

At 85, Louise Nevelson gets her day in the L.A. sun

*Her sculpture
'Night Sail' is
unveiled at the
Crocker Center*

By Hunter Drohojowska

Until this year, Los Angeles had only one small sculpture — at the County Museum of Art — by Louise Nevelson, considered one of the most important American sculptors of this century. In the last four months, the city has received more than half a dozen.

Last Thursday night, city notables gathered downtown to dedicate a monumental sculpture titled "Night Sail," commissioned from Nevelson by developers Maguire Thomas Partners and the Crocker National Bank for the plaza of Crocker Center.

The only large-scale public sculpture by Nevelson in Southern California, it faces the Museum of Contemporary Art's new building east of Grand Avenue. Last March, she gave that institution six sculptures, including the dramatic sculptural wall "Sky Cathedral: Southern Mountain" (1959), measuring approximately 11 by 15 feet, as well as a handful of collages. Nevelson also gave the county museum five mixed-media collages to join the 52 prints it already owns.

Nevelson was in town last week for the so-called "unveiling" of the 33-ton "Night Sail," but the two-story structure proved too large to drape. During an interview earlier in the day at the Beverly Hills Hotel, she explained the reasons for her gifts to the L.A. museums.

"Through these years," she said, "there were a few people that somehow have supported me. I stuck it out through thick and thin and have never forgotten them. These are the people I wanted to return to. There's a communication that goes on. Some of them are the



Louise Nevelson created her two-story sculpture "Night Sail" specifically for the Crocker Center. It took her two years to complete and cost more than \$100,000.

top men in art — and money, too, now. So I'm sitting pretty."

One of those men is MoCA director Richard Koshalek, who was a mere curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis when Nevelson met him in 1971. But she did not forget his kindness, as the generosity of her gift indicates.

Nevelson, 85, was dressed with her customary flamboyance in a kimono jacket and tweed skirt, and draped in a chunky silver Iranian

necklace. As usual, a scarf covered her gray hair, and her expressive brown eyes were fringed with false eyelashes, slightly askew. In the hefty accent she's acquired after 65 years of living in Manhattan, she said, "I was probably the last person that projected a seriousness. Now it's all uniforms, but I always had a flare. I projected glamour and freedom which didn't conform. I (couldn't) stand the word logic. It doesn't suit me. As Tennessee Wil-

Leo Jarzomb/Herald photographer



Sculptor Louise Nevelson says she has given several artworks to local museums in gratitude to local collectors who have supported her work.

liams said, 'I don't want reality, I want magic.'

She continued, "I built my life like an architect, so I could claim as much time as possible. I say that the human being that is aware has a right to claim their own life."

Nevelson is prone to such pronouncements. Her conversation is more philosophical than factual, a reminder of the wisdom associated with age. "We are taught through so many systems," she said, adding that a distinction must be made between people who are born artists and those who have studied art. "A truly basic awareness we're born with. You don't have to be told what to do. I had the kind of mind that was basic. I can look at an academic work of art and abstract it like that," she explained, snapping her fingers. "Art was not my most difficult subject. Life was my most difficult subject."

Indeed, life was not always rosy for Nevelson. As a woman, she was not taken seriously as an artist, though she attended the Art Students League and studied with the

abstract expressionist Hans Hofmann in Munich in 1931. Her first solo show came in 1941, but it was not until 1955 that the Whitney Museum of American Art bought "Black Majesty," a horizontal arrangement of geometric forms in wood. The following year the Museum of Modern Art acquired her best-known piece, "Sky Cathedral," and her career began to soar. She was 56.

"I have enjoyed being a woman. I love to flirt," she said, batting those false eyelashes. "People ask me about being (sufficiently) strong, and I say if a woman can have a baby, what makes them think a woman doesn't have strength? People love to have myths around."

This spring, she was awarded an honorary degree at Harvard. "The only woman. When I was younger, I was going to reject all that. As I moved on, I realized to fulfill my potential I couldn't do that."

Nevelson doesn't consider herself a perfectionist. "Perfection moves. In the Indian philosophies, the circle is the mind, it's like a machine, it's active. I happen to be prolific, I don't expect perfection. I only expect breathing. My work and I are one. I don't live in a studio, I live in houses. I don't even like the word 'work.' It's like breathing."

As advice to others out to conquer the art world, she added, "Napoleon said you stoop to conquer. But I was like an American Indian. My knees wouldn't give. I'd rather steal than beg. If I were so gentle, I wouldn't be where I am. I know where I am, I put myself here. I couldn't do anything else. If you have something you believe in and live with, who do you owe anything to?"

Some 200 movers and shakers from the spheres of art, business

and politics were gathered on the Crocker Bank courtyard when Mayor Tom Bradley proclaimed June 20 "Louise Nevelson Day."

Dr. Earl A. Powell III, who, with curator Stephanie Barron, has been advising Crocker Center on acquisitions for its growing sculpture garden, was irrepressibly enthusiastic over "Night Sail." "It's a magnificently kaleidoscopic piece. Look at those black forms against the blue sky, the way the light radiates off of the edges of the grids which echo the windows."

As a sailor, Powell also liked the sculpture's references to a sailing ship, such as a long fat ovoid resembling a cleat, and a small hole at the top. The sculpture, of aluminum and steel painted a rust-resistant matte black and costing more than \$100,000, holds its own between the towering pillars of rose granite on either side.

Among those on hand to wish her well were her old friend, L.A. artist June Wayne; art critic Joan Hugo; her dealers Arnold Glimcher and Renato Danese of Pace Gallery in New York; landscape architect Lawrence Halprin; collector and Crocker Bank lawyer David Vena; collectors Stanley and Elyse Grinstein; Judge William Norris with his art consultant wife, Merry; the Community Redevelopment Agency's Don Cosgrove, Ed Helfeld with wife his wife, Dorothy; and Mayor Bradley's right hand, Fran Savitch, with her husband, Leon.

Nevelson sat alone on a bench with a glass of wine. She was quite taken with the sculpture, which took her two years to complete. "It holds its own, but it's not too aggressive," she said. "You get a little jaded. I'm fortunate in my life because I never thought I was too bright. It saved me in a certain way. I am still fresh. Something that you never thought was your strength may serve you best. I'm as pleased as I have been. This sculpture has a grace. Instead of being a Beethoven, it's a Mozart."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.