

Bonnie Bronson  
*Selected Works on Paper 1972-1988*

The short years of Bonnie Bronson's career, barely more than two decades, saw the development of a mercurial talent. The assured mastery of the Abstract Expressionist idiom, even in her paintings as a very young artist, were already a plateau in which she might have remained for some years.

Instead, this quickly gave way to an extraordinary series of wall mounted 3-dimensional metal constructions; then, and still, the only real counterpart to these are those of Lee Bontecou (1931- ) and perhaps, loosely, John Chamberlain (1927-2011) though Bronson remained, strangely, very painterly in her execution. Despite the apparent brutality of some of the jagged edges of these mysterious, sometimes slightly menacing works, Bronson's metal reliefs retained the spirit of the earliest *papier colle* of early Cubism.

But as the Abstract Expressionist idiom became more remote, she began increasingly to use patterns and repetition; she came to call this "modular" composition though in her use it was, to be sure, neither axiomatic as with Le Corbusier or Donald Judd (1928-1994) nor rule-driven as with Sol LeWitt (1928-2007). For Bronson, a "module" was simply a contained pictorial element: a shape, certainly, possible of uniform color or texture, or also possibly modulated through stages of monochrome or a spectrum, a technique of which she was a master.

The interior of *Leland #1* (1975), for example, a large scale collaboration with Lee Kelly, makes this especially evident. Set in the center of a small glade in south downtown Portland, surrounded by high-rise buildings, it is a formidable structure of weathered Cor-ten steel. One cannot but think of archaic dolmens and henges. On closer approach, though, an interior labyrinth is revealed, lined with enameled steel tiles of a bewildering array of seemingly random shapes and gradations of a rich dark red.

Or in *Kassandra* (1980), one of her most extraordinary works, a collection of rectangles of varying two (and three) dimensions, fabricated from folded raw corrugated cardboard as two dozen different "modules," in a jagged "wallscape" 10 feet high and 24 feet long. The formal device of the module, in this case the aggregate of size, shape and slope (the cardboard remained unfinished) suggested a potentially infinite extension. It is interesting to note here that, based on photographic evidence from her studio, she determined at the last minute to *invert the entire work*, itself an assembly of, typically 40 or so of the small panels into 8 larger (10 foot by 3 foot) modules, for its first exhibition.

The module became the basic formal device by which she mediated order and disorder, similarity and difference, repetition and change. Although her work was sometimes linked to minimalism, she was in fact far closer to the postminimalism of Eva Hesse (1936-1970) or her near-exact contemporary Jennifer Bartlett (1940-2022). But throughout her career, Bronson remained an astonishing colorist, as apparent in the subtle modulations of the Grids or Nepali Window series or the comparative abandon of her last works, strikingly influenced by her travels in the Yucatan.

That change is the only constant may be a truism, but it could hardly be more apposite for Bronson. The evident joy she took in the sheer materiality of the work belied a restless and probing formal intelligence. This small selection of works hints at the range of her virtuosity, the echoes and correspondences that animated her brief career. As Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge put it, "the summit moves with the tide."

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.

Bonnie Bronson  
*Selected Works on Paper 1972-1988*

*[clockwise from door]*

*Window [diptych] (1972)*  
acrylic on paper  
24 by 31 inches overall  
\$2,300

*Study for Nepali Temple (1986)*  
mixed media on vellum  
18 by 24 inches  
NFS

*Nordstrom M & W [final stage] (1973)*  
sepia photographic print from drawing  
24 by 17 & 24 by 18 inches  
NFS

*Untitled [soft pattern] (1978)*  
colored pencil & pastel on paper  
22 by 30 inches  
\$1,400

*Untitled [frottage pattern] (1978)*  
colored pencil & pastel on paper  
18 by 24 inches  
\$1,200

*Four Studies for Leland Series (1982)*  
colored pencil on paper  
8 by 8 inches  
\$600 each

*Hillary (1983)*  
mixed media on steel  
20 ½ by 20 ½ inches  
\$4,600

*Justin (1983)*  
acrylic on steel  
20 ½ by 20 ½ inches  
\$4,600

*Landscape Through Window [2 views] (1986)*  
photographic print of metal sculpture  
48 by 36 [or] 36 by 48 inches - installation can  
rotate through any of the cardinal orientations  
NFS

*Untitled [irregular pale polygons] (1975)*  
mixed media on paper  
26 by 36 inches  
\$1,800 each

*Nepali Windows [selections] (1986)*  
ink, watercolor & collage on paper  
5 by 14 inches  
\$800 each

*Untitled [multiple patterns] (n.d.)*  
26 by 36 inches  
graphite, ink & colored pencil on paper  
\$1,800

*Grids [selections] (1986-1988)*  
colored pencil, graphite & ink on paper  
6 by 6 inches  
\$600

*Drawings for Chac [selections] 1988*  
graphite & colored pencil on paper  
24 by 18 inches  
\$1,600

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](mailto:leekellyfund@gmail.com). A portion of the proceeds of sales from this exhibition benefit The Lee Kelly Fund.



**Leland Iron  
Works**