Exhibition documents Louise Nevelson’s dark and gloomy world

LOUISE NEVELSON
WORKS IN WOOD
At the Bakalar Sculptfire Gallery, Wannam Building (E3), through December 31.

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ary last term, Art im-

pression was light, graceful, and j"o1ous. The current Louise Nevelson exhibit — the Calder's successor in a gallery of retrospectives of sculptors represented at MIT — is its opposite in every respect. Black is now the dominant color; the shadows no longer perform delicate figures on the walls, but recede in cavities or loom ominously behind solemn columns. Whether one should cite biographical reasons for this contrast is, as always, a matter of dispute, but Nevelson's life and artistic career have been full of struggle. Born in Kiev in 1899, an immigrant in this country at age six, she had to fight her way into art from a middle-class background in which an artistic vocatio[n] was not taken seriously — particularly for women. Her fierce sense of independence overcame both this prejudice and subsequent adversity. Nor was art taken lightly, though; it did not reach full maturity until the 1950s, after which recognition gradually, but irresistibly, followed. As a first example of this style, the Case with Five Balusters (1959). A shallow wooden box, horizontally oriented, forms the stage. The first and last suites are filled with figures of mortals in front of the walls of Troy in the Trojan War, looking out of the gutter from which it emerged. Unfortunately never managed to raise itself above the dust of the gutter into which it fell, the art of Nevelson's Case with Five Balusters (1959) is echoed by a later scene of Nancy lying and amoral, finding tenderness only in the company of each other. Although the rise to fame of the Pistols is depicted as an exhilarating joy ride, the disillusionment after their breakup, the failed attempts to create a career for Sid on his own, and the fall of Sid and Nancy into heroin addiction all combine to reflect the depressing decline of punk culture. "Sid & Nancy" is a very violent and depressing film that makes good in its attempt to depict very emotionally a very unusual romance. Although the film might be unsuitable for those who take a strong dislike to the hostile stance of punk punk anti-heroes, Nevelson's recycling of junk and scrap creates a kind of urban archeology, an elegy in the figurative sense of the word — introverted, hermetic discourse, in which we suspect a gloomy truth. Night Landscape in the Moon, almost contemporary with the Bal-

suites, is on display. A long, narrow hus shell formed and covered with pulsing forms, it is erotic in the literal as well as figurative sense of the word — intensified, and enclosing a distinct reality. However, both Cubism and Surrealism are no more than sides of attention to her work, which is prolific and multifaceted. Nevelson's recycling of junk and scrap might lead one to believe that her work is a kind of urban archeology, as thugs in the face of dooms. This assumption seems incorrect, though, for there is nothing exotic about her art. Rather, Nevelson transforms her material into an abstract vocabulary, stealing its independence value by painting each composition in a single color. Admittedly, one often encounters a certain hieratic quality in her work, but this point probably more to a lifelong fascination with "primitve" cultures than to a conscious effort to mound reality in metaphysical terms. Louise Nevelson's Case with Five Balusters (1959)

This hieratic outlook is most obvious in the four Rain Forest Columns in this exhi-
bition. All of these show different sculptural elements struggling to maintain a precarious balance around a vertical spine. As always with Nevelson, a global sense of direction orients the whole — whether it is a predominant alignment, or a rhythm of obstructions. In spite of their name, the Rain Forest Columns arise from a fascination mainly from their antropomor-
phism; to see a cliche, they are like os-
trems.

But Nevelson's most famous works are her sculptural walls, of which a good ex-

cample, Tide T Tide (1963), is on display here. Boxes integrated in a tight square grid contain small compositions of colo-


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ments, a mesmerizing pattern of contrasts. The whole is colored black. The over-

whelming structure, threatening in its gloomy complexity, seems a demonic ma-

chine; it shows a giant, branching conflict barely kept in check, Leviathan governing the metropole.

Only in Nevelson's latest work do the tensions begin to subside. The Sky Series of 1976-1979 exemplifies this, as does the Sky Series of 1963, is on display here. Boxes integrated in a tight square grid contain small compositions of colored shapes in many forms and arrangements, a mesmerizing pattern of contrasts. The whole is colored black. The overwhelming structure, threatening in its gloomy complexity, seems a demonic machine; it shows a giant, branching conflict barely kept in check, Leviathan governing the metropole.

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