as she explained to Trione, a "powerful statement, but at the same time a minimal statement" (3).

There was never a time in her career when Bronson was not, I think, "in the middle of it"—every arrival was a departure for another destination, every departure a new arrival. This could not be more explicit than in an unrealized project proposal for the Anchorage, Alaska public school system (1988), in which a foyer and reception area is covered with motifs derived from several distinct phases of her work. A set of two pieces from 1987, *Tuck Welded Kisses*, also make this clear—based on the irregular polygons of the earlier *Jas* and *Leland* series, these were assembled with the much rougher spot–welding technique that Bronson preferred for the more self–consciously totemic *Serpent Feathers* series (also 1987). But it is also not so hard to see in the *Tuck Welded Kisses* works references to the jagged edges of the 1960s metal constructions.

So, if her family and friends, her gardens and her travels, have been absent from my story, it is because the story that I wanted to tell was both larger and smaller than that—it has been about the problem of, as Stephen Melville puts it, "the seeing of something from somewhere, rather than the seeing of everything from nowhere."[65] And that has meant for me to see her work in the context of her contemporaries, to pay tribute to the intensity and restlessness of a mercurial body of work.

The last words go to others, "voices that I thought I recognized." Perhaps you do, too. Her brother, Dave Bronson, ended a remembrance thus:

> If Bonnie were here now, her eyes would be narrowing at me.
> ...'That' s enough. You've covered it. Why don' t we do something else?'[66]

An expanded and fully illustrated version of this

60 Margaret Atwood, *Selected Poems 1965–1975* (New York: Mariner Books/Simon & Schuster, 1976): 8.

61 Marie–Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier, "The Disembodied Voice: *India Song*," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 248–9.

62 Prudence Roberts, *Bonnie Bronson* (Portland: Bonnie Bronson Fund/Oregon Community Foundation, 1993): 15. Reprinted by the Portland Art Museum for the exhibition, *Bonnie Bronson: A Retrospective*, exhibition dates February 23 through April 4, 1993: n. pag.

63 Joel Weinstein, "Art as biography: a Bonnie Bronson retrospective," *The Oregonian* (7 March 1993): D4.

64 Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women) – Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 286–287.

65 Stephen Melville, "The Temptation of New Perspectives." *October* 52 (Spring 1990): 12.

66 Dave Bronson, "Artist landscaper traveler rock climber wife mother my sister." Eulogy for Bonnie Bronson (unpublished: 1990): n. pag.

Exhibition Checklist

Untitled [sketchbook painting]
1961
Oil on paper
14 x 11 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled [sketchbook painting]
1961
Oil on paper
14 x 11 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled [black]
1963
Oil on canvas
62 x 52 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled [cream]
1963
Oil on canvas
48.25 x 47 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled
1965
Oil on metal construction
41.5 x 36 in.
Private collection

Untitled [orange construction]
1965
Painted metal construction
27 x 32 x 20 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled [Black construction]
1965
Painted metal construction
37 x 37 x 10 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

For Merge I
c. 1970
Oil & graphite on board
10.5 x 9 in.
Collection Kassandra Kelly

For Merge III
c. 1970
Oil & graphite on board
10.5 x 9 in.
Collection Kassandra Kelly

Untitled
1974
Enamel on steel
40 x 35 in.
Collection Dave & Ann Bronson

Untitled
1974
Enamel on steel
24 x 36 in.
Collection Norm & Kathy Bronson Dull

Untitled
1974
Enamel on steel
36 x 24 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Study
1975
Hot dipped galvanized steel
30 x 33 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled [Leland polygons]
1975
Watercolor & graphite on paper
18 x 26 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled [Leland polygons]
1975
Watercolor & graphite on paper
18 x 26 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Grandma's Dream II
1978
Acrylic & cray-pas on cardboard
15 x 16 in.
Private collection

Grandma's Dream XI
1978
Acrylic & cray-pas on cardboard
15 x 16 in.
Private collection

Streak o' Lighting
1978
Acrylic & cray-pas on cardboard
19 x 22.5 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Patchwork Six I
1979
Acrylic & watercolor on paper
11 x 15 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Patchwork Six III
1979
Acrylic & watercolor on paper
11 x 15 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Hooking I
1979
Cray-pas on cardboard
18 x 16 in.
Collection Lucy Stirling

Hooking II
1979
Cray-pas on cardboard
18 x 16 in.
Collection Lucy Stirling

Variable Split
1979
Corrugated cardboard & rhoplex on wooden frame
48 x 57 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Teppola II
1979
Painted steel
52 x 63 in.
Collection Mark & Melody Teppola

Jas #1
1979
Acrylic lacquer on etched steel
51 x 113 in.
Collection Portland Art Museum

Jas #3
1979
Acrylic lacquer on etched steel
73 x 134 in.
Collection Mark & Melody Teppola

Kassandra
1980/2011
Corrugated cardboard on wood frame
120 x 288 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Seto #3
1980
Cray-pas on wax paper
11 x 11 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Seto #4
1980
Cray-pas on wax paper
11 x 11 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled I [white on cream grid]
c. 1982–84
Acrylic on paper
20 x 26 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled II [white on cream grid]
c. 1982–84
Acrylic on paper
20 x 26 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled III [grids]
1985-86
Colored pencil, graphite and ink on paper
6 x 6 in.
Collection Susan Hammer

Untitled V [grids]
1985-86
Colored pencil, graphite and ink on paper
6 x 6 in.
Collection Ted & Elaine Molskness

Untitled VI [grids]
1985-86
Colored pencil, graphite and ink on paper
6 x 6 in.
Collection Theresa & Keith Chipperfield

Untitled VII [grids]
1985-86
Colored pencil, graphite and ink on paper
6 x 6 in.
Collection Sarrah & Carlos Torres

Untitled VIII [grids]
1985-86
Colored pencil, graphite and ink on paper
6 x 6 in.
Collection Steve & Gail Ossowski

Landscape through Window
1986
Lacquer on steel
48 x 36 or 36 x 48 in. (installation variable)
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Rinpoche's Window
1986
Lacquer on steel
52 x 36 or 36 x 52 in. (installation variable)
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Crossing the Black Water
1986
Watercolor and collage on paper
5 x 14 in.
Collection Susan Hammer

Landscape through Window
1986
Watercolor and collage on paper
5 x 14 in.
Collection Dave & Ann Bronson

Mera Peak
1986
Watercolor and collage on paper
5 x 14 in.
Collection Norm & Kathy Bronson Dull

Tuck Welded Kisses I
1987
Welded steel
13 x 36 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Serpent Feathers III
1987
Welded steel
20 x 35 in.
Collection Dave & Ann Bronson

Eight Deer I
1987
Porcelain enamel on steel
20 x 16 in.
Collection Lee Kelly

Chac Drawing III [cutout]
1988
Watercolor, graphite & ink on paper, mounted on board
13 x 17 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Chac Drawing VIII [cutout]
1988
Watercolor, graphite & ink on paper, mounted on board
13 x 17 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Chac III
1988
Carved wood & paint
18 x 14 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Chac VI
1988
Carved wood & paint
18 x 14 in.
Collection Lee Kelly

Untitled V [mosaic]
1990
Watercolor on paper
9 x 12 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Untitled VI [mosaic]
1990
Watercolor on paper
9 x 12 in.
Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Selected Public Sculptures & Commissions

Tree of Life (1964), welded bronze and enamel sculpture. University of Portland, Portland, Oregon. 5000 N Willamette Boulevard, exterior of Mehring Hall. Collaboration with Lee Kelly and John Kelly.

Women's Wall & Men's Wall (1974), wall sculptures. Nordstrom, Washington Square, Beaverton, Oregon. Missing, presumed destroyed.

Untitled (1974), enamel and steel sculpture. US National Bank, Sandy Boulevard Branch, Portland, Oregon. 7200 NE Fremont Street at Sandy Boulevard. Collaboration with Lee Kelly.

Untitled (1974), enamel and steel wall sculpture. Multnomah Athletic Club, Portland, Oregon. Collaboration with Lee Kelly.

Untitled (1975), enamel on steel wall relief. Willamette Savings and Loan, Milwaukie, Oregon. Sold to private collector at auction after collapse of bank.

Untitled (1975), commissioned enamel on steel wall relief. Citizen's Bank, Corvallis, Oregon.

Leland #1 (1975), enamel and COR-TEN steel outdoor sculpture. Portland Development Commission. Portland Center Park, Portland, Oregon. SW Lincoln Street near First Avenue SW. Collaboration with Lee Kelly. Restored in 2010 with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and Regional Arts & Culture Council.

Color II (1975), enamel on steel wall relief. Reed College, Gray Lounge in Kaul Auditorium. 3203 SE Woodstock Boulevard, Portland, Oregon. Gift of Lee Kelly and Kassandra Kelly, on behalf of the Estate of Bonnie Bronson.

Untitled (1976), enamel on steel wall relief. South Community College, Seattle, Washington.

Heidi Memorial Bird Bath & Bench (1976), outdoor sculpture. Volunteer Park, Seattle, Washington. Collaboration with Lee Kelly & David Valla.

The Doctors (1980), acid-etched steel wall sculpture. Professional Arts Building, Vancouver, Washington. Work subsequently re-sited to Oregon Health Sciences University, Portland campus.

Deerfield (1980), lacquered steel wall sculpture. Puyallup Public Schools, Chimicum, Washington.

Untitled (1982), porcelain enamel on steel wall sculpture, Justice Center, Portland, Oregon. 1120 SW Third Avenue, main lobby.

Torana Gateway (1982), commissioned outdoor stainless steel and acrylic lacquer sculpture. One Union Square, Seattle, Washington. Sixth Avenue at University Street. Collaboration with Lee Kelly.

Untitled (1983), outdoor porcelain enamel on steel façade sculpture. Wy'East Day Lodge, Timberline Lodge, Oregon.

Untitled (1984), commissioned enamel on steel wall sculpture. Southern Oregon State College, Ashland, Oregon.

Bellgate (1985), commissioned outdoor sculpture. Bellevue Pedestrian Corridor, Bellevue, Washington. Collaboration with Lee Kelly & David Cotter. Re-sited in 2007 to Meydenbauer Bay Park, Bellevue, Washington.

Memorial for Sir James McDonald (1987), outdoor sculpture, Elk Rock Gardens, Portland, Oregon. Collaboration with Lee Kelly.

Untitled (1989), porcelain enamel on steel façade sculpture, Renton Community Center, Renton, Washington. 1715 Maple Valley Highway.

Nepali Window (1989), commissioned outdoor enamel on steel façade sculpture, Metropolitan Arts Commission, Portland, Oregon. 337 SW Alder Street, exterior of Central Plaza Parking Structure.

Nepali Window (1991), steel wall sculpture, purchased by Oregon Health Science University, installed on Portland campus.

Chronology

1940
Born March 9, Portland, Oregon.

1957
Attends University of Kansas.

1958-59
Attends University of Oregon.

1959-61
Attends Portland Art Museum School (now Pacific Northwest College of Art).

1961
Marries sculptor Lee Kelly.

1962
48th Annual Exhibition of Northwest Artists, group exhibition. Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington.
Fountain Fete, group exhibition. Skidmore Fountain Plaza, Portland, Oregon.
Birth of son, Jason Howard Kelly, August 19.

1963
Artists of Oregon: Painting & Sculpture, group exhibition. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.
After their home and studio in Portland suffers considerable damage in the Columbus Day storm, Kelly & Bronson purchase a former dairy farm on five acres outside rural Oregon City. They remodel the forty-year-old barn for their studio spaces and begin replanting the property, mostly pasture land, with trees.

1964
Bonnie Bronson: Paintings, first one-person exhibition. Mt. Angel College, Mt. Angel, Oregon.
Four Young Painters, group exhibition. Marylhurst College, Marylhurst, Oregon.
Tree of Life, commissioned outdoor sculpture. University of Portland, Portland, Oregon. Collaboration with Lee Kelly and John Kelly.

1966
Bonnie Bronson: Metal & Paper, one-person exhibition of drawings, paintings on paper and welded steel wall reliefs. Mt. Angel College, Mt. Angel, Oregon.
Gallery Artists, group exhibition. Fountain Gallery, Portland, Oregon.

1969
Bonnie Bronson: Paintings & Works in Clay, one-person exhibition. Mt. Angel College, Mt. Angel, Oregon.
Bonnie Bronson & Lee Kelly: Recent Work, two-person exhibition. Marylhurst College, Marylhurst, Oregon.
Gallery Artists, group exhibition. Sally Judd Gallery, Portland, Oregon.

1970
Gallery Artists, group exhibition, Sally Judd Gallery, Portland, Oregon.

1971
Bonnie Bronson: Enamel on Steel Wall Hangings, one-person exhibition. John Bolles Gallery, San Francisco, California.
Drawings & Sculptures by Lee Kelly & Bonnie Bronson, two-person exhibition. Salishan Lodge, Gleneden Beach, Oregon.

1972
Bonnie Bronson: Enamel on Steel Wall Hangings, one-person exhibition. Sally Judd Gallery, Portland, Oregon.
Bonnie Bronson: Enamel on Steel, one-person exhibition. West Hills Unitarian Fellowship, Portland, Oregon.
Rankin House, enamel and steel sculptural core to single-family home, Portland, Oregon. Collaboration with Lee Kelly. Subsequently destroyed.
Gallery Artists, group exhibition. Bizarre Gallery, Cannon Beach, Oregon.

1973
Artists of Oregon, group exhibition. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.
Awarded Art Advocates Project grant, which she used to develop industrial enameling process for the arts at Pioneer Enameling Company, Seattle, Washington. Also, **Art Advocates 1972-73**, group exhibition by grant recipients at First Unitarian Church, Portland, Oregon.
Kelly, Bronson, and their children, Kassandra and Jason, begin making annual backpacking trips to Idaho and the area along the Salmon River, where Lee Kelly grew up.
Jason is diagnosed with leukemia. He attains remission easily.

1974
Bonnie Bronson: Enamels, one-person exhibition. Bizarre Gallery, Cannon Beach, Oregon.
Women's Wall & Men's Wall, a pair of commissioned wall reliefs. Nordstrom, Washington Square, Beaverton, Oregon.
Untitled, commissioned enamel and steel sculpture. US National Bank, Sandy Boulevard Branch, Portland, Oregon. Collaboration with Lee Kelly.
Untitled, commissioned enamel and steel sculpture. Multnomah Athletic Club, Portland, Oregon. Collaboration with Lee Kelly.
Family Show, exhibition with Lee Kelly, Kassandra Kelly and Jason Kelly. Contemporary Crafts Gallery, Portland, Oregon.

1975
Bonnie Bronson & Lee Kelly: Georgetown Series, collaborative works. Polly Friedlander Gallery, Seattle.
Bonnie Bronson: Enamel on Steel, one-person exhibition. Maude Kerns Art Center, Eugene, Oregon.
Untitled, commissioned enamel on steel wall relief. Willamette Savings and Loan, Portland, Oregon.
Untitled, commissioned enamel on steel wall relief. Citizen's Bank, Corvallis, Oregon.
Leland #1, commissioned enamel and steel outdoor sculpture. Portland Development Commission. Portland Center (Second Avenue) Park, Portland, Oregon. Collaboration with Lee Kelly.
Artists of Oregon, group exhibition. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.
1954-1964 in Retrospect, group exhibition. Sally Judd Gallery, Portland, Oregon.
Oregon Women Artists, group exhibition. Wentz Gallery, Museum Art School, Portland, Oregon.

1976
Bonnie Bronson: Enamel and Cardboard, one-person exhibition. Contemporary Crafts Gallery, Portland, Oregon.
Untitled, commissioned enamel on steel wall relief. South Community College, Seattle, Washington.
Heidi Memorial Bird Bath & Bench, commissioned outdoor sculpture. Volunteer Park, Seattle, Washington. Collaboration with Lee Kelly & David Valla.
Art Advocates 1966-1976, group exhibition. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.
Six Women Artists, group exhibition. Clackamas Community College, Oregon City, Oregon. With panel discussion.

1977
Bonnie Bronson: Cardboard Wall Works, one-person exhibition. Polly Friedlander Gallery, Seattle, Washington.
Works by Women on Paper, national invitational group exhibition. Women's Building & Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California.
Jason's disease returns in a more aggressive form.

1978
Five Women, group exhibition. Reed College, Portland, Oregon. With panel discussion.
Outdoor Sculpture Invitational, group exhibition. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.
Awarded Oregon Arts Commission Individual Artist Fellowship.
May 10, Jason dies.

1979
Bonnie Bronson: Recent Wall Pieces & Drawings, one-person exhibition.
Portland Art Museum. Portland, Oregon. Includes **Jas** series of monumental wall sculptures.
Bonnie Bronson: Acrylic on Paper, one-person exhibition. Traver Gallery, Seattle, Washington.
ArtQuake, group exhibition. ArtQuake Festival, Portland, Oregon.
Sculpture Invitational, group exhibition. Foster/White Gallery, Seattle,Washington.
First visit to Nepal and India with Lee Kelly.

1980-82
Member, Board of Directors. Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, Oregon.

1980
Kassandra Wall, one-person exhibition. Blackfish Gallery, Portland, Oregon.
Bonnie Bronson, one-person exhibition. Governor's Ceremonial Office, Salem, Oregon.
The Doctors, commissioned acid-etched steel wall sculpture. Professional Arts Building, Vancouver, Washington.
Deerfield, commissioned lacquered steel wall sculpture. Puyallup Public Schools, Chimicum, Washington.
Artists of Blackfish Gallery, group exhibition. Cheney Cowles Museum, Spokane, Washington.
Images North and South, group exhibition. Boise Gallery of Art, Boise, Idaho.

1981
Contemporary American Art from the Collection, group exhibition. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon
Recent works by Lee Kelly & Bonnie Bronson, two-person exhibition. Salishan Lodge, Gleneden Beach, Oregon.

1982
Bonnie Bronson: Leland Wall Sculptures, one-person exhibition. Blackfish Gallery, Portland, Oregon.
Untitled, commissioned porcelain enamel on steel wall sculpture, Justice Center, Portland, Oregon.
Torana Gateway, commissioned outdoor stainless steel and acrylic lacquer sculpture. One Union Square, Seattle, Washington. Collaboration with Lee Kelly.
Returns to Nepal with Lee and Kassandra Kelly.

1983
Untitled, commissioned outdoor façade sculpture, porcelain enamel on steel, Wy'East Day Lodge, Timberline Lodge, Oregon.
Bonnie Bronson: Metal Collages, one-person exhibition. Hodges/Banks Gallery, Seattle, Washington.
Oregon Biennial, group exhibition. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.

1984
Untitled, commissioned enamel on steel wall sculpture. Southern Oregon State College, Ashland, Oregon.
Gallery Artists, group exhibition. Hodges/Banks gallery, Seattle, Washington.
Women Painters of Mithila, group exhibition. Folk Craft Gallery, Portland, Oregon. Curated by Bonnie Bronson & Lee Kelly of works from their collection by women of India's Mithila province.
First ascent of Mt. Hood.

1985
Bonnie Bronson: Painted Steel, Fountain Gallery, Portland, Oregon.
Bellgate, commissioned outdoor sculpture. Bellevue Pedestrian Corridor, Bellevue, Washington. Collaboration with David Cotter & Lee Kelly.
Sunriver Invitational, group exhibition. Sunriver, Oregon.
Metal: Mountain High Invitational, group exhibition. Timberline Lodge Oregon.
Begins designing tapestries for weaving in Nepal, using traditional wools, dyes and weaving techniques.
First travels in Mexico with Kelly and friends/patrons, Mark & Melody Teppola. Visits archaeological sites at Chichen Itza, Uxmal and Mexico City—experiences that directly influence her work of the next several years.

1986
Bonnie Bronson: Nepali Windows, one-person exhibition. Hodges/Banks Gallery, Seattle, Washington.
25th Anniversary Exhibition, group exhibition, Fountain Gallery, Portland, Oregon.
75th Anniversary Exhibition, group exhibition. Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, Oregon.
Ascents of Mt. Rainier, Mt. Adams. Ice and rock climbing seminars.

1987-89
Ascents of Mt. Washington, Broken Top.

1987
Bonnie Bronson: Serpent Feathers, one-person exhibition. Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, Oregon.
Bonnie Bronson: Patan Watercolors, one-person exhibition. Cabell Center, Catlin Gabel School, Portland, Oregon.
Memorial for Sir James McDonald, commissioned outdoor sculpture, Elk Rock Gardens, Portland, Oregon. Collaboration with Lee Kelly.
Member, Design Team for Washington State University's Glenn Terrell Friendship Mall. Washington State Arts Commission, National Endowment for the Arts and Washington State University.
Bonnie becomes a grandmother, with birth of grandson, Carter Bronson Stirling.

1988
Bonnie Bronson: Chac Series, Linda Hodges Gallery, Seattle, Washington.
Bonnie Bronson: Serpent Feathers & Eight Deer, Art Gym, Marylhurst College, Marylhurst, Oregon.
Untitled, commissioned outdoor enamel on steel façade sculpture, Renton Community Center, Renton, Washington.
Lee Kelly & Bonnie Bronson, two-person exhibition. Lopez Community Library, Lopez Island, Washington.
Mixed Media Wall Reliefs, group exhibition. Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, Oregon.
Hosts month-long broadcast of **Arts Focus** series on art and architecture, and hosts women architects for International Women's Day. KBOO-FM radio, Portland, Oregon.

1989
Bonnie Bronson: Chac Series, one-person exhibition. Marquam Hill Society at Oregon Health Sciences University, Portland, Oregon.
Installation of **Nepali Window**, commissioned outdoor enameled steel wall relief, Metropolitan Arts Commission, Central Parking structure, Portland, Oregon.
Bonnie becomes a grandmother again, with birth of granddaughter Lucy Lee Stirling.

1990
Awarded Metropolitan Arts Commission grant to develop, in collaboration with Portland composer Michael Stirling, an interactive climbing wall with sound triggered by motion sensors.
August 4, Bonnie dies while climbing with Kelly and Mark Stevenson on Mazama Glacier, Mt. Adams.

1991
Nepali Window, steel wall sculpture, purchased by Oregon Health Science University, installed on Portland campus.
Bonnie Bronson Fund is established under the auspices of the Oregon Community Foundation. The purpose of the fund is to award an annual fellowship for a regional artist, and build a collection of their works. The Fund awards its first fellowship in 1992, and, in 1996, Reed College accepted the collection as a long-term loan.

1993
Bonnie Bronson: A Retrospective, one-person exhibition. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.

Bonnie Bronson, '61, Collecting Inspiration

A PNCA alumna class of 1961, Bonnie Bronson's inspiration lives everywhere in our city. In particular, at the publishing of this catalog, it lives in the galleries and museums of seven institutions—The Art Gym at Marylhurst University, The Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College, Elizabeth Leach Gallery, The Ronna and Eric Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College, Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland Art Museum and The White Box at the University of Oregon—which are all honoring the 20th anniversary of the Bonnie Bronson Fund with simultaneous exhibitions. But this is really only the wonderful beginning, for Bonnie's work can be found in collections and public spaces throughout the region. There is a wonderful Bronson-Kelly collaboration in the Multnomah Athletic Club, for example; and Bronson fireplace and kitchen installations in a number of other homes I have visited. At PNCA, there is a painting that Bonnie completed in 1960, while a student, perhaps selected from her thesis exhibition for the school archive. You will find it in the history corridor in the main campus building. It is a portrait of a seated woman—perhaps an artist—rendered in impressionistic style, with bold colors and brushwork. My favorite aspect of the painting is its subtle central focal point: the strong fingers of a hand, folded easily over a forearm, catching and releasing the light.

As the anniversary exhibitions are intended to demonstrate, the influence of Bonnie Bronson extends beyond her own work in a manner that one can only believe she would have approved. Through the work of the Foundation and the fellowship program it operates, the careers of twenty of Portland's most talented mid-career artists have been advanced, allowing for the pursuit of new avenues of investigation and the production of new bodies of work. The results benefit all who care about the quality of our shared culture, and they regenerate Bonnie Bronson's own inspirational artistic vision and legacy.

The community-wide celebration of Bonnie Bronson and the 20th Anniversary of the Bonnie Bronson Foundation could not have happened without the vision and dedication of Joan Shipley, a lifelong friend of the artist and her family. In her gentle and incomparable way, Joan has carried forward the legacy of one of Oregon's master artists, ensuring that Bonnie Bronson's spirit will continue to inspire future generations.

Tom Manley
President

Colophon

Published on the occasion of the exhibition **Bonnie Bronson: Works 1960–1990**, organized by Randal Davis and The Bonnie Bronson Estate.

Bonnie Bronson: Works 1960–1990
Pacific Northwest College of Art
September 1– October 9, 2011

This exhibition, coinciding with the 20th anniversary of the Bonnie Bronson Fund, is the first major showing of her work in nearly two decades, since the Portland Art Museum's posthumous survey in 1993. A comprehensive exploration of her entire body of work, the exhibition includes many drawings and paintings on paper, the majority of which have never been exhibited. In archiving the contents of the Estate, a cache of some six dozen works never exhibited was discovered, packed for nearly thirty years, spanning her student years to the early 1980s. The depth of material in **Bonnie Bronson: Works 1960–1990** offers a view of her oeuvre more complex than any previous exhibition.

Gifts and Special Thanks
PNCA is grateful for the support of the individuals, corporations and foundations whose gifts have helped to make this exhibition possible.

Major Exhibition Support
Ford Family Foundation
The Wyss Foundation

Carole Alexander
Lisa Andrus-Rivera
Ann and Dave Bronson
Anne and James Crumpacker
Marilyn Deering
John W. Failor
Marilyn Fletcher
Paul Hart and Jan Jacobsen
Lee Kelly and Susan Hammer
John and Sally Lawrence
Tom Manley and Susanne Hashim
Richard and Mary Rosenberg
Shirley and Dennis Schiller
Joan and John Shipley
Al Solheim

Special thanks to Ben Bright Photography and Box and Foam for its contribution of resources which helped to make the **Kassandra** installation possible. Special thanks to Badger, Justin Kenney and Lucy Stirling for their work on the reconstruction of **Kassandra**.

Additional thanks to the lenders for generously sharing work from their collections, and to Mrs. Margaret Bronson, Linda Coghill, National Builders Hardware, Roger Porter, Carter Stirling, Susan Teppola and Winestock for their friendship and support.

PNCA is especially grateful to the friends and family of Bonnie Bronson. Lee Kelly, Kassandra Kelly and Randal Davis have worked with tremendous care to bring this retrospective to life.

Catalog Essay
Randal Davis, The Estate of Bonnie Bronson

Catalog Design
Scott Ponik

Photography
Ben Bright Photography

Bonnie Bronson: Works 1960–1990 catalog produced by PNCA Department of Communications and Public Programs

Editorial Project Management
Becca Biggs, Director of Communications

Design Project Management
Dave Roos, PNCA Graphic Designer

Copy Editing
Anna Gray

Printing
Brown Printing Inc., Portland

ISBN 978-0-9844562-1-5

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Published by
Pacific Northwest College of Art
1241 NW Johnson St.
Portland, OR 97209
www.pnca.edu

Front/back cover: **Landscape through Window** (1986), Shown in two axial rotations;
pp. 18-19: **Plan** (detail), Bonnie Bronson's original master layout for **Kassandra**;
pp. 32-33: Photo of Bonnie Bronson, courtesy the Estate of Bonnie Bronson