

Bonnie Bronson
Notes on the "module"

As Bonnie Bronson moved away from her early Abstraction Expressionist work, she made more frequent and explicit use of what she came to call "modular composition." This formal device became a defining character of nearly all of her work from the late 1960s until her premature death in 1990.

It's perhaps easiest to understand what the module *was not* for Bronson since it was no less a determinative characteristic of much art of the period. It was not, to be sure, axiomatic as with Le Corbusier or Donald Judd (1928-1994); it was not rule-driven as with Sol LeWitt (1928-2007), nor was it based on arbitrary ("ready-made") elements, such as Carl Andre's (1935-) firebricks.

For Bronson, a "module" was simply a contained pictorial element: a shape, certainly, possibly of uniform color or texture, often modulated through stages of monochrome or a spectrum, a technique of which she was a master. This is amply evident in the works here, notably the subtly but densely worked *Grids* and the liquid *Seto*. More broadly, the module became the basic formal device by which she mediated order and disorder, similarity and difference, repetition and change.

From this vantage, Bronson seems almost closer to the distancing of Jasper Johns' "things the mind already knows." The 10 works in the *Grids* all depend upon the same simple 16-unit square. They further share formal device of the circle whose diameter is equal to the horizontal/vertical span of a single unit. This becomes, with a Johnsian echo, a target at once blank and filled in. With macro-structural choices made, in effect, pre-compositionally, Bronson then went to work to differentiate the works in the series with an almost obsessive attention to micro-detail and -structure.

A special note might be made of several works here, too, for their interesting position in Bronson's *oeuvre*. She and Lee Kelly were great travellers, and led several treks into the Himalayas. From these Nepalese excursions came a remarkable collaboration, though one which hardly moved past a nascent stage. They proposed to create artist-designed carpets which were to be fabricated by Nepalese craftspeople; they both created designs and even worked together on a small artist's book. Several carpets were in fact executed, but the collaboration never went past these few prototypes; shown here are two of Bronson's unrealized designs.

Another unusual work is also one of her last, the *Untitled [mosaic watercolor]*. Bronson's work was in the process of profound change at the time of her death. Becoming much more influenced by her travels with Kelly, in this case to the Yucatan region, aspects of her work became formally far looser and her extraordinary gifts as a colorist, typically exercised within a comparatively reduced range, took on a considerable flamboyance.

Yet deep preoccupations with structure, repetition and difference remained. In *Untitled [mosaic watercolor]* the macroscopic division of the space seems almost arbitrary, becoming instead the vehicle for a dizzying array of hatchings and other devices. Among her final works was an [unrealized] proposal for the design of an airport lounge in which literally every surface was, in the manner of the small watercolor here, executed in a different patterning.

Lucy Lippard's 1972 essay on the grid could well have been written with Bonnie Bronson in mind. "The grid," Lippard suggested, is a space of possibility and change, "music paper for color, idea, state of mind...."

Oregon artist Bonnie Bronson was born in 1940 in Portland. After several years at the University of Kansas and the University of Oregon, she returned to Portland. She met Lee Kelly in 1961 while a student at the Museum Art School, now the Pacific Northwest College of Art. They married that same year and moved from Portland to Oregon City in 1963, beginning the transformation of a former dairy farm into a complex of studio and living spaces. Her career lasted from 1964 to 1990, ended by her death in a mountaineering accident on Mt. Adams.

Her work was shown in Portland and throughout the Pacific Northwest at, among others, Blackfish Gallery, the Fountain Gallery, the Art Gym at Marylhurst College and the Elizabeth Leach Gallery. Her work was the subject of solo exhibition at the Portland Art Museum in 1979 and a posthumous retrospective there in 1993. In the fall of 2011, her work was the subject of a major retrospective exhibition, *Bonnie Bronson: Works 1960–1990* at the Pacific Northwest College of Art.

Notable public commissions included the University of Portland, Oregon Health Sciences University, Timberline Lodge, Multnomah County Justice Center, and One Union Square and Volunteer Park, both in Seattle. Her work is in the collection of the Portland Art Museum, the Seattle Art Museum and the Hallie Ford Museum of Art. The Estate of Bonnie Bronson is represented by the Elizabeth Leach Gallery.

A portion of the proceeds of sales from this exhibition will benefit The Lee Kelly Fund. The Lee Kelly Fund, a donor-advised fund held by the Oregon Community Foundation, was established by his family to support academic research and exhibition opportunities concerning the work of Lee Kelly and Bonnie Bronson. For more information, contact leekellyfund@gmail.com.

Works in the exhibition

[clockwise from door]

Untitled [Grids IX] 1985-86
colored pencil, graphite, ink on paper
6 by 6 inches \$600

Untitled [Grids I] 1985-86
colored pencil, graphite, ink on paper
6 by 6 inches \$600

Untitled [pink grid] c. 1982-84
watercolor, graphite on paper
10 by 12.75 inches \$1,000

Untitled [gray field] 1981
acrylic on paper
20 by 24 inches \$1,800

Seto 1980
monoprint
11 by 11 inches \$1,500

Untitled [study for purple carpet] 1988-89
graphite, colored pencil on paper
12 by 12 inches \$1,000

Untitled [study for green carpet] 1988-89
graphite, colored pencil on paper
12 by 12 inches \$1,000

Untitled [watercolor mosaic] 1990
graphite, ink, watercolor on paper
9 by 12 inches \$1,000



**Leland Iron
Works**