Lee Bontecou: Drawn Worlds is organized by the Menil Collection and curated by Michelle White. This exhibition is generously supported by Louisa Stude Sarofim; The Brown Foundation, Inc.; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; The John R. Eckerd, Jr. Foundation; Marilyn Ohbien; Agnes Gund; and the City of Houston.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS
A Conversation
Thursday, February 27, 7:00 p.m.
Curator Michelle White is joined by Maura Reilly, executive director of the Linda Pace Foundation; and Veronica Roberts, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas at Austin, in a conversation about the exhibition.

Lee Bontecou: Nature, Wonder, Horror, and Play
Tuesday, April 1, 7:00 p.m.
Mona Hadler, professor of art history at Brooklyn College and the Graduate School of the City University of New York, discusses Lee Bontecou’s work.

BOOK
Lee Bontecou: Drawn Worlds
Michelle White, with contributions by Dana Aschenbrenner and Joan Banach
144 pages, 91 illus.; hardcover, $50
Available at the Menil Bookstore

Lee Bontecou
Drawn Worlds

Lee Bontecou, Untitled (b. 1958), Soot on paper, 27 x 39 inches (68.6 x 99.1 cm). Collection of Gail and Tony Ganz, Los Angeles. Photo: Ed Glendinning

The Menil Collection
January 31–May 11, 2014

American artist Lee Bontecou (b. 1931) is known for her pioneering sculptures made of raw and expressionistic materials. Though best known for her three-dimensional work, drawing has always been an equally important component of her artistic practice. Lee Bontecou: Drawn Worlds brings together a selection of works on paper from throughout the artist’s over fifty-year-long career, from early soot drawings created with a welding torch to recent works in graphite and colored pencil. Calling her drawings “worldscapes,” Bontecou has produced an incredible body of work that propels us into fantastic space.

Lee Bontecou understands drawing as a process of discovery, a place to solve problems, and a means to explore the imagination. While the artist plans and experiments on paper in anticipation of constructing her sculptural forms, there is not always a traditional progression in her process from drawing, as foundational step, to sculpture, as final outcome. She often goes back and forth between three and two dimensions, and there is not necessarily a clear point of origin for an idea or an image. Though many of her drawings are formally intertwined with her sculptural forms, there is not always a traditional progression from drawing to sculpture; she ultimately stands on her own as works in and of themselves. In them, she employs, even relishes, methods unique to the medium, revealing her deeply pleasure-full and tactile approach, as well as the great care she places in the art of drafting.

The variety of drawing techniques Bontecou employs is extraordinary. She achieves slick surfaces by working on plastic or by prepping paper supports with gun, leading to smooth passages of graphite. There are bold, repetitious, and impressionistic marks inspired by her love of drawings by Vincent van Gogh, stratified bands of hatched lines, and sweeping gestures created modulated tones, like those made by a commercial airbrush. With its seductive, velvety presence and illusion of depth, the black soot generated a world of its own.

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One of Bontecou’s most innovative approaches to material involves the use of soot. While in Rome on a Fulbright scholarship in the late 1950s, she discovered that she could use a welding torch to draw. Turning off the oxygen to an oxyacetylene torch, she deployed only an acetylene flame, which has a lower temperature and does not set paper on fire. The acetylene flame also produces more soot, and as a result, she discovered that, by moving the torch back and forth or blowing the flame from below the paper, she could spray the carbon-based powder and incrementally build up layers in gradated bands. The sweeping gestures created modulated tones, like those made by a commercial airbrush. With its seductive, velvety presence and illusion of depth, the black soot generated a world of its own.

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Lee Bontecou, Untitled, 2011. Graphite on paper, 30 x 44 inches (76 x 111.8 cm). Collection of the artist. Photo: Paul Hester

Lee Bontecou, Untitled, 1961. Graphite on paper, 22 x 28¾ inches (57.5 x 72.9 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester

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