

KINDRED SPIRITS

Louise Nevelson & Dorothy Hood



Louise Nevelson (1899–1988) and Dorothy Hood (1918–2000) were independent women, ardently committed to assuming leading roles at the forefront of the American vanguard. Coming of age as artists in the 1940s—Nevelson in New York, and Hood in Mexico and Texas—they frequently drew inspiration from common sources, balancing abstraction and content as they synthesized the lessons of Pre-Columbian art, Cubism, and Surrealism into the bold, new language of midcentury Modernism.

The exhibition *Kindred Spirits: Louise Nevelson & Dorothy Hood* features works from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi, as well as selected local loans, to highlight the affinities that can be found in the careers of these two artists across five decades. Although Nevelson and Hood have been featured together in larger surveys, this exhibition is the first to focus on their work side by side, examining the physical and metaphysical territories they mapped in sculptures, paintings, and works on paper of startling originality.

Kindred Spirits: Louise Nevelson & Dorothy Hood

November 3, 2018–February 3, 2019

This exhibition is organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Generous support provided by:

Johanna and Stephen Donson

Madeline Kelly

Gary Mercer

Carol Lynne Werner

Louise Nevelson & Dorothy Hood: A Shared Legacy

In the mid-1950s, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, was among the first institutions to collect works by Louise Nevelson and Dorothy Hood, and both artists celebrated career milestones in this city with major exhibitions in 1969 and 1970, respectively. Hood was also the focus of a drawings retrospective at this museum in 1975, and her work was supported by annual and biennial exhibitions at Meredith Long & Company, her primary gallery, from 1962 to 1996. Nevelson and Hood enjoyed important public commissions in Houston as well, and their works are now represented in great depth in Texas collections.



Louise Nevelson, *Bird Form*, c. 1945, marble, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, 54.18.

Bird Form reveals the influences that Louise Nevelson drew upon while shaping the basic vocabulary of her early sculptures. Its polished finish and rounded edges reflect her training with the sculptor Chaim Gross. Its reductive aesthetic also echoes the Pre-Columbian and Native American carvings that Nevelson discovered in 1933 through Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo and visits to Mexico.



Dorothy Hood, *Warrior's Plumage*, 1957, ink on paper, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Mrs. Eugene Wagner, 57.44.

Dorothy Hood first established herself as an artist of note through her drawings, and *Warrior's Plumage* eloquently demonstrates her confident command of line as both a descriptive and emotional force. The composition is dominated by an omniscient eye, while Hood's tautly flowing calligraphy describes distant landscapes and delicate plumes. The title alludes to Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec feathered serpent deity who embodied creation between earth and sky. At the same time, Hood insisted that her work existed primarily in a space “for the purpose of its psychological and psychic meaning.”

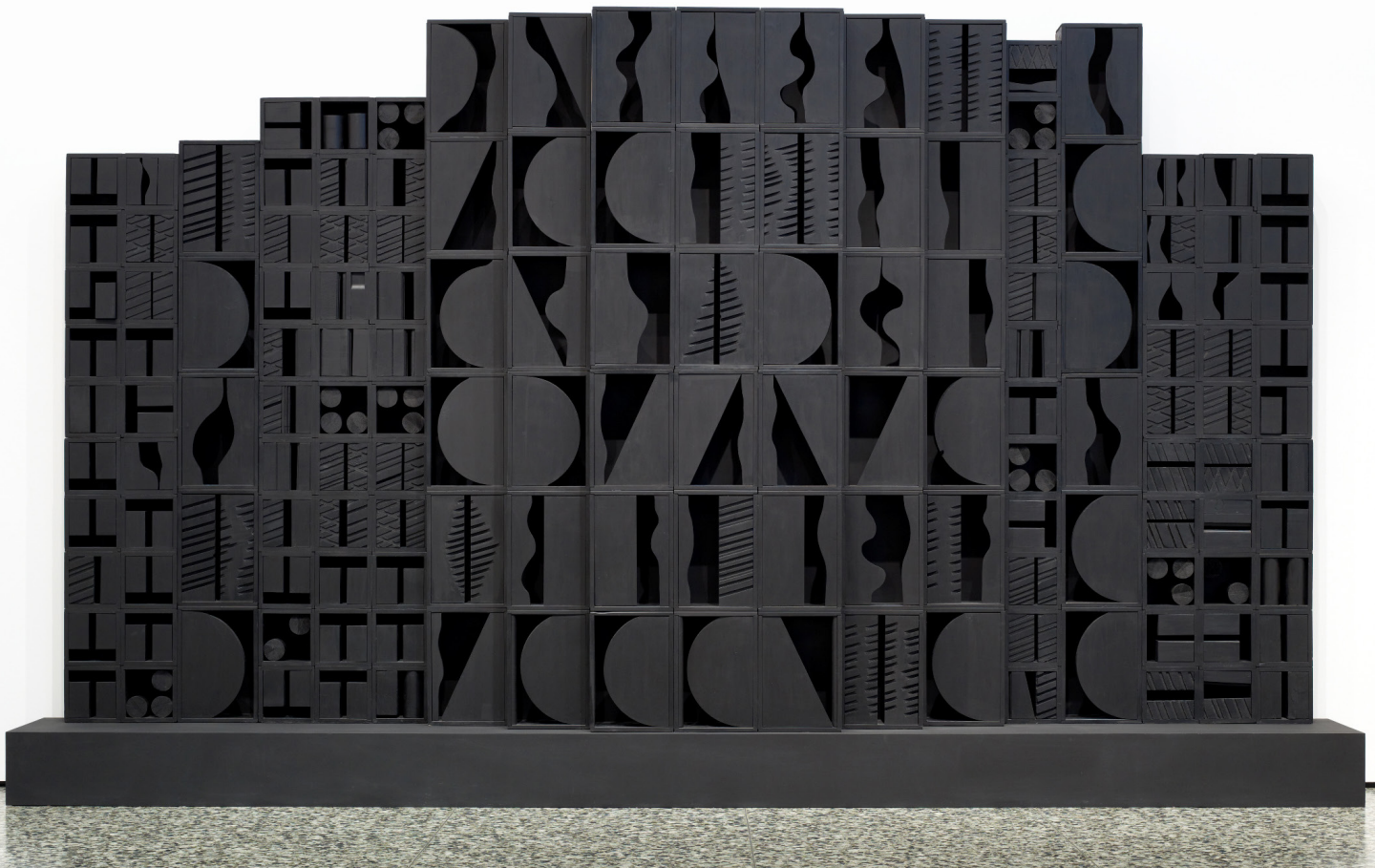
Louise Nevelson at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Louise Nevelson entered the international stage in the 1960s with exhibitions in New York, Venice, London, and Bern, and her first retrospective was hosted by the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1967. Two years later, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, brought her work to Texas audiences with a second retrospective. Organized by interim director Mary Buxton, this was one of the few solo shows devoted to a woman artist at this museum in the 1960s.

“This is the most perfect exhibition installation my works have ever had,” Nevelson commented to Ann Holmes for the *Houston Chronicle*. Nevelson oversaw the installation in the Museum’s Cullinan Hall, using spotlights to heighten the dramatic theatricality of her work. Visitors entering the exhibition would have first seen an array of white sculpture, and then would have been drawn deeper into the gallery by Nevelson’s “night music” of monochromatic black reliefs.



Louise Nevelson, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, October 23–December 14, 1969.
Mirror Image I, from the Museum's collection, can be seen at the center of the gallery.



Louise Nevelson, *Mirror Image I*, 1969, painted wood, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by The Brown Foundation, Inc., 69.10.

Louise Nevelson created *Mirror Image I* to be the centerpiece of her 1969 retrospective in the Museum's Cullinan Hall, and its clean Modernism echoes that of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's architecture.

Nevelson's embrace of more reductive, geometric volumes during the late 1960s has been compared to the emergence of Minimalism. However, the cut-out curvilinear and geometric elements that activate the surface of the relief are closer to the example of Henri Matisse's cutouts, while the deep, shadowy voids that dominate the center of the relief retain the mystery that was always characteristic of Nevelson's mature work.

Dorothy Hood at the Contemporary Arts Museum

During the 1960s, Dorothy Hood became firmly established in Houston through exhibitions with her primary gallery Meredith Long & Company. Her first significant museum presentation was hosted by Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum in 1970, during an interim period when the institution occupied the Jones Hall Gallery at the University of St. Thomas. Director Sebastian J. Adler helped Hood secure a larger studio in preparation for this exhibition, which introduced her most ambitious paintings to date.

Dorothy Hood: Recent Paintings was hung in rhythmic intervals, with the larger works running from floor to ceiling. Using organic tones, black and white, and intense primary colors, Hood infused her canvases with a new sense of space and tonal vibrancy.



Dorothy Hood: Recent Paintings, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, May 8–June 14, 1970.
Haiti, from the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, can be seen on the far right.



Dorothy Hood, *Haiti*, 1969, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Meredith J. Long, 70.68.

Haiti, Dorothy Hood's first truly monumental painting, was featured in her 1970 exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Hood stated, "I feel that I have met my scale. I have now been able to do what I have never done before. . . . For me this has been the difference between a small orchestra and full symphony."

Hood's confident command of scale and her use of a central black field to anchor the composition may reflect her experience of Louise Nevelson's 1969 retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Hood was on the faculty of the Museum School, housed in the same building, and she would have been keenly aware of Nevelson's achievement.

Louise Nevelson Collages

In the late 1960s, Louise Nevelson embarked on a series of abstract collages notable for their pared-down and elemental simplicity. Using colored papers, cardboard boxes, paper sacks, and scraps of fabric that she discovered on the streets of her lower Manhattan neighborhood, she then arranged these fragments on plywood supports, so that the wood grain could be an active element in the composition. This method also allowed Nevelson to break with the monochrome palette of her sculptures, and to express a new degree of freedom as she broke from the grid.

Nevelson acknowledged the legacy of Cubist collages created by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso in the 1910s in these works. However, where Braque and Picasso toyed with word play and illusion, using fragments of text and printed materials that had the appearance of wood grain, Nevelson refrained from illusionism or any suggestion of narrative.



Louise Nevelson, *Untitled*, 1969, cardboard, wood, and paper on board, collection of Charles Dishman.

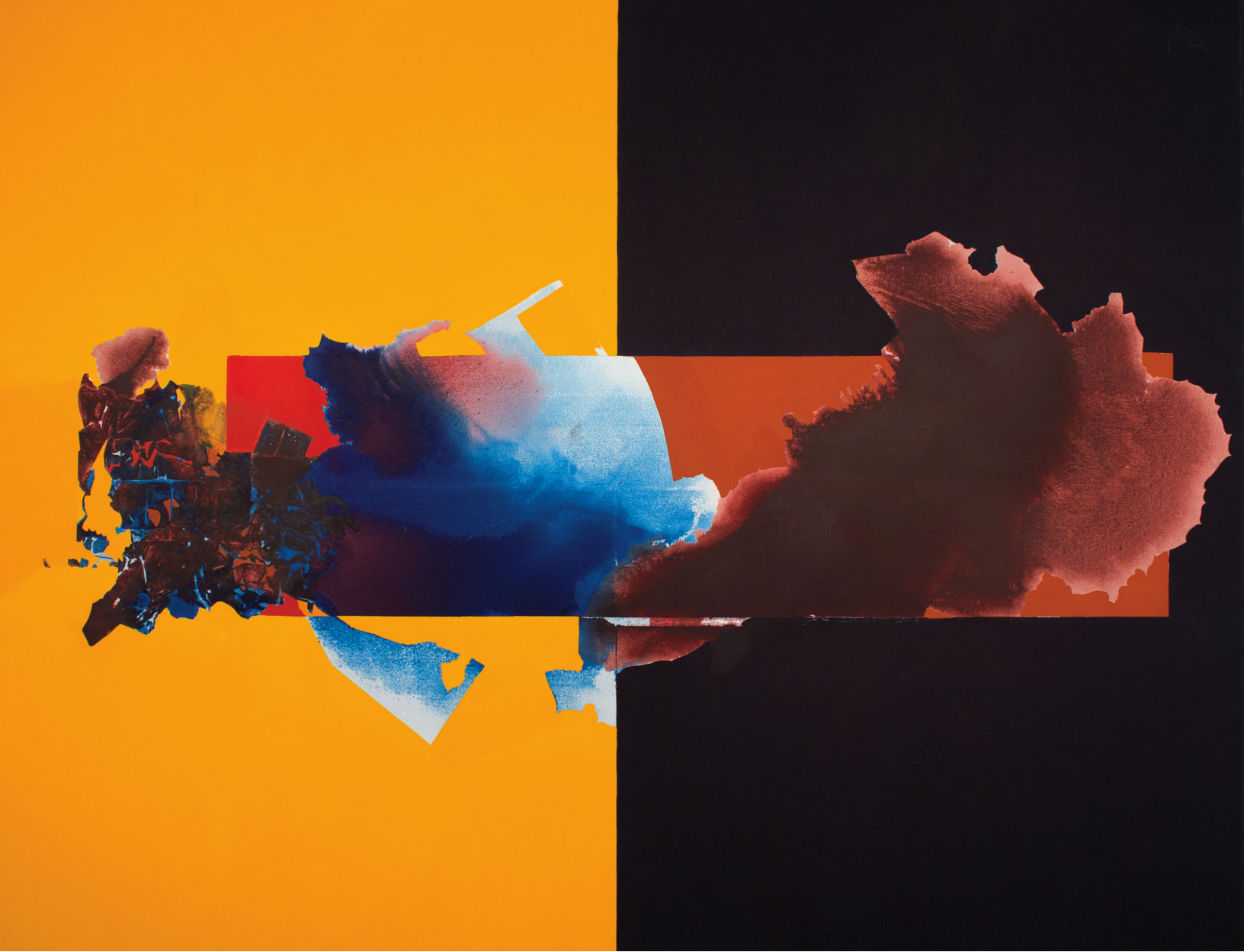
Dorothy Hood Collages

Following a 1981 trip to Egypt, where she amassed handfuls of beautifully printed papers, Dorothy Hood launched into a series of collages that were to occupy her for more than a decade. She found in collage an intimate, creative outlet that was less demanding than her large canvases, and she also appreciated the lineage of collage in both Cubist and Surrealist art. Reviewing Hood's first exhibition of these new works in 1982, Mimi Crossley observed, "They are put together in surrealist compositions—a surrealism not made by juxtaposing images full of content, but created by placing shapes on shapes, texture against color, until a dreamlike world is born in *toto*."

Hood's first collages tended to be vertical, with a compositional flow that was not dissimilar to her paintings. As the series evolved, however, Hood began to insert increasingly narrative elements.



Dorothy Hood, *Untitled*, c. 1982, collage and paperboard, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of the James Shelton Jr. Collection, 2017.216.



Dorothy Hood, *Untitled*, 1987, oil on canvas, collection of the Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi.

Some of Hood's most triumphant paintings were created in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Executed with the assurance of five decades of studio practice, these vibrant canvases are notable for their compositional freedom and painterly authority. At the same time, a new richness of color entered her work, reflecting her travels to India and her fascination with Mughal painting and textiles. In a 1992 interview with Ann Holmes, Hood stated, "I feel that what I am doing at this juncture is celebrating. If that shows indirectly, this is what I believe."



Louise Nevelson, *Mirror Shadow XII*, 1985, painted wood, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Barry Weissler, 2017.383.

Mirror Shadow XII is one of a series of approximately 50 reliefs that Louise Nevelson created well after she entered her 80th decade. As is typical of these works, *Mirror Shadow XII* breaks with the rectilinear dynamics that had typified her earlier work, and the composition spins off the framing the grid at a 45-degree angle.

Writing on this series, John Russell observed, “Light flows in and out, where once it took a bath in black dust. . . . Long lean shapes are aligned with a diagonal thrust that threatens to blast off and go through the ceiling.”

Copyright and Photography Credits

Page 1: (left) Portrait of Louise Nevelson, no date, photograph courtesy Pace Gallery.

Artwork © 2016 Estate of Louise Nevelson / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York;

(right) Portrait of Dorothy Hood seated in front of *Subterranean Illumination*, c. 1976, photograph courtesy Meredith Long & Company. Artwork © Estate of Dorothy Hood.

All works by Louise Nevelson: © Estate of Louise Nevelson / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

All works by Dorothy Hood: © Estate of Dorothy Hood