TOWARD THE OPEN LATTICE:

IBRAM LASSAW WITHIN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST SCULPTURE, 1945-1953

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis focuses on Ibram Lassaw's open-lattice works by first discussing works from 1945 to 1950 to outline the conceptual and formal themes that contributed to the later style. The open-lattice form presents a complicated interplay between geometric and biomorphic forms, heaviness and lightness, tangibility and remoteness, and openness—which creates a partial boundary whereby the viewer is able to visually penetrate the form, while still being removed bodily. This thesis attempts to root Lassaw's open-lattice works and his metallic accretion process within the Abstract Expressionism movement by comparing the similar bodily experience of viewing Lassaw's works to those of Jackson Pollock's, for example, with a focused attention on material characteristics. This embodied approach offers a new and highly-appropriate language by which to discuss Lassaw's textural open-lattice works. A video of Lassaw's sculpting process is included with this thesis as a supplemental file.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Monoceros, a sculpture of 1952 that is currently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is exemplary of a group of works created by Ibram Lassaw (1913-2004) during the early 1950s, which are the focus of this thesis. Produced by coating a complex structure of wire with metals, its tall structure dances between extremes of heaviness and lightness, geometry and formlessness, openness and enclosure, and tangibility and remoteness. Its form is best described by the term "open-lattice," which suggests spatial expansion, rather than static enclosure. While this sculpture has a long exhibition history, there are two exhibitions worthy of discussion in order to introduce the important issues to be addressed by this thesis. In the same year of its creation, *Monoceros* was selected as an example of the best recent sculpture to be included in the Museum of Modern Art's *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* show, a sweeping sculptural survey that traveled to museums in Philadelphia, Chicago, and finally New York City in April of 1953. More recently, it appeared in *Abstract Expressionism and Other Modern Works: The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* as one of the remarkable works that the collector had donated to the museum in 2006.

The Museum of Modern Art opened its *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* show in October of 1952. Andrew Cardiff Ritchie, the show's curator, assembled what he calls an "anthology" of works from Europe and America that demonstrate the "diverse directions" of sculpture in the previous fifty years.[1] The exhibition, which included over

[1] Andrew Cardiff Ritchie, "Foreword" in *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1952), 8.

one hundred works and was the most ambitious survey of modern sculpture of its time, was divided into six stylistically-based sections, and one heterogeneous section called "The Last Decade: Old and New Tendencies." Containing the most recent work, "The Last Decade" section featured works by well-established European sculptors, such as Alberto Giacometti and Pablo Picasso, as well as sculpture by younger European and American artists. Ritchie encouraged visitors to trace the new works' trail of influences found in the previous stylistic sections, such as "The Object Dissected: The Cubists and Futurists" or "The Object and the Subconscious: The Surrealists." This strategy might reveal an agenda, which Ritchie hints at in the catalogue's foreword. He writes, "My choice of younger sculptors who have only become known in the past decade is undoubtedly the most subjective of all. Even so, I have tried here to avoid nationalistic bias as much as possible and have included only work that I have personally seen and consider to have unusual merit."[2] Ritchie admits that there is a high percentage of Americans in the exhibition's contemporary section, but assures his audience that they were chosen based on their quality. This statement and the purposeful delineation between the decade before the show and the previous forty years, serves to suggest that American sculpture had risen to the high artistic status that had previously been granted only to European modernism. Just one year previously, Ritchie had assembled an exclusively American exhibition, entitled simply *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*, which also included a work by Lassaw (*Milky Way*, 1950). This demonstrates his dedication to the establishment of America's place in the larger artistic traditions of the Western world, and within in the new style of abstraction. Ritchie positioned

[2] Ibid.

Lassaw's sculpture with those of David Smith, David Hare, Theodore Roszak, Herbert Ferber, and Seymour Lipton, in *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* as the contemporary embodiment of the developments within twentieth-century sculpture.

Ritchie's discussion of *Monoceros*, in the show's catalogue essay, however, is somewhat cursory, revealing the difficulty of determining to which stylistic category Lassaw's work most closely adheres. He places Lassaw within the realm of Constructivism:

> A still younger generation of contructivists, however, have, turned to wire; for example, the Americans Lippold and Lassaw, or in the case of the English sculptor, Robert Adams, to finely joined strips of wood. Lippold's *Variation No. 7: Full moon*, his master piece, is a lyrical, astronomical, linear music that makes earlier abstractions by Gabo and Pevsner almost weighty by comparison. Space has been captured here in a gossamer net. If Lippold's is an almost rococo resolution of the constructivist's music of the spheres, Lassaw's *Monoceros* is its baroque counterpart. Like a fugue it rises architecturally, cube on cube, to a splendid resolution.[3]

Ritchie had previously described the works of Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner, Ben Nicholson, among others as Constructivist, as characterized by open space and a precision of form resembling, "a fine machine or mathematical model."[4] In calling Lassaw's work a "baroque counterpart" to Constructivism, he relates the open geometric form to precise works like Gabo's, while suggesting that its highly textured bronze and manganese differ and belong under a different designation.

Discussing Lassaw's work in terms of Constructivism makes sense in many ways, since its openness, geometry, and play with space does engage in a dialogue with works by Gabo and others. But Ritchie ignores the expressiveness of *Monoceros*'s textured

[3] Andrew Cardiff Ritchie, "The Last Decade: Old and New Tendencies" in *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* , 36.

[4]Andrew Cardiff Ritchie, "The Object as Constructed on Geometric Principles" in *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century*, 28.

metallic surface, commenting that, like other Constructivist-influenced works, "[Lassaw's works] miss a quality of passion, a lack of human involvement that seems to express a strange aloofness in the face of the political and emotional turmoil of today."[5] Ritchie contrasts this aloofness with the work of David Smith, David Hare, Theodore Roszak, Herbert Ferber and Seymour Lipton, all of whom he identifies as Abstract Expressionists. Ritchie asserts that Abstract Expressionists do not partake in any "complacent world of escape" and are firmly rooted in America and the "toughness and vitality" of their materials.[6] Ritchie does not hide his enthusiasm for those artists associated with the movement, stating that American Abstract Expressionism is the "most vital wing" of new sculptural practices.[7] Therefore, in the Museum of Modern Art's 1952 exhibition, Lassaw's sculpture was shuffled to the past and not connected with the concerns of his contemporaries, a position that I will challenge throughout this thesis by examining formal concerns and material practices.

After *Monoceros* returned from traveling with *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century*, Muriel Kallis Steinberg purchased it from the Kootz Gallery in October, 1953.[8] Beginning in the late 1940s, Steinberg traveled from Chicago to New York several times a year to visit museums and galleries. Steinberg had studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, although she eventually stopped her own artistic pursuits, citing frustration with her own artistic limitations, and focused on collecting after her marriage

[5] Andrew Cardiff Ritchie, "The Last Decade" in *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century*), 36-37.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Arthur F. Jones, "Ibram Lassaw" in *Abstract Expressionism and Other Modern Works: The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London), 139.

to wealthy Chicago businessman Jay Z. Steinberg.[9] Drawn to the work of Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, and other Abstract Expressionists, she became friends with the artists through her association with Hugo Weber, her former professor from Chicago's Institute of Design. She even attended meetings at The Club, a rented space at 39 East Eight Street that opened in October 1949 as a meeting place where artists could socialize, present lectures, and hold panel discussions about art, particularly that of an abstract nature.[10] Between 1952 and 1953, Steinberg began to form a substantial Abstract Expressionist collection, acquiring works such as Willem de Kooning's *Attic* of 1949; Jackson Pollock's *Number 28, 1950* of 1950; Mark Rothko's *No. 3* of 1953; and Franz Kline's *Nijinsky* of 1950. Thus, when she purchased *Monoceros* on 21 October 1953, Steinberg knowingly placed it in the Abstract Expressionist context of her maturing collection. She placed *Monoceros* alongside the paintings of Pollock and de Kooning as well as sculptural works, such as David Smith's *Song of the Landscape* of 1950 and Theodore Roszak's *Firebird* of 1950-51.

Ibram Lassaw's work has received little scholarly attention, even though his works are included in many major museums. Much of the early published writing about Lassaw's work was found in exhibition catalogues and contemporaneous reviews during the 1950s and early 1960s, which was the most profitable and high-profile period of

[9] Mary Simpson, "Modern Art Collecting and Married Women in the 1950s Chicago—Shopping. Sublimation, and the Pursuit of Possessive Individualism: Mary Lasker Block and Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman," *Women's Studies* (2010): 608.

[10] Irving Sandler recalls that the club formed as a result of a conversation at Lassaw's studio "for the purpose of finding a meeting place." Irving Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists* (New York City: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 27. Lassaw and Steinberg apparently attended the same talk about Zen Buddhism that D.T. Suzuki gave at The Club during January 1952. It was the first meeting for Steinberg, who was accompanied by Hugo Weber, while Lassaw was a founding member of The Club and a great admirer of Suzuki, whom he often quoted in his daily journal, or "Day Book."

Lassaw's career. The artist contributed to the literature as well in 1968, when he wrote "Perspectives and Reflections of a Sculptor: A Memoir," for *Leonardo* magazine.[11] Lassaw's ten-page entry is a thoughtful discussion of his artistic process and his opinions about art, his sculptures, and life in general. This article is both useful and problematic, since scholars have depended too heavily and uncritically on Lassaw's own reflections on his work.

Nancy Heller's PhD dissertation "The Sculpture of Ibram Lassaw," written in 1982 at the University of New Jersey and subsequent articles by her are the anchor for Lassaw research.[12] Heller often looks to the artist's words to address issues, relying heavily on personal interviews, the *Leonardo* article, and the artist's so called "Day Books," or journals. Although the manuscript contains an impressive amount of biographical information, Heller does not discuss the actual sculptures in detail. Her focus is on Lassaw's broad interests, with particular attention to his study of astronomy and investigation of Zen Buddhism. Although these intellectual interests were important for the way in which Lassaw thought about his work, and certainly affected his titles, the sculptures themselves are fundamentally abstract and deserve to be analyzed with full consideration of form, content, and context.

Previous to Heller's dissertation, Susan E. Strickler produced "The Sculpture of Ibram Lassaw: Its Relationship to Abstract Expressionism," an MA thesis written in 1977

[11] Ibram Lassaw, "Perspectives and Reflections of a Sculptor: A Memoir," *Leonardo*, no. 4 (1968): 351-361.

[12] Nancy G. Heller, "The Sculpture of Ibram Lassaw," (PhD diss, New Brunswick: Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey, 1982; Nancy Heller and Ibram Lassaw, "Drawing in Space: Ibram Lassaw (1913-2003)." *American Art.* 18, 2: 106-108, 2004.

for the University of Delaware.[13] Although the work is only twenty-nine pages in length, Strickler attempts to track the entire artistic development of Abstract Expressionist painters and Ibram Lassaw beginning in the 1930s. Strickler provides ample evidence of Lassaw's interactions with the group and therefore makes a convincing argument that Lassaw and the Abstract Expressionist painters participated in the same art scene in New York City. However, because Strickler pays almost no attention to formal characteristics or material practices, her work focuses mainly on the larger concerns of Abstract Expressionism.

The principle goal of my thesis is to locate Lassaw's open-lattice sculptures of the 1950s within Abstract Expressionist ideas and practices, while recognizing the complicated nature of the stylistic term, with special consideration to the formal qualities of the works themselves. Much of more recent Abstract Expressionist scholarship was stimulated by Serge Guilbaut's book of 1982, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. [14] Guilbaut understands the movement in relation to its political climate as it rose to prominence just after World War II when, he asserts, it became a kind of cultural weapon for the United States government. [15] Although often challenged by scholars who shy away from Guilbaut's Marxist theoretical approach, his study's association of the movement with politics has

[13] Susan Elizabeth Strickler, "The Sculpture of Ibram Lassaw: Its Relationship to Abstract Expressionism" (MA Thesis, University of Delaware Press: Newark, 1977).

[14] Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

[15] Irving Sandler, who conducted many interviews with Lassaw and frequently wrote about his work, provided one of the first comprehensive discussions of the movement in 1970, although Guilbaut's more controversial work inspired more scholarly conversation, *The Triumph of American Painting; a History of Abstract Expressionism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970).

unfortunate consequences for artists like Ibram Lassaw, who did not engage with politics in their personal lives or artwork. Although there have been many important contributions to Abstract Expressionist scholarship, Ellen Landau's recent commentary on the movement in her work, *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, offers a complete look at writings of artists and their contemporaries, and a historiography of the scholarship.[16] Landau keeps political climates in mind while discussing the critical "glory days" of Abstract Expressionism when Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg conceptualized the movement and it became a common talking point across the United States, however she also maps the artists' earlier works of the 1940s with attention to the concept of figuration and content. This study, which includes artists' earlier works and a synthesis of changing art historical understandings of the movement, supplied an important launching point for my research, whereby I identified a lack of scholarship about three dimensional works.

I begin in my first section, then, with the intention of focusing of formal character by showing how certain aspects of these later works related to earlier concerns and lead to the development of the open-lattice style. I offer a short biography, which stresses the sculptor's early turn to abstraction, and proceed to explore certain works created after World War II by also comparing these works to those of other artists. Concepts and styles of Constructivist and Surrealist sculpture are juxtaposed in interesting ways in these works of the 1940s, including the theme of outer geometric forms, usually of interlocking steel rectangles, with an inner biomorphic feature, usually made of plaster or plastic and affixed to the outer frames with plastic or wire. These composite works appear

[16] Ellen G. Landau, *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

simultaneously biological, plasmic, and severe, with the outer steel structures acting as a partial boundary. Lassaw's turn to abstraction in 1930, exploration of new materials, and varied material textures preceded similar developments within Abstract Expressionist painting and sculpture in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In the next chapter, I undertake an exploration of the formal nature of Lassaw's open-lattice work from the 1950s, which includes a discussion of the artist's process in reference to materials used, orientation, color, relationship to drawings, and spontaneity. The open-lattice works forge an interactive experience with the viewer and therefore demand an embodied approach for analysis. I begin with a discussion of *Milky Way* (1950), a transitional work that marks a new stylistic direction for Lassaw, while also gaining critical attention, and proceed to the metal works, formed through the metal accretion process, which I identify as Abstract Expressionist.

Many of the formal aspects of Lassaw's work refer to his process, including the subtle changes of material and color, his working around and *within* the open space of the form, and the texture of the surface with its variegation even within a geometric structure. Thus, there is reason to question Ritchie's assertion of a "lack of human involvement," in Lassaw's sculpture since *Monoceros* creates a sensual pull and takes account of the viewer's physical presence, while remaining non-objective.[17] From a distance, *Monoceros* looks smooth and shiny, with sections that look like beads of polished lava. As the viewer gets closer, however, miniature mountains of raw metal with jagged pinnacles appear. All of these dynamic relationships cause the viewer to move toward

[17] Andrew Cardiff Ritchie, "The Last Decade" in *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century*, 36-37.

and around the work, a bodily activity which I will argue relates to the Abstract Expressionist canvases created by artists such as Jackson Pollock.

In my brief conclusion I endeavor to suggest the ways in which a discussion of Ibram Lassaw's formal concerns can offer a means to reevaluate conceptions about the Abstract Expressionist movement. Throughout this manuscript, I locate Lassaw's open-lattice works within the context of Abstract Expressionism, where he holds a related, but distinct place within the style, a situation clearly seen in the recent exhibition of the Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

CHAPTER II

WORKS OF THE LATE 1940s

Ibram Lassaw created about forty works in the 1930s and 1940s. If compared with his artistic output during the 1950s when he created roughly 130 works, this early period could seem insignificant; however, Lassaw's works completed after WWII demonstrate thoughtful explorations of visual concerns that run throughout his oeuvre. These include: contrasts of texture, interlocking geometric forms, complex delineations of space, and transparency. This chapter will explore the themes found in these varied works, created after the artist finished serving in WWII, culminating with *Star Cradle*, a sculpture from 1949, after which the artist transitioned to the open-lattice works of the 1950s. Lassaw was influenced by both European periodicals and important exhibitions in New York, but also managed to establish a unique relationship to the concerns of Abstract Expressionism, which he carried into the 1950s. I will identify and discuss key works of this period, while also comparing them with characteristic works by other sculptors, such as Alberto Giacometti, Isamu Noguchi, Seymour Lipton, and David Smith.

Biographical Notes

Lassaw grew up in Brooklyn, the son of Russian Jewish parents who had immigrated to New York City from Alexandria, Egypt in 1921, when Lassaw was just eight years old. As a very small child, Ibram created little figures out of mud and clay,

submitting some of the latter to art contests at his school. Lassaw credits the positive feedback he received from his parents and teachers for his continued interest in sculpture.[18] This interest led to his joining Dorthea Denslow's Sculpture Class at the Brooklyn Children's Museum in 1926 (Fig. 2). Denslow had studied art in various schools and the Art Students League.[19] This class was Lassaw's primary sculptural training, introducing him to academic artistic traditions. Denslow's influence is manifest in Lassaw's earliest works, including a plaster portrait head from 1927 called *The Bust of Aphrodite* (Fig. 3).

Lassaw would soon break from his teacher's style of academic figuration and explore abstraction, while also expanding into other intellectual pursuits. He read widely about both the history of art and current art practices, as well as other subjects such as science and philosophy. He read art publications to keep abreast of artistic developments in Europe, especially *Cahiers d'Art*, and amassed a reproduction collection.[20] Perhaps inspired by the narratives provided by museums in New York City, which he visited frequently, Lassaw filled many binders with images of artworks that span all time periods, from "Albrecht Altdorfer to Zuloaga."[21] According to the artist's daughter, Denise Lassaw, Ibram began the collection when he was just thirteen.[22] The withered

[18] Nancy Heller, "Telephone interview with Ibram Lassaw," October 18, 1979 in Nancy Heller, "The Sculpture of Ibram Lassaw," 18.

[19] Denslow's sculptural practice consisted mainly of academic portrait modeling that was praised for its sense of whimsy, but she did not engage in newer artistic trends.

[20] Lassaw attended a private lyceé while living in Alexandria, reflecting his parents stress on education. Since his early instruction was in French, Lassaw was able to read *Cahiers d'Art*, whereas others were only able to look at the images.

[21] Ibram Lassaw, *Leonardo*, 353.

[22] Denise and Ernestine Lassaw, interview with the author, December 12, 2010.

scrapbooks, filled with the artist's handwriting, remain in the possession of the late artist's family and attest to the important role the collection played in his study of art.

Organized group conversation became Lassaw's preferred mode of education, first experienced when he joined the Clay Club, a group formed from Denslow's most serious students that met for informal instruction and discussion. Lassaw enrolled in classes at City College of New York from 1931-32 at his parents' urging; however, he found the art history courses disappointingly simplistic. He also attended the Beaux Institute of Design at night, but only briefly. After leaving both schools in 1933, Lassaw moved to the artistic neighborhood of Greenwich Village, committing himself fully to his sculptural practice. Greenwich Village was dominated by creative individuals in the 1930s, making the entire neighborhood a kind of artists' club. There he joined the Artists and Writers Dinner Club in 1933, which was established by Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock. The group met almost every night at a tavern and eventually evolved into The Club in 1948, the famous Abstract Expressionist institution that served as a place for discussion and also provided financial support for struggling artists. Such organizations gave Lassaw challenging forums in which to debate his broadening interests about art, philosophy, Zen Buddhism, and the sciences. During the mid-1930s, he became a founding member of both American Abstract Artists (AAA) and the short-lived Unemployed Artists of America, which eventually politicized and became the Artists' Union. Lassaw, like many future members of Abstract Expressionism, worked for the Works Progress Administration, teaching and working for a salary in the Sculpture Division from 1935-1942. Although Lassaw did not sell a piece of artwork until 1951, his participation in these groups allowed him to interact with both local and European artists,

and garner some intellectual support and financial security. Although the atmospheres Lassaw found in these groups fueled many of his theories about art making and lent support to his ambitions, there was little direct association between the abstract American sculptors or with formal sculptural groups. As suggested by Wayne Andersen, this may explain some of the difficulty of identifying Abstract Expressionist sculptors and their lack of stylistic cohesion.[23]

Leaving college without a degree was a risk, but Lassaw's boldest choice, in both a financial and artistic sense, was his move to total abstraction. Other sculptors, such as David Smith, experimented with abstraction during 1930s; however, many more worked in socially-oriented realist styles, which were more popular during the politically-charged period of the Depression. For instance, Seymour Lipton, who would later be counted among the Abstract Expressionist sculptors, carved powerful images in wood of subjects such as lynchings during the 1930s, while David Smith created the ironic *Medals of Dishonor* as a critique of wartime regalia and celebration.

New York buzzed with exhibitions in the late thirties, particularly those of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the newly established Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). In her thesis about the Abstract Artists of America, Susan Larsen emphasizes the importance of exhibitions organized by artists, pointing out that the first AAA show in 1937 "was the largest, most comprehensive, and best-attended show of American abstract art to be staged without the sponsorship of a museum".[24] Such artists' groups provided an outlet for Lassaw's work and an entrance into the museum and gallery world.

[23] Wayne Andersen, "American Sculpture: The Situation in the Fifties," *Art Forum* 5 (Summer 1967): 61.

[24] Susan Carol Larsen, *The American Abstract Artists Group: A History and Evaluation of its Impact Upon American Art* (PhD dissertation, Northwestern University: Chicago, 1978), 250.

During the spring of 1942, Lassaw was drafted into the army. Based on some experience with sheet metal and welding in his sculptures of the 1930s, he was assigned to work in repair shops and performed other technical tasks, such as making three-dimensional maps, after going through basic training.[25] He never left the United States, staying in various military bases until 1943, which allowed him to remain abreast of the art scene. Although he had done some casting in small forges of his own design, his sculptural forms being similar to those of Jose Di Rivera, as early as 1938, he received further training in the Army Technical Skills Office, where he learned to weld with an oxy-acetylene torch and how to work with various new materials such as metal alloys and plastics.[26] Lassaw's Master List, which is the artist's own record of his works and their publications, does not identify any completed sculptures from 1942 to 1943, but due to a domestic assignment and access to new technology, his time in the army was not an artistic hiatus.

Works after World War II: The Ins and Outs

Gravity Tension, 1945

Gravity Tension, created shortly after Lassaw's military discharge, was the first work in which he employed his new technical skills and materials (Fig. 4). He welded two intersecting steel frames, their crossed transparent rectangles creating an open and

[25] Denise Lassaw, "Ibram Lassaw's Life and Art: A Personal Account" in Ibram Lassaw, Arthur Frederick Jones and Denise Lassaw, *Ibram Lassaw: Deep Space and Beyond: A Retrospective Exhibition of Works and Photographic Documents from the Artist's Studio in Springs, East Hampton, New York* (Radford, Virginia: Radford University Foundation Press, 2002), 6.

[26] Irving Sandler, "Ibram Lassaw," in *Three American Sculptures*, ed. George Fall (New York: First Grove Press, Inc., 1959), 49.

dynamic division of sculpted space. This space is inhabited by two organic shapes connected to each other by thick strands of wire. Because this work plays with both geometric and biomorphic forms, Lassaw engaged a discourse about abstract art that had arisen through two sweeping survey exhibitions that Alfred Barr had organized at MOMA during 1935-36. *Cubism and Abstract Art*, and *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* introduced two key directions of European modernism to an eager American audience. In his catalogue for the first show, Barr divided abstraction into two broad categories: geometric and biomorphic.[27] He succinctly summarized the situation as follows: "The shape of the square confronts the silhouette of the amoeba."[28]

Several works from Barr's shows are pertinent to the sculptural ideas that Lassaw employed in *Gravity Tension*. *Abstract Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* (1926), the work of Antoine Pevsner (1886-1962) from the *Cubism and Abstract Art* exhibition is a complicated relief with planes of celluloid, copper nitrate, and iron that extend from a back panel to form the volume of Duchamp's figure through the interactions of the virtual, transparent, translucent, and opaque planes (Fig. 5).

Naum Gabo (1890-1977), Pevsner's brother, had begun creating similar figures in Norway during 1915.[29] The brothers followed Picasso's disruption of sculptural boundaries found in his paintings and sculptures of 1909 and the musical instrument sculptures of 1912, made from an assembly of cutout cardboard planes. After returning to

[27] For a history of the term "biomorphic" and its usage in New York in the 1930s see Jennifer Mundy's essay "The Naming of Biomorphism" in Oliver A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche, ed. *Biocentrism and Modernism* (Ashgate Publishing Company: Great Britain, 2011), 61-75.

[28] Alfred Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 19.

[29] Ibid., 133. For the most comprehensive description of Gabo's sculptural career, see Martin Hammer and Christine Lodder, *Constructing Modernity: The Art & Career of Naum Gabo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

Russia in 1917, the two brothers became leading figures in the Constructivist movement, holding an outdoor exhibition of their sculptures and paintings in Moscow in August 1920. *Two Cubes (Demonstrating the Stereometric Method),* an informational model about the mathematical concept behind their works, was shown and described as follows in the manifesto they distributed at the exhibition: "Here we take four planes and we construct with them the same volume as four tons of mass."[30] During the following winter, Gabo made a small model of *Column,* a sculpture that made use of the concept and was subsequently produced at various scales in different transparent materials (celluloid, Perspex, and glass) (Fig. 6). A version of *Column* from 1923 sat alongside Pevsner's work in Barr's show. As a fusion of architecture and sculpture, the work's transparent planes converge to form a potential monument that ascends and contains what might be elevators and viewing decks. *Gravity Tension* adopts these crossing transparent planes that create virtual volume—Barr's "shape of the square." In Lassaw's work, however, there is no central focus and the volume is filled with a very different sculptural language.

Barr's concept of biomorphic abstraction appeared in both of his exhibitions, as in Jean Arp's *Human Concretion* of 1935, which Barr describes as "sculpture protoplasm, half organic, half the water-worn white stone [plaster]."[31] However, he also points out that ultimately such sculptures developed from Arp's Dada reliefs produced in Zurich during 1915-18 and shown by Barr in his exhibition the following year. Consisting of irregularly curved shapes painted different colors, which were cut from boards and

[30] Lodder, *Constructing Modernity*, 59.

[31] Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 186.

screwed to each other in layers, Arp compared the Dada reliefs to the rocks and driftwood that he picked up around Lake Ascona.[32] They could be exhibited and examined with different orientations, each of which created new visual associations and served to activate the works.

Some of Barr's early reliefs contained cutout voids in the place of projecting elements. This is true of *Mountain, Table, Anchors, Navel* of 1925, which Barr exhibited in *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* in 1936 and describes in the catalogue as "oil on cardboard with cutouts" (Fig. 7).[33] Thus, the work consists of a rectangular piece of cardboard that is mounted in frame, most of its surface painted blue and serving as a field for the smaller forms. The "mountain" is a biomorphic shape that is painted brown, while the "navel" is a black oval ring painted on its right peak. The two "anchors" and "table", however, are shapes cut out of the cardboard, through which the viewer sees the white wall plane behind and the shadows cast on it. Thus, this work is the opposite of a relief, introducing the idea of a window onto an open space that has both a sense of boundary and openings that can be entered, at least visually. This concept of cutouts with navigable openings is perhaps best understood in contemporary times by mock doctors in a game of "Operation".

Gravity Tension, thus, contains spatial ideas proposed in Constructivist sculptures as well as a sense of animation contained in biomorphic abstraction. Its lower organic form rests, somewhat awkwardly, on the frames that enclose it, while the balloon-like plastic form dangles from above. The lower form is richly textured, appearing like

[32] For more discussion, see Margherita Andreotti, *The Early Sculpture of Jean Arp* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989).

[33] Alfred Barr, *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 218.

solidified channels of lava or a section of branched coral. Made of cast metal, it seems simultaneously animated and heavy, as it reaches up in a cupping gesture and connects to the upper form by the five wires that seem to materialize a current between oppositely charged poles. The globular upper form is the opposite of the coral-like form in its smoother and more translucent material that gives the shape a sense of buoyancy.

The outer frames do not intersect with each other evenly, remaining slightly off-center, which gives the work an unstable geometry. These disjunctures produce a tension between the geometric frames and the organic shapes contained within. Because *Gravity Tension* does not have a clear core, it also does not have a set orientation, nor any optimum viewing angle or focal point. The tactile qualities of the inner forms attract, yet also repel touch, particular due to the sense of a charged field. The steel rectangles define the threshold of that field. Forming an open stereometric solid, like those previously employed by Naum Gabo, the crossing planes lead the eye into the interior, defining a sense of "inner" and "outer," but without closure, so that the frames also create a sensual pull. *Gravity Tension* has an invisible closure that hints at a boundary like a perforated line.

Many works displayed in Barr's exhibitions, including Pevsner's *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*, have a play with spatial boundary. The spatial category of the "surrealist object," often composed of irrationally juxtaposed objects of daily use, confused the distinction between an autonomous work of art and everyday goods. For instance, Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985) created *Object* in 1936, which consists of a cup, saucer, and spoon covered with the fur of a Chinese gazelle. Set on the ordinary space of a table, their extraordinary tactility both attracts and repels the hand and lips of the

viewer. Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966) sculpture from 1930, *Suspended Ball*, employs a frame to further complicate the liminal boundary of the sculpture (Fig. 8).[34] The black metal rods define a box or cage. A plaster sphere hangs from a brace across from the top of the cage and a crescent moon shape rests on a bed of plaster that stretches between the cage's four legs. The ball's underside is cleft, as if it is a groove worn by its passage along the upper edge of the crescent, a fact that inspires conversations about the ambiguously erotic nature of the work and its suggestion of violence.

Like *Gravity Tension,* the metal frame of *Suspended Ball* encloses two objects and wire. Critics and scholars have at times referred to Lassaw's work as "cage-like," but, in fact, Lassaw's framing rectangles function in a different way, for they are dynamic and open, quite unlike Giacometti's vitrine, which cages the potential sexually-associated motion and violence of the work.[35]

The tactility in *Suspended Ball* depends on the sculpture's mechanical element, which references toys and the instinct for play. Toys depend on the imagination of their user, which releases some of the sculptural form's autonomy to solicit the viewer's impulsive desire. The work begs to be "operated," in the same way that a child might play with a toy that features mechanical elements, by pulling back the sphere like a pendulum and allowing it to finally touch or glide over the crescent shape. Donald Judd, the Minimalist sculptor popular in the 1960s, later referred to Giacometti's works as the "apple core of their spatial apple," implying that the space around and perhaps within the

[34] It was actually Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* that inspired André Breton to encourage his Surrealist friends to create Surrealist objects, but Lassaw would have encountered both Giacometti's sculpture and the Surrealist objects concurrently.

[35] There is a potential sexual element in *Gravity Tension* as well, with the phallic upper form and curving lower form. The two biomorphic shapes, however, are not very dynamic and do not possess the same potential for movement as found in Giacometti's work.

sculpture has a kind of presence and becomes part of the work.[36] Giacometti dissolves some of the distance between viewer and object, with the removal of monumentality and a demarcating pedestal. The work enters a kinetic rather than optical axis, as Rosalind Krauss suggests.[37] *Gravity Tension* is not as mechanical as Giacometti's *Suspended Ball*, since the figures seem limp and awkward, rather than mobile. Its upper globular shape is made of thick, clouded plastic and reaches down from the frame. It does not hang like *Suspended Ball*, rather it seems to have attached itself to the metal, like a fungal growth or an insect's egg sack or nest.[38] Whatever kinetic quality may exist in *Gravity Tension* is implied, not actual, but imagined in the tension and charge between the forms' tactile and material contrasts and also the way the stereometic volume draws the eye and hand "inside."

A year prior to Lassaw's creation of *Gravity Tension*, Isamu Nogchi (1903-1979) produced a work called *Lunar Infant* (Fig. 9). The two sculptures and the two artists shared similar influences, poetic interests, and material preferences. These included enthusiasms for both Constructivism and Surrealism, for celestial themes, for the materials and processes of plastic and electricity, as well as a concern with distancing their sculptural practice from traditional monolithic sculpture with a base. Noguchi, however, retained a fundamental interest in the human figure. He sculpted portraits

[36]Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 119.

[37] Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1985), 76.

[38] When Lassaw began using plastic, he had to invent processes to cut, shape, and color it. In Lassaw's personal Day Books from this period he has "recipes" for different plastics alongside those for metallic alloys. *Intersecting Rectangles* (1940) has a few strips of Plexiglas within a complicated structure of nested rectangle frames, but this small inclusion does not match the works Lassaw created after his military service, when he started to use plastic in more meaningful ways.

throughout his career, for both financial interests and the challenge presented by figural representation, an inclination rooted perhaps in his apprenticeship with Constantin Brancusi in Paris during the 1920s; his works are best described as abstracted torsos or abstracted figures (as opposed to simply "abstract"). He traveled widely during the 1930s and 1940s and was not rooted in the climate that produced Abstract Expressionism as was Lassaw.

Lunar Infant's structure is composed of crisscrossing frames of thin wooden rods – an open stereometic volume as in Lassaw's work. A white shape hangs from the top crossing. Composed of rounded sheets of Magnesite, the anthropomorphic shapes fit together to reference a torso that is suspended by a thick black electrical cord that continues above the sculpture to plug into an outlet. *Lunar Infant* is a kind of hanging lamp; however, since the frames intersect at their midpoint and the biomorphic form is centered in this space, it seems to be both a sculpture with a cord and a lamp within a frame. In Noguchi's work the frames intersect in the middle, at an origin point where the cord hangs. This symmetry contrasts with *Gravity Tension*, for Lassaw's frames do not meet in their centers, nor do the two shapes seem "designed," giving the work a dynamic energy. Noguchi's torso is static, but the electric light that glows through its junctures animates the modular form with velvety shadows and subtle changes in color. Noguchi created a series of self-illuminated sculptures which he called *Lunars* and about which he said the following in 1968:

> I started by making self-contained objects and panels which I called Lunars….I thought of a luminous object as a source of delight in itself—like fire, it attracts and protects us from the beasts of the night. The self-contained luminous object was sculpture, so far as I was concerned, but I could arouse no interest in either critics or dealers….I thought of a room

of music and light, a porous room within a room—in the void of space.[39] As the artist suggests, the use of light is captivating and pulls the viewer in, but due to the dimensions and nature of the form, it cannot be all-enveloping (as the imagined room might be).[40]

In comparison with *Lunar Infant*, *Gravity Tension* is more tactile and sculptural, less ethereal and optic than Noguchi's sculpture. The celestial allusion of Noguchi's title suggests a certain removal, while Lassaw's title and forms convey a material "gravity" and "tension." Through both title and form, Lassaw creates multiple dichotomies, including a contradiction of subject matter and materiality, interplay between biomorphic shapes and angular geometric elements, and the creation of a liminal boundary that both beckons and forbids the viewer's touch. Other works of the mid-1940s contain similar contrasts, as in *Arachnide* (Fig. 10) of 1944, in which multiple plastic components stretch between steel frames like spider webs or double helixes; and in *Urageod* (Fig. 11) of 1946, in which a large biomorphic shape begins to wrap like tentacles around its steel frame.

Charms of Four, 1946

Lassaw created a more unified order of steel and plastic in *Charms of Four* in

[39] Isamu Noguchi, *Isamu Noguchi: A Sculptor's World* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2004), 27.

[40] Lassaw also experimented with electricity earlier in his career. In the late 1930s, Lassaw created a half dozen "Shadow Boxes." These works are smooth, painted wooden boxes with cutouts that reveal inner shapes of wood and painted wire. Each box has a push button on the front that, when activated, backlights the inner forms. Although Lassaw's use of electricity was innovative and a clear embrace of technology, when compared with Noguchi's enigmatic and gentle use of electric light, Lassaw's shadow boxes seem static and clunky.

1946 (Fig. 12).[41] His steel frames again cross off-center, however, one frame is now shorter than the other at the top. The corners of each frame are filled with thick sheets of cloudy plastic, each cut on an irregular curve. Their joint interaction creates an open irregular space inside the stereometric volume formed by the rectilinear planes. Floating in this space (although suspended by attachment to one of the cloudy plastic sheets) is a central irregular form that is made up of small colored modules, consisting of cubes as well as rectilinear solids and planes, all formed from plastic, some transparent and others colored variously – mostly in shades of red and blue. *Charms of Four*'s artistic structure hints at the structure of an atom, which consists of a dense central nucleus of clustered protons and neutrons surround by a cloud of negatively charged electrons. Lassaw seems to allude to the nucleus with his centered cluster of modular forms, while the irregularly curved panels suggest the cloud of electrons orbiting in different trajectories. Atoms maintain structural balance through interacting electromagnetic charges, a dynamic principle perhaps suggested by the title, *Charms of Four*. These structural principles are ever-changing as particles interact, but the atoms' invisible fields underlie all reality.

As scientists began to conceptualize atomic structure during the twentieth century, the instability of the electromagnetic field drew the desire to manipulate it and exploit its potential power. *Charms of Four* conveys both vulnerability and power. Like the space between opposite charges in a magnetic field, its open space is also charged. Although the sculptural forms do not move or change like particles within an atom, the space between the forms has a similar sense of expansion, contraction, and dynamism. This

[41] This movement toward material unity was a continuing process. The steel frame is eliminated in *Albescence* and *Mandala*, sculptures of 1948 and 1949, which have crossing rectangular planes of translucent plastic each with complicated cutouts in irregular organic shapes that resemble amoebas.

spatial animation includes the stimulation of manipulative design, inspiring a desire to reach through the partial plastic barrier and alter the nucleus, like shifting the modular positions of a Rubik's Cube. Although Lassaw never commented explicitly about atomic structure possibly being a compositional inspiration for *Charms of Four*, he did address the idea of expansion and contraction, when discussing his ideas about the universe in *Leonardo* magazine.

> The atomic scale of existence also suggests a world of relationships at a distance, fields of force, processes. George Gamow, a science writer and physicist once said that if all the unfilled space between the protons, neutrons and electrons of a human body was removed there would be left an almost invisible speck ….The universe performs its divine work of art with both galactic clusters and sub-atomic particles. Life is enacted moment by moment, an illimitable network of energy transactions.[42]

This comment certainly indicates his familiarity with atomic structure, interest in cosmology, and belief in the dynamic power of space.[43]

The relationship between *Charms of Four* and atomic structure is bracketed by the work's context in 1946; the years of experimentation with the atomic bomb in scientific laboratories across the United States, were followed by the first test at the Trinity site in July, 1945, its military/political use at Hiroshima and Nagasaki August 1945, and two further tests at Bikini Atoll in July 1946. These investigations and uses of the atomic bomb all predate *Charms of Four*. However, while the nuclear explosions and contentious political climate figure directly in Noguchi's creation of *Cronos*, his

[42] Ibram Lassaw, *Leonardo*, 354-55.

[43] A retrospective exhibition of Lassaw's work, at the Guild Hall Museum in East Hampton, which was only a few miles from the artist's home in East Hampton, suggests the influences of astronomy and references to the atomic age to which Lassaw responded, but the short catalogue essays only point out the expansive nature of Lassaw's work, without reference to the physical presence that they hold and their sense of active, charged space. Helen Harrison, Lisa Phillips, Judith B. Sneddon, et al. *Ibram Lassaw: Space Explorations: A Retrospective Survey 1929-1980* (East Hampton, NY: Guild Hall Museum, 1988).

sculpture of 1947, there is much evidence that Lassaw always distanced himself from political commentary in his art.[44] In his comment about abstract art, for instance, in the catalogue of American Abstract Artists' first exhibition in 1937:

> The new attitude that is being formed as a result of [modern physics, electricity, machinery, psychology and psychoanalysis] is concerned with the invention of objects affecting man psychologically by means of physical phenomena. It is a new form of magic. The artist no longer feels that he is "representing reality," he is actually making reality. Direct sensual experience is more real than living in the midst of symbols, slogans, worn-out plots, clichés—more real than political-oratorical art. Reality is something stranger and greater than merely photographic rendering can show. [45]

In this quote, Lassaw directly states his opposition to politically-oriented art and focuses on art's sensual expression as influenced by modern experience. In addition to the numerous statements that Lassaw made in later interviews, including commenting to Irving Sandler, "Direct sensual experience is more real than living in the midst of symbols, slogans, worn-out plots, clichés—more real than political—oratorical art," which attest to his apolitical nature, Lassaw's works remained fundamentally abstract from 1933 until the end of his career.[46] Comparison with the career and work of Seymour Lipton, one of Lassaw's contemporaries, can assist understandings of Lassaw's approach to sculpture.[47]

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[44] Mayu Tsuruya, "Isamu Noguchi's Cronos: Myth in the Atomic Age" (Master's Thesis, University of Oregon, 1992).

[45] Ibram Lassaw, "On Inventing Our Own Art" in American Abstract Artists, *American Abstract Artists* (New York: s.n., 1938), 15.

[46] Irving Sandler, "Ibram Lassaw" in *Three Americans: Ferber, Hare, Lassaw*, 46.

[47] For other examples of politically charged art see David Smith's "Medals of Dishonor" sculptures from the late thirties, and *Cubes and Anarchy* the David Smith retrospective show and catalogue put together by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2011 which looks simultaneously at the theme of geometry in Smith's work and his affiliation with political socialist movements. Carol S. Eliel, David Smith,

Seymour Lipton (1903-1986), like Noguchi, transitioned to abstraction much later than Lassaw; his works became non-objective only after World War II. His early sculpture had highly political themes, including works carved in wood and titled *Lynched* (1933) and *Soldier* (1940), the latter referencing the Spanish Civil War. Even in Lipton's abstract works of the late 1940s, however, there is a sense of violence, which provides political commentary about freedom and conflict. He once commented on his move to abstraction in an interview with Wayne Andersen:

> In the late thirties I made wooden sculpture based on social themes. As I soon found social themes too limiting….I left the human figure in about 1942 and began using skeletal forms—first in bronze, then in lead—construction of horns, pelvis, etc., so as to convey a fierce struggle on a broad biological level. Gradually toward 1950, a sense of inwardness of struggle growth, and of cyclical renewal led in part to an inside-outside sculptural form of an evolving entity: of a thing-suggesting process. This development was intensified by a search for new sculptural materials and ideas…I was concerned with: the internal as well as the external anatomy of life and reality.[48]

However, Lipton's statement about his finding socially-oriented themes "too limiting" is not reflected in his works of the 1940s, which continued to allude to skeletons, perhaps to animal and prehistoric creatures more than to humans, but forms that still play with themes of a social nature, including capture and violence. *Imprisoned Figure* (1948) exhibits the violence common to his work of the later 1940s (Fig. 13). A distorted wooden frame rises from its base like a cage, within which angled and curved lead sheets twist, struggling against confinement. Sharp points thrust outside the frame like the limbs of an enraged animal or prisoner. The broken lead figure's thrashing seems to have

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Christopher Bedford, Alex Potts, and Anne Middleton Wagner, *David Smith: Cubes and Anarchy* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2011).

[48] Wayne V. Andersen, *American Sculpture in Process, 1930-1970* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), 38.

distorted the wooden frame. Such forms and suggested actions lend the work a sinister feeling, suggesting, like the title, an unstable scene of containment and torture. It is Lipton's ability to create this sense of *scene* and *narrative* that gives his works a political bend.

Formal comparisons between Lipton and Lassaw offer some similarities in terms of framing and enclosure, but their use of organic forms differs; Lipton's being more aggressive and figurative while Lassaw's reference the more abstract and slow-growing processes of nature. While Lipton plays on the relationship between inner and outer through the tension between cage and figural core, which results in a sense of struggle against containment, Lassaw's frames solicit entrance and allow expansion between inner and outer. Lassaw creates a sense of dynamism and movement through his use of space, as opposed to Lipton who creates movement and urgency through his forms and their relationship to narrative and figures. The two artists present strongly contrasting works in terms of tone, form, and objective.

Somewhere Window, 1947

Somewhere Window offers one of Lassaw's most directive titles. This large work encourages reflection about looking, specifically *looking through*, a fact made visual by a photograph taken of him looking through the sculpture at the camera (Fig. 14; Fig. 15). Like previous works, the sculpture features steel frames and cutout plastic panels, but the spatial intersections reach a new level of intricacy, produced by six, variously sized steel frames, which cross at different heights and angles, all complicated further by an intricate system of colors. The plastic panes are cut by irregular curves on their inner edge, as in

Charms of Four, but now some of them are colored like the modular units of the previous sculpture's core. Some panes change color where they intersect one another, confusing vision and making understanding of the sculpture's material reality difficult. It is a visual puzzle, causing the observer to circle the work, peering at the surfaces and through the openings. Thus, having no sense of frontality or orientation. *Somewhere Window* produces a sense of infinity, a *mise en abyme*, like being inside a mirrored room. Unlike previous works that engage multiple sensual readings, *Somewhere Window* focuses intensely on vision and the process of peering through a window, an action that produces yet another window.

Lassaw liked the idea that one could visually enter a space, be it a painting or a sculpture, although he recognized that sculpture more directly engaged the space of the viewer. He once commented, "One of the most intriguing of my fantasies is that of entering into the interior world of a work of art and then, like the ancient Chinese legend of the painter Wu Tao-Tzu, of discovering that it is forever impossible to find the way back in."[49] This playful idea of transit into the work of art articulates the concept that Lassaw's work exists in an imaginary space, contained in the depths of the sculpture, and also in a physical space, which the viewer occupies.[50] However, the border between these spaces is liminal, for one can transgress the boundary both literally, by extending one's hand, and metaphorically, by extending one's imagination, while circling *Somewhere*

[49] Lawrence Campbell, "Lassaw Makes a Sculpture," *Art News*, vol. 53 (March 1954): 67.

[50] Lassaw had a few large scale commissions later in his career which allowed him to physically enter his work in some way. During this time he also created a series of "projection paintings." By combining bright colors on a small glass slide, and then projecting the images onto large walls, Lassaw created a two-dimensional, but still spatial work, since the viewer could interact with the work, casting shadows with his/her body. The works were recently displayed as prints and as wall-size projections at Rutger's University in 2000. See *Deep Space and Beyond* for more discussion.

Window provides ever more entry points.

Somewhere Window also indicates a trend in Lassaw's plastic works of the late 1940s, which features the opening of the sculpture's core. In his fully plastic works, like *Albescence* and *Mandala*, from this period the plastic panels, which intersect, have more and more cutout forms that dissolve the sculpture's core and push toward open space, while maintaining a feeling of inner and outer, accomplished by the panel's geometric intersection.

Star Cradle, 1949

Lassaw created a sculpture called *Star Cradle* that introduces new kinds of intersections and the concepts about the cutout (Fig. 16). In astrological terms a star cradle is a sight of origin for a star that occurs when giant clouds of dust and gas collapse in on themselves. The title also refers to the bed of an infant, which can be rocked to alter the baby's state of consciousness and also acts as a site of interaction. The small sculpture is formed by the perpendicular intersection of three rectangular steel frames. One of the vertical planes and the horizontal plane are almost the same size, while the crossing vertical plane is approximately a quarter less wide, and features a crackled plastic—or crazed plastic—that, like the paint, thwarts perfect transparency. All frames fit concentrically inside each other and are filled with plastic panels. Thus, there is a point where all three planes meet, while their intersection also divides the three planes into twelve panes, each of which is an expanse of thick sheet plastic. Each pane is different, however, because Lassaw cut a uniquely curved shape from the middle of each. He treated the remaining plastic panel in a way that clouded it and then set each transparent

"figure" back into its "ground" after he had dripped red paint over the "figure" in a unique configuration, which reminds one of similar crossing rivulets in Jackson Pollock's poured paintings of the same year. This process of cutting out, treating, and then replacing material seems to challenge the nature of the cutout, by calling attention to the void through double framing and reinsertion. By adding color, Lassaw frustrates the panel's transparency.

The work is small, and thus, like Surrealist objects, asks to be handled, turned, and perhaps manipulated, which refers to the baby bassinet (Fig. 17). Despite its small size, it is easy to sense in *Star Cradle* an aspiration to address new qualities of process, spontaneous release of energy, and scale (both literal and metaphorical) found in the Abstract Expressionist paintings of Pollock, de Kooning, and others, who were Lassaw's friends, during 1949.

Rosalind Krauss seems to have understood this as well, since she included *Star Cradle* in the chapter entitled "Tanktotem: Welded Images," which discusses Abstract Expressionist sculpture, in her seminal work, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. However, she uses the work only to compare it unfavorably with the sculpture of David Smith and dismiss it from what she defines as the most innovative formal qualities of Abstract Expressionism. Like Andrew C. Ritchie in *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century*, she aligns Lassaw's sculptural concerns with those of Gabo and other Constructivists, pointing to the use of stereometric planes, which she argues suggest a preoccupation with a sculptural and ideational core. Since Krauss's discussion raises significant issues, it is useful to consider it at some length. Krauss has recognized, elsewhere, significance exchanges between David Smith and Ibram Lassaw during the 1930s, writing: "During

the 1930s, the one American sculptor whose work seems to have had any influence on Smith was Ibram Lassaw. *Growing Forms* is strikingly like the sculpture Lassaw exhibited in the exhibition of American Abstract Artists of 1938, the first year that Smith himself showed with this group."[51] However, their work certainly went in different directions during the 1940s, Smith focusing his work almost entirely on the welding process, which stimulated an improvisational approach that resulted in a sense of collaged units linked by drawing in space, while Lassaw was equally interested in spatial transparency, increasingly facilitated by use of plastic. During the 1930s and 40s, however, both were seen as leading sculptors within their common artistic circle and showed sculpture in the same group exhibitions. Although Smith was an active artist in New York, he steered toward more political artistic collectives, such as Artists Union, while Lassaw focused on AAA, The Club, and other groups that became important Abstract Expressionist collectives.

Although Krauss includes works by David Hare, Seymour Lipton, Isamu Noguchi, Louise Bourgeois, and Herbert Ferber, all American sculptors of the same generation as Lassaw and Smith, in her "Welded Images" chapter, only Smith's work contains the qualities that she connects to Abstract Expressionism. The others, in her opinion, continue to make use of Constructivism's "virtual volume and stereometric

[51] Rosalind Krauss, *The Sculpture of David Smith: A Catalogue Raisonné* (Garland Publishing, Inc.: New York, 1977), 21-22. The two artists met in 1936 and had access to each other's work after their introduction. They were united by their plaster biomorphic forms in the early thirties. Lassaw's *Sing Baby Sing* from 1937 clearly reflects an interaction with Smith's works such as *Construction* from 1932. Composed of shaped black iron rods with added wooden elements that are painted in bright yellow, red, and blue, it spans horizontally with very little depth, which produces a clear orientation. Smith created a series of iron wire and wood works in 1932, titled simply *Construction,* while this one work was Lassaw's only investigation of the style. *Sing Baby Sing* refers to a popular film, and is thus an allusion to narrative; *Sing Baby Sing* was some of Lassaw's closest contact with figuration.

construction" and Surrealism's "encaged possession." Krauss's argument is driven by her observation that while much of the sculpture of the 1940s was concerned with the concept of the totem, only Smith was driven by an effort to shape his sculpture in a way that "became a *formal* counterpart to what Smith saw as the essence of totemism itself."[52]

She also makes an unexplained and less perceptive elision between "totem" and "emblem," associating the latter with the visual language of Abstract Expressionist painting. Defining it as "a simple, frontalized shape [suspended] in a neutral, undifferentiated space, "she emphasizes that it "stubbornly exists at the scale in which it literally manifests itself and in the material of which it is made."[53] Recognizing that this characterization did not fit the later work of Pollock and Newman (de Kooning is unmentioned), she asserts that all Abstract Expressionists retain the emblem's mode of address, the state of speaking to *someone*, rather than that of the traditional picture, which she characterizes as existing independent of any audience. Smith, she argues, wanted to retain this space of confrontation with an abstract sign, but avoid any sense that the sign could be possessed. She illustrates his achievement by discussing *Blackburn: Song of an Irish Blacksmith*, a welded metal sculpture of 1949-50. The primary frontal view gives a serene and balanced sign of a figure with head raised and arms outstretched, while the side view is noisy, confused, and "filled with a clutter of metal shape[s]" (Fig. 18; Fig. 19).[54] Thus, any formal continuity as an observer moves about the work is missing, because Smith substitutes, "for it a sensation of schismatic break between one fact and the next, depending on the principle of radical *discontinuity*." The contrasts that Krauss

[52] Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1977), 154.

[53] Ibid,, 148.

[54] Ibid., 159.

draws between *Blackburn* and *Star Cradle* are worth quoting in full:

> Lassaw's *Star Cradle* made in 1949, the same year as *Blackburn* is separated from Smith's arbitrariness and premeditated incoherence by its own strict concern for unity. In *Star Cradle*, the principle of intersection operates at the core for the planes that radiate from it. Looking at *Star Cradle* from its "front." We are aware that if the work were to rotate on either its X- or its Y-axis, it would continue to display the same information about this structure. Its obedient stereometry makes it the legitimate child of Gabo's diagram of 1937. By contrast, Smith's lack of obedience was expressed not only formally, through his rejection of the principles of geometric organization, but thematically as well. For, by using the theme of totemism, Smith puts distance between himself and the kind of technological content that characterized orthodox constructivism.[55]

One wonders if Krauss thought very deeply about *Star Cradle*, or did she just see crossing planes and think "stereometry"? Instead of engaging the actual sculpture, did Krauss just think "Gabo's diagram" or visualize the mathematical model describing three-dimensionality that has been manufactured in cheap translucent plastic and given to school children in order to study the dimensionality of graphs? Certainly there are sculptures by Gabo that posit a core and contain technological content, but such is not the case with *Star Cradle*. While there is no concern with the emblem or totem (nonexistent in any work by Lassaw), must one accept Krauss's theory that such concerns are essential elements of Abstract Expressionist painting or sculpture? Certainly Smith emphasizes the artist's "aesthetic separateness" in *Blackburn*, by displaying his work on a circular metal base plate that rests on an elevating concrete column. But *Star Cradle* is small, barely a foot in its broadest dimension, and sits directly on a surface, balanced by little feet that keep it from wobbling. It inspires the desire to be picked up, as did Arp's Dada reliefs found in the *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* show, as suggested in a text that was

[55] Ibid., 159-161.

published in 1948:

> He [Arp] was no longer interested in improving, formulating, specifying an aesthetic system. He wanted immediate and direct production, like a stone breaking away from a cliff, a bud bursting, an animal reproducing. He wanted animalesque objects with wild intensities and colors, he want a new body among us which would suffice unto itself, an object which would be just as well off squatting on the corners of tables as nestling in the depths of the garden or staring at us from the wall…To him the frame and later the pedestal seemed to be useless crutches …[56]

Although *Star Cradle* is certainly not an animalesque object, it asks for the viewer to play with it, to explore shifting relations to one's body and the world seen through it. It does not encourage a divide between the viewer's body and the sculptural work, in the manner that an emblem would. It also does not have an orientation, that sense of frontality demanded by Krauss, nor the core that she abhors, for there is just a juncture of planes with twelve different windows to be looked through, each from multiple directions and sides, including from above and below. The work does have a few small metal "feet" that prevent the work from rocking back and forth, but this slight indication of a base does not discourage the impulse to physically interact and touch the work. Arp's statement about his increasing distance from traditional aesthetic concerns, including a pedestal or base, may prove helpful:

> Even in my childhood, the pedestal enabling a statue to stand, the frame enclosing the picture like a window, were for me occasions for merriment and mischief, moving me to all sorts of tricks. One day I attempted to paint on a windowpane a blue sky under the houses that I saw through the window. Thus the houses seemed to hang in mid-air. Sometimes I took our pictures out of their frames and looked with pleasure at these windows hanging of the wall. Another time I hung up a frame in a little wooden

[56] Alexander Partens [pseudonym used by Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, and Walter Serner], writing in *Dada Almanac* in 1920, as quoted in Hans Arp, "I became more and more removed from aesthetics," Robert Motherwell, ed., *Arp, On My Way: Poetry and Essays 1920-1947* (New York: Wittenborn, Schulz, Inc., 1948), 47.

> shack, and sawed a hole in the wall behind the frame, disclosing a charming landscape animated by men and cattle…As a child I also took pleasure in standing on the pedestal of a statue that had collapsed and mimicking the attitude of a modest nymph.[57]

The rivulets of red paint of *Star Cradle* on the transparent panes create discontinuities, as does the crazing, while also making one wonder about connections, and produce perplexing tensions between figure and ground similar to those explored in Pollock's and de Kooning's works of 1948-49 and is perhaps a precursor to Pollock's glass works, and the 1951 Han Namuth film of Pollock painting, in which the painter is filmed through glass.

Pollock's *Cut-Out* series from 1948-1950 have a particular relationship with the reinsertion and cut process of *Star Cradle*. For this series Pollock would cut out a human shape from one of his drip paintings—effectively carving out a figure from the ground. When viewed alone the human shape appears as a negative in *Untitled (Cut-Out)* from 1948-50 and it is unclear whether the figure was painted around, or removed. This work then plays with the idea of the void, and also the cutout. Pollock would occasionally reinsert this form onto another painted ground, as in *Untitled (Cut-Out Figure)* 1948, mirroring Lassaw's removal, treatment and reinsertion of plastic in *Star Cradle*.[58]

Lassaw's plastic and steel works from the late 1940s present complex dichotomies that address the idea of the cutout, also found in both earlier artists' work like Pevsner, Arp, and Henri Matisse during the 1940s, as well as Lassaw's contemporaries such as Pollock. Some artists think of this as a void or emptiness, but

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[57] Arp, *On My Way*, 47-48.

[58] For more comprehensive discussion of Pollock's cutouts see: Tetsuya Oshima, *The Figure Reemerging: Jackson Pollock's Cut-outs, 1948-1956* (Ph. D. dissertation, City University of New York, 2008); and Timothy J. Clark "Jackson Pollock's Abstraction" in Serge Guilbaut, ed. *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945-1964* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990):172-243.

Lassaw's slight geometric imperfections, use of tactile materials and compositions which feature a sense of inner and outer without clear boundaries animate and activate the space within the works and suggest an electrically-charged expansion of space that all at once attracts and repels the viewer's body. This physical push and pull allows the viewer to both enter the work visually and through an imagined touch, while also remaining fundamentally distanced from the work's inner, plasmic, realm. As Lassaw continued to explore geometric outer shapes and interior space, when he created *Milky Way* in 1950. This watershed sculpture features no central core and an amalgamation of geometric and biomorphic forms, but still maintains a sense of innerness and became the first of the open-lattice works, which will be the focus of Chapter II.

CHAPTER III

OPEN-LATTICE WORKS OF THE 1950s

Lassaw's sculptural style during the 1950s has been given a few different names, most of which refer to the works' openness or "drawing in space." I believe that these are somewhat misleading and will use the term "open-lattice" since this designation hints at the work's expansive quality, while still referencing a structural nature; this descriptor, too, implies the idea of *openings*, as found in a perforated lattice wall where there is a simultaneous sense of visual penetration and corporeal blockage. In this chapter, I will look at four of Lassaw's open-lattice works in order to articulate the hallmarks of the style, its location within the New York School art scene of the 1950s, and to propose a mode of looking at the works that is rooted in some phenomenological concerns. I will discuss the transitional work, *Milky Way, Clouds of Magellan* (an architectural commission) *Kwannon*, and *Monoceros,* all of which were produced in the early 1950s and suggest the direction that Lassaw pursued in the latter half of the decade.

Transitional Plastic Works

After completing *Star Cradle*, Ibram Lassaw turned away from works that contrasted strong outer geometry with inner biomorphic forms and began to create structures that fused the two. He first built a work called *Arcturus* (1950), which references a bright, fast moving star, using plaster shaped over wire. This work, although apparently finalized and thus worthy of a name, was more of an experiment, through which he discovered that plaster alone could not support the composition. Lassaw returned to plastic, mixing what he called a "plastic metal" that melted easily and could

be shaped around a wire armature using welding equipment, to create *Milky Way: A Polymorphic Space* (Fig. 20).[1] The work's textured surface, material, and composition marked a new style for Lassaw and garnered favorable critical reception that brought about new opportunities.

Milky Way: A Polymorphic Space, 1950

Milky Way stands over four-feet high and usually rested on a tall pedestal, which served as an aggressive change in scale from his works of the 1940s—compare, for example, *Star Cradle*'s height of under one foot. The looping structure has no base, or small feet to indicate orientation as in *Star Cradle*, but rather touches the ground with two thick, curving, forms. This lowermost part of the work is not a simple geometric composition, but part of the thick wire armature that is coated in various thicknesses with the "plastic" compound. These lineaments of plastic-coated wire rise and cross in continuously circulating loops, which remain roughly rectangular. This rectangular structure, however, is not rigid or fixed, due to the variable thickness and textured surface of the lineaments and imperfect intersections. *Milky Way'*s surface is rough, with small, raised nodules of the plastic material that occasionally form jagged edges. The brittle, plastic outer layer was originally a dull white color, although the dark wire could occasionally be seen underneath (Fig. 21).[2] It is these imperfections that give *Milky Way*

[1] Master List

[2] Although many of Lassaw's works have changed color with time, the plastic works have changed the most, with many of becoming gray and clouded. Since these sculptors were creating new materials, it is understandable that he would not have understood how the plastic would age, but it is unfortunate that many have cracked, broken, and lost their transparency. In the case of *Milky Way*¸ the plastic has grayed, but the form is largely unchanged.

an organic feel, similar to the unpolished nature of some of his earlier works of pure plaster from the 1930.[3]

Milky Way's composition suggests interweaving linear energy, constantly moving, diving up, down, and across, in and out in a way that brings the viewer into the work's cyclical quality. Wayne Craven, however, rightly points out that Lassaw's works should not be read solely through this linearity:

> [Lassaw's work] represents his efforts to create a continuum of life, eternity, energy, and matter…Although it may be called sculpture in line drawn in space, the texture and body of the line are of extreme importance; they constitute the mass of the sculpture and constantly delight the eye as it meanders through the space, which becomes inseparably interlocked within the piece.[4]

It is the material's textural surface that removes *Milky Way* from a diagrammatic reading, too focused on linearity, since the surface texture produces an interactivity between the work and viewer. I disagree, however, with Craven's description of the space as "interlocked within the piece," however, since instead of containing space, like a cage, I believe the work presents a tension between the inner space of the work and the outer space that expands infinitly and consumes the body of the viewer. Craven identifies the open-lattice works' capacity for "delighting the eye" but *Milky Way* also excites the hand and calls attention to the space occupied by the work and the viewer. This interaction on spatial and tactile levels demands an embodied reading of Lassaw's work, rooted in touch and physical interaction.

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[3] In the 1930s, Lassaw did experiment with a "finishing processes" in *Sculpture, 1936*, which included polishing plaster after creating a form. Lassaw also occasionally painted or dyed plastic pieces in the 1940s. In an attempt to fix color, by preventing oxidation, Lassaw later experimented with spraying the open-lattice works with a plastic solution, which unfortunately grayed with time, leaving the works with a grayish plastic overlayer. His open-lattice works, however, did not have any finishing processes at the time of their creation, with all aspects of color or material consistency worked out before the art-making process begins.

[4] Wayne Craven, *Sculpture in America* (New York: Crowell, 1968), 637.

The work's thoughtful title, which includes both an astrological component and one rooted in physical space and color, indicates that Lassaw was aware of the intricacies of his piece. The sculpture's subtitle "A Polymorphic Space" is not usually noted in the Lassaw scholarship or even in catalogues and exhibitions of his work, but the term polymorphic, which suggests interbreeding and simultaneous states of being occuring in one object, is a highly appropriate estimation of the work's dual roles as inner and outer, geometric and biomorphic, linear and stereometric, and open and bounded. The other component in the title, "Milky Way," alludes to an expansive galaxy filled with interconnected star systems, which encapsulates the expanding feeling of the sculpture, while hinting at its milk-white color. Despite its contradictions, *Milky Way* presents a unity of composition that divorces the work from ideas about orientation and frontality.

Lassaw continued working with different materials, noting the combinations of materials, including plaster, plastic and metallic salts, like recipes in his Day Books, searching for the best, cheap material to support his compositions. The plastic material of *Milky Way* is the result of this experimentation, which occasionally inspires scholars to describe the artist as an alchemist—especially when dealing with different/new metals—but, beyond alchemy, the most important point about these experiments is that Lassaw endeavored to create a combination of materials that would accommodate his desire for improvisation, while also providing visual unity.[5] *Milky Way*'s creation required a series of steps: formulation of the plastic, the building of the wire armature, and the application of the white material over the armature. Since Lassaw never envisioned his sculptures

[5] Martica Sawin first spoke of the artist as alchemist; she subtitles her 1955 article: "Using the latest technical means for working directly in metal, an American sculptor revives the alchemists' quest." "Ibram Lassaw," *Arts* XXX (December 1955): 22-26; this concept also appears in Carl Jung's book *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944).

through preliminary sketches, he hoped that these steps would allow him to discover the sculpture's composition and content through a free-flowing process. Denise Lassaw has recalled how her father twisted small wire forms, coating them in the plastic material, and then placed at various sites around and within the larger armature, stepping away to judge the results. [6]

Although *Milky Way* successfully conveys ideas about free-flowing lines and materials, the structure is not seamless, with heavy joint sections that break up the flow of the line. These repeated joint forms do, however, add a certain visual uniformity. The thickened joint sections are not rounded, but the modules are somewhat pointed, as if extending, and offer a means by which the linear elements can expand. While the repetition of the same extending joint forms adds to the visual unity of the work, the disunities in thickness and surface texture, the irregular shapes of the bands, and the relative instability of the overall structure create a somewhat tortured feel. The awkward stops and starts within the structure reflect Lassaw's own discovery process as he experimented with a new style, although *Milky Way* does suggest the possibility of a flowing working process, with easy manipulations and interactions between artist and work.

These ideas about an unbroken, spontaneous art-making process align with Zen concepts of energy flow that were important to Lassaw and other artists associated with Abstract Expressionism.[7] The discovery of content and composition through artistic

[6] Denise Lassaw, interview with the author, December 13, 2011.

[7] Many New York artists read Carl Jung's philosophy and shared influences with Surrealist concepts of automatism. For an extensive discussion of the ways in which eastern concepts affected general views of the creative process in terms of the continuum and the dynamic quality of the solid/void see David J.

process—tack-welding found and raw steel forms in the case of David Smith or applying various types of paint in various ways to canvas spread on the floor in the case of Jackson Pollock—has often been identified as a defining characteristic of Abstract Expressionism, along with alloverness and rejection of a central focus.[8] Like Pollock's premixing and dilution of house paint, before beginning to paint, Lassaw prepared his "plastic metal," hoping to work fluidly with it. Similar to the way Pollock would "enter" his painting, brushing, spilling and pouring paint across its surface, and then staple his canvas to the wall to study the effect, so Lassaw would work closely with the object to add an element, thicken a form, or alter a texture, and then move back to consider the result. This corporeal interaction, which was a fundamental part of the artistic process, also mirrors the process of viewing the work, as the beholder moves about the work, coming close to the work, then backing away, projecting herself into the work. Michael Fried, in his influential analysis of Pollock's abstraction, argues that Pollock, while being self-critical, explored the self-sufficiency of line and created a pictorial space that is available only through visual means, creating pure "opticality," to use Greenberg's term.[9] Lassaw's open-lattice offers a similar allover abstraction, however, being three dimensional, his

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Clarke, *The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture* (PhD diss., Courtauld Institute, 1983).

[8] Ann Temkin, in the of the most recent publications concerning Abstract Expressionism, has focused on some of the most powerful of Abstract Expressionist works in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Rather than focusing on the artistic personalities of painters who have been raised to hero status by many previous studies, she has given more attention to the works themselves, including those in other media, such as sculpture, in order to identify some overarching principles. Ann Temkin, *Abstract Expressionism at the Museum of Modern Art: Selections from the Collection* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010). Much recent scholarship also attempts to root Abstract Expressionism within a political ideology, relating artistic practice to social movements in which individual artist's participated, but also addressing the sense of authority offered by the large scale works that are at once democratic and distanced, with their lack of a clear political message.

[9] See Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 33-40.

compositions expand directly into the viewer's space and have both optical and tactile qualities, something apparent in Pollock's works as well if one moves close to their surfaces. Lassaw's process, however, has an additional level of entrance, since he works *within* the form.

Shortly after completing *Milky Way*, Lassaw created another work, *Procyon,* using a similar concept of "plastic metal" over wire. Both works were included in the Whitney Museum of American Art's annual sculpture show. Later that year, *Milky Way* appeared in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Abstract Sculpture and Painting in America* as well as several other exhibitions, giving it a public presence that led to its reproduction in seven catalogues and journals. [10] Such attention led Samuel Kootz to approach the artist about possible representation through his gallery. The Kootz Gallery opened in New York City in the mid-forties and came to represent Abstract Expressionist such as Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, and Herbert Ferber.[11] Kootz sold *Procyon* only one month after signing Lassaw to a contract and continued to represent the sculptor until the gallery closed in April of 1966.[12]

Artistic Success and the Metallic Accretion Process

Kootz organized a one-man show in 1951, at which Lassaw showed over twenty new sculptures. Critics, who had barely mentioned the artist before 1951, now gave

[10] Master List

[11] Kootz supplemented his shows of American art and support for young American artists by selling popular European paintings, mostly those of Picasso but also Léger, Joan Míro, and others. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Virginia M. Mecklenburg, and Tiffany D. Farrell, *Modern Masters: American Abstraction at Midcentury* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2008), 25.

[12] The 1951 sale of *Procyon* was Lassaw's first since his high school days.

Lassaw and Kootz generous reviews. Stuart Preston's of the New York Times was particularly favorable—referring to the works as "abstract fantasies in gilded bronze that rear their filigree members into the air" and praising the sculpture's "unified" structure.[13] These aesthetic qualities were made possible by use of an oxy-acetylene torch that Lassaw purchased after receiving his first payment for *Procyon.* It is important to note the chronology of events during this time, since some scholars have suggested that the purchase of the torch led to the open-lattice style; however, as discussed above, the sculptor was already exploring this mode with works such as *Procyon* and *Milky Way* the year before. The use of the torch, however, allowed him to work in a more spontaneous, free-flowing manner that yielded durable sculptures with new coloristic potentials.

This new process, which I refer to as the metallic accretion process, is worth describing in detail, since upon purchasing the torch, Lassaw transitioned to exclusive use of metals in his sculptures and continued using the tool until he stopped making sculpture in the 1980s. Lassaw used the torch to heat pieces of galvanized wire to a pliable state in which they could be bent with tools and the artist's hands. He then took a thin rod of bronze, silver, or another metal, heating it as he ran it along the wire, bring it to a state in which it began to melt and coat the wire (for a demonstration of this process see the video in the supplemental file included with this thesis).[14] The works are occasionally identified as "drip sculptures," an allusion to Pollock's poured paintings, but, unlike Pollock's rapid execution, Lassaw's process is slow. The artist steadily builds up the textured surface, like the accretions of minerals that form stalagmites or the calcium carbonate secretions

[13] Stuart Preston, "CHIEFLY MODERN: New Sculpture in Metal—Diverse Painting," *New York Times,* October 12, 1952.

[14] Denise Lassaw gives a demonstration of the metallic accretion process in East Hampton, New York, video taken by author, December 14, 2011.

of expanding coral colonies. As seen in *The Hyades*, one of the new works exhibited at the Kootz Gallery in 1951, the metal can simply coat the wire, creating shimmering filaments, or can be built up in layers, producing a thicker cairn form of melted metal (Fig. 22). Varying in texture and thickness, these metal lineaments have an organic quality, while they also secure a visual and structural unity, without the need for the thickened joint sections found in *Milky Way*.

Their glistening surfaces are fundamental to the sculptures' new unity. As in *The Hyades*, the works are simultaneously liquid and solid, wavering as if images reflected by water. There is a liquid smoothness to the works, but, if viewed more closely, small bumps and irregular nodules become apparent and asked to be touched. The lineaments seem warm and malleable, as if one might simply reach out and reshape the forms.

The reflected light alters the color of the shiny metal works, but there are also slight inherent variations in color. Unlike the sole use of bronze in *The Hyades*, Lassaw soon began to mix different metals. Manganese bronze yielded a reddish hue, while silver, copper, nickel and various bronze alloys further expanded his palette.[15] The torch's different heat settings could impact coloring, as could dipping the hot metal rod into a powdered flux. While Lassaw used fluxes primarily to minimize oxidation, depending on their chemical composition, they could alter color. As Lassaw became increasingly proficient in the use of his process, he learned to read the nature of the torch's flame, and, like Pollock with his painting process, he could accommodate chance, controlling it to a certain degree.

[15] In the later 1950s, Lassaw added gems for their color, as in *Amethyst Moment* (1957).

Unlike other sculptors, like David Smith, who created drawings as part of the conceptual and physical progression of creating works, Lassaw started and finished with the process and the sculptural object. He expressed is views about this at a round-table artists' discussion in 1950 about when a work of art was "finished." in 1950:

> I would consider a work finished when I sense a "togetherness," a participation of all parts as in an organism. This does not mean that I entirely understand what I have created. To me, a work is at first, quite unknown. In time, more and more enters into consciousness. It would be better to consider a work of art as a process that is started by the artist. In that way of thinking a sculpture or painting is never finished, but only begun. If successful, the work starts to live a life of its own, a work of art begins to work.[16]

This give-and-take between creation and creator refers to the sense of animation inherent in Lassaw's work as well as the concept of experiential production, energy flow, and the work's coming-into-being. During the metal accretion process, Lassaw's hands never touched the sculpture. While he dictated the form through his shaping of the wire and the placement of the metal rods within the torch's flame, the work's outcome had a certain independence that he revered. Similarly, he only titled his works after their completion, when they have been properly removed from the artist, and begun to "work" as Lassaw said.

Clouds of Magellan for Philip Johnson's *Guest House*, 1953

Lassaw's contract with Samuel Kootz soon allowed the artist to employ his open lattice structure and metallic accretion process in larger scale sculptures.[17] Kootz sought

[16] *Lassaw Papers*, Motherwell, Robert, Ad Reinhardt, Bernard Karpel, Robert Motherwell, Robert Motherwell, and Ad Reinhardt. *Modern Artists in America: First Series: (A Biennale to Document Modern Art in the United States)*, (New York: Wittenborn), 1951.

[17] Lassaw later installed a fifteen foot hanging sculpture, *Elysian Fields*, for the Hilton Hotel in New York City in 1963 and a fourteen foot sculpture, *Pantheon,* for the lobby of the Exxon Building in Rockefeller

out commissions for Lassaw, the first being from Philip Johnson, a renowned New York City architect and tastemaker. Before receiving his Bachelor of Architecture from Harvard University in 1943, where he studied with Marcel Breuer and Walter Gropius, Johnson had been the founding director of the Department of Architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, organizing the ground-breaking exhibition of 1932 that introduced the "International Style" to the United States. After acquiring a tract of land in New Canaan, Connecticut, he designed the *Glass House*, his personal dwelling, which was completed in 1949. The glass and steel structure, which closely resembled the style of Mies van der Rohe, immediately received wide publication in architectural journals, popular magazines such as *Life*, and multiple awards, including the 1950 Silver Medal of Honor from the Architectural League of New York. The *Glass House* is part of a complex, however, designed in tandem with the *Guest House* (or *Brick House*), a two bedroom dwelling with a study and small kitchen and bath. Its utterly closed façade faced the transparent façade across the lawn, the space delineated with short stonewalls and a processional concrete path between the two structures.

Johnson presented a unified concept of closed and open in a design for a two-story house (glass above, concrete below) that he showed in the exhibition *The Muralist and the Modern Architect*, which was held at the Kootz Gallery in October 1950. For this show, Kootz matched his gallery's artists with five architectural firms, pairing William Baziotes with Johnson; this marked one of Kootz's first collaborative exercises between

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Plaza in 1973. He created over fifteen works for five temples, although the KTI temple and the *Clouds of Magellan* were his only collaborations with Johnson. Other sculptors also completed large scale commissions for Jewish temples, in the 1950s when public works of sculpture were becoming more popular, like Herbert Ferber's *…and the Bush was not Consumed* for Congregation B'nal Isreal, Millburn, New Jersey in 1951.

artists and architects.[18] Thus, it is not surprising that when Johnson decided to remodel the *Guest House* in 1953, he turned to Kootz for recommendations about artistic decoration. Johnson converted the previous two bedrooms with a study between into one long bedroom and a smaller library. The bedroom underwent a dramatic change upon the insertion of a double canopy within the box, created by a pair of domical plaster vaults, supported on paired columns that stood free of the ceiling and walls. Artificial or natural light, from fixtures and skylights above the vaults, washed down the walls, which were covered in lush Fortuny fabric with pink, gold, and silver highlights. Kootz suggested that Lassaw produce a relief for the bedroom. [19] After Kootz' initial mediation, Johnson and Lassaw formed a personal and professional friendship.[20]

Lassaw produced drawings, which Johnson approved or denied, while working for the specified space above the low double bed located a few feet out from the bedroom's west wall and under one of the plaster vaults. These vaults, with their columns create a processional movement that ends in the relief, placed high on the wall, framed by the shallow arch (Fig. 23). The lighting in the room comes, somewhat mysteriously, from above the plaster arches and is set on a dimmer, so guests can adjust the light to create new reflections and shadows on the sculpture. Lassaw visited the work in 1958 to

[18] Adolph Gottlieb was paired with Marcel Breuer, David Hare with Frederick Kiesler, Hans Hoffman with José Luis Sert, and Paul Wieder and Paul Motherwell with The Architects' Collaborative. Stover Jenkins and David Mohney, *The Houses of Philip Johnson* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2001), 109.

[19] Johnson and his partner David Whitney collected sculptures to sit on the grounds (including a large work by Donald Judd in 1971) and many works to fill the sculpture gallery, which was finished in 1970, and decorate the interior of the *Glass House*; Lassaw's relief, however, took a larger part in the design process than other works, which were not conceived at the same time that Johnson was working on the architectural design.

[20] The Lassaws visited Johnson and Whitney's home the 1950s, staying the weekend at New Canaan complex, as the architect and artist continued to collaborate on projects such as Johnson's design for the congregation Kneses Tifereth Israel synagogue in Port Chester, New York, during 1956.

"brighten up and spray *The Clouds of Magellan*."[21] Both Johnson and Lassaw, then, wanted the sculpture to remain vibrant and reflective.

The Clouds of Magellan hovers as it spreads horizontally against the white plaster wall, its colors and textures harmonizing with those of the fabric-covered walls, the bedspread, and the original plush poiffes. Being a relief anchored to a wall, the sculpture lacks the fully three-dimensional relationship with the viewer that is exploited in Lassaw's other open-lattice works; however, the bounded nature of the work only serves to highlight the variegated depths and materials of the work. Extending almost two feet from the wall, the visual effect of varying depths seems greater because of the contrasts of sizes and coloring of the rectangles formed by the mixture of thick and thin lineaments and the use of different metals. When one looks closely however, one notes the foremost layer of forms is flush, with no protruding elements. This work is less accessible than other works by virtue of its boundedness, height on the wall, location behind the bed, and uniform protruding depth. The spatial dynamic seems to work under the work's surface, "within" the form. The sculpture seems to be protected by a uniform, plasmic sheet of space that extends around the outermost edge, but it does not feel so caged or separated—it is rather, like the sense of boundary created by water. *The Clouds of Magellan* seems to be underwater due to its wavering forms, dancing shadows that change with the light, and glittering color. Although the work is vertical, and hangs on the wall, it has a formal quality of a still, shallow pond, which has a gentle dynamism with changing light and gentle current; to put it simply, the work floats on a horizontal plane, while being suspended vertically on the wall.

[21] Day Books, December 11, 1958.

While Lassaw benefited financially and in terms of his artistic reputation from his many commissions for architectural decoration after this successful commission from Johnson, he chaffed under the pressure for artistic compromise, as he became somewhat known as a Jewish sculptor, because of his many commissions for Jewish buildings.[22] Lassaw's parents were Russian Jewish, however Lassaw never practiced the religion in his adult life nor studied it significantly, preferring the writings of Zen and metaphysical scientific philosophies. Lassaw was apparently never offended by the designation, however, and did not write any aggressive statements in public platforms or in his personal journals concerning Judaism or organized religion in general. It seems, rather, that Lassaw was more interested in larger theories about connectivity, which related to his scientific interests. In December of 1953, he was asked to contribute to a special "symposium" for *Art Digest* concerning "Art and Religion" where his most recent architectural commission, *Pillars of Fire* for a Beth El temple was reproduced. The sculptor commented on the unfortunate distinctions between science, art, and organized religion. He managed to steer clear of vilifying religion, with caveats like "Art and religion are as vital to the life of the human race as oceans, winds and forests are to our planetary ecology and as the endocrine glands are to the functioning of the individual."[23] The artist here, again, demonstrated his varied interest and wide scientific readings, while offering religion a role within an overarching ecology. In a much more political

[22] Upon meeting with the "censorship board" of a Cleveland Temple in March, 1957, Lassaw writes in his Day Book "Don't give a finger!" As a largely self-directed artist, who did not appreciated the institutional setting of school, or working with assistants, this collaboration was difficult for the artist. A few days after installing *Creation*, his second work for Johnson's KTI Temple, on December 27, 1958, Lassaw finally writes, "Working hard on large sculpture for no one but myself-but for anyone to dig," returning to self-directed works.

[23] Ibram Lassaw, "Symposium: Art and Religion," in *Art Digest* 28 (December 1953): 10.

statement, David Smith, whose submission was listed just after Lassaw's made inflammatory statements about the specific relationship between art and Christianity (which he seems to substitute for all religion), stating, "It is a little late even to toy with the idea that art has any chance with ideologies better served by plaster saints, television, radio and Tin Pan Alley."[24] Smith, here, seems opposed to the idea that art would purport an ideology. He goes on to state that the artist "is not involved with translation." This response, when contrasted with Lassaw's less specific and perhaps more generous answer, highlights the different way the two artists envisioned their works: Smith as antithetical to ideologies or narrative and Lassaw as part of a system of symbiotic relationships between humans and all organisms.

Kwannon, 1952

The glimmering sculpture of molten bronze and silver, *Kwannon,* is one of Lassaw's most prominent pieces of the early fifties (Fig. 25). It was first displayed in Lassaw's second one-man shows at the Kootz Gallery in October of 1952 and is now part of the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Compositionally, *Kwannon* is more figural than Lassaw's other structures. The sculpture seems to stand next to the viewer, with horizontal arms, and small feet, while the title references a specific Buddhist god. The sculpture is grander than Lassaw's usual scale, rising over six and a half feet (almost 200 cm). The height adds to the figural associations of the work, since it rivals the body of the viewer, especially when compared to other open-lattice works, such as *Milky Way* or *Monoceros,* which are about four-feet high. Although there are no distinctive facial

[24] David Smith, "SYMPOSIUM: Art and Religion," in *Art Digest* 28 (December 1953): 11.

features, the uppermost section of *Kwannon* is not as wide as the rest of the work, and the section has fewer intricate rectangles. This slimming and opening-up at the work's apex, forms an abstract head, while an expansive area immediately below spread across like arms, and suggests the sense of a core. The work also has supportive elements that act like feet.

This figural reference should not be overplayed, however, for it has little solidity. Composed of defined and expansive space, it seems almost spectral, its shimmering lineaments constantly circling in and around an apparition without any semblance of weightiness. There are three "feet" at the bottom of the form. Although these spindly shapes certainly support the work technically, they do not seem capable of supporting the form, and thus seem to drop out of the form, like tendrils, instead of appearing strong and structural.[25] These "almost supports" create the allusion that the entire form is floating, as seen in *Solstice* (Fig. 26). Lassaw dissolves the base of the work, by creating slender forms that seem to loop out of the middle of the structure; this allusion has some relation to Lassaw's process, since the artist did not start with the base and build up as if part of an organic growing process, but rather worked spontaneously, constantly moving to different parts of the piece.

The "arm" shapes do not operate like human arms either. Instead of two symmetrical arms that mirror each other, the horizontal section seems to have been gently pulled out of the center of the form, as if stretched like an expanding accordion. The rectangular features are more concentrated in this central form, and grow larger at the

[25] Lassaw only increased the allusion of "feet" that drop out of the work throughout the 1950s and in his later works, by creating works such as *Solstice* from 1961, which has many elements that come close to touching the floor or base, but simply hover above.

outermost edges, which adds to the idea that they have been pulled out, and stretched. Although this concept references universal expansion and can be a metaphor for the expanding of the universe, because the work seems to have been stretched by hand, it becomes a physical reference, as if the artist, or creative force, simply grasped the structure in the center, and easily expanded it on a horizontal axis.[26] The lower horizontal form, which corresponds to human hips in a figural reading, has a similar feeling of being stretched, although to a lesser degree. This effect of looping expansion and contraction makes the "arms" of *Kwannon* constantly cycle back to other aspects of the work, as opposed to reaching out, away from the center.

"Kwannon" is one of Lassaw's more specific titles and adds to the figural association of the work, although mostly on a metaphoric level. The title references the Buddhist god of mercy, Kwannon or Kannon, and has a different feel than his grand astrological titles that reference vast areas with many components, or those that refer to overarching Zen concepts.[27] The name suggests a specific figure, but the form has little of the gods' iconography, only perhaps her attributes, namely fierce compassion and mercy. Lassaw often quoted D.T. Suzuki, a Zen master who gave lectures at Columbia University and attended artists' clubs as a guest lecturer following WWII. In a later guide to Zen, Suzuki describes Kwannon as "the one who views the world in truth, free from

[26] This relation to touch and manipulation recalls a Hoberman sphere toy, which acts like a collapsing geodesic dome, and frequently used in educational settings to describe the expanding of the universe, since it expands and contracts as the viewer handles it. This toy, first released worldwide in 1995, would certainly not have been a reference for Lassaw as he created the work, but the ever expanding and contracting toy follows principles of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome and concepts of four-dimensional architecture, as well as atomic physics—theories that Lassaw was interested in.

[27] The sculptor did sometimes give specific Zen titles, for example he gave the work just before this an even more direct title of *Ascension of Innana*, which references a specific character and narrative, but most referenced more general ideas, such as *Mantra* (1958).

defilement, with knowledge extending far, and full of love and compassion."[28] Suzuki also calls attention to the idea that, while the god is far-reaching, Kwannon also has interiority, stating, "He is in possession of all merits…and like the ocean holds in himself an inestimable mass of virtues."[29] Perhaps the loose, stretched form of *Kwannon* with its cyclical arms and running lines that cause the viewer's eye to bounce about the work, reminded Lassaw of the concept of expansive knowledge, and the interplay of kindness or mercy between two figures. The Zen concept of energy flow also emerges in analysis of this work, especially when one imagines the mirroring process that would occur, as the viewer imagines themselves grasping the outer edges of the work and expanding it horizontally. Associations are multiplied when one notes the title's similar sound to "quantum" which physics recognizes as the smallest amount of electro-magnetic energy that continually shifts forms.

Lassaw did not reference the human figure in the same way that other sculptors of his time did, but rather did so with a vague title, a mirroring height, and references to physical manipulation. Clement Greenberg was particularly impressed with David Smith's work in the 1950s and often commented on its strengths. In 1966, the critic identified the human figure as a common theme throughout Smiths oeuvre, "As he turned increasingly abstract in later years… the human figure became more and more the one constant attaching him to nature. It was the soar of the human figure that held him, the uncompromising upward thrust it makes, the fight it carries on with the force of

[28] Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 37.

[29] Ibid., 38.

gravity."[30] Greenberg, here, indicates the weightiness of Smith's work. He does not state, as many have about Smith's work, that the heaviness of the materials contradict the thrust, but rather, Greenberg rightly identifies that the sense of upwardness, and the figural association thereof, is a tortured kind of erectness, that rises in a laborious "fight" with gravity. One can read a similar upward thrust in Giacometti's sculptures of figures and the vertical strips of Barnett Newman's works after WWII. Both artists present straight lines that rise, in strict verticals, with Giacometti's figures slipping forward in space. Newman's verticals and Giacometti's spindly figures also fight with gravity, as Greenberg identified in Smith's work, although their forms seem to teeter, while Smith's struggle to rise. *Kwannon,* in contrast, does not have an upward, or outward thrust, despite its vertical and horizontal features, but floats, continually circling and flowing in repetitious forms.

Lassaw's unifying metal lineaments relate most closely to Pollock's swirling lines of paint, in the way that they produce a sense of alloverness and unity. When viewing a Pollock, such as *Number 28, 1950* (1950) which Muriel Kallis Steinberg purchased from the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1953, the viewer's eye scans the plane, following the trajectory of one line and then moving to another in a seamless, repetitious flow (Fig. 27). However, while entranced by this optical shimmer and dematerialized sense of space, the viewer is also drawn to the tactile aspect of the work, provided by Pollock's layering of different colors, use of think lines, and occasional glimpses of the raw canvas underneath. The layering also references the artist's actions as they occurred over time. Due to the work's large scale, the viewer walks toward the large canvas, to better see the tactility,

[30] Clement Greenberg, "David Smith: Comments on His Latest Works" in John O'Brien, ed., *Clement Greenberg*: *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 4: 228.

and then steps backward to feel the work's wholeness. The viewer's body and eye, then, undergo a similar process; the eye loops about the surface of the work, while the body cycles back and forth from it.

In *Kwannon*, too, the viewer's eye finds no place to rest, and the color variations, caused by the alternation between bronze and silver, and knobby textures pull the viewer close, while the unity and beauty of the form deserve distanced contemplation. In Lassaw's open lattice forms, though, the materiality adds an element of touch.[31] Where the tactility in Pollock's paintings convey a sense of the artist's gestures and pulls the viewer closer, Lassaw's materiality inspires the urge to touch and grasp, to feel and caress—in short, to manipulate.

The openings in *Kwannon* provoke another level of interaction, that a painting cannot, which further complicates Lassaw's work and distances his sculptures from those of his contemporaries. Just as in *Somewhere Window*, and other transparent works, *Kwannon* inspires the viewer to peer look through the outer forms, which are still composed of rectangles, changing her stance to peer through the frames of windows. Unlike Lassaw's earlier works, though, there is no central form in *Kwannon*. The increased level of intricacy and concentration of forms in the figural "heart center" of the piece still does not act as a focal point, but rather fosters the cyclical feeling between it and the "arms." *Kwannon*'s outer forms relate to the work's interior, more directly than in Lassaw's works from the 1950s, but still act as a partial boundary, since the outermost frames are penetrable, but not perhaps large enough for a human hand. These openings

[31] See Laura Marks theory of Haptic Consciousness in "Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes," *Framework: The Finnish Art Review* 2, (November 2004): 1-7.

also relate to the ever-changing open forms of an atom, with interior, charged space. The viewer, then, enters the work visually, but with a haptic consciousness that goes beyond awareness of texture and material, as found in Pollock's work, and relates to the concept of expanding space and the magnetic energy within the form.

Monoceros, 1952

A final comparison between two work from the Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection, Theodore Roszak's *Firebird* and Lassaw's *Monoceros*, will articulate the different approach to abstraction, materiality, and viewer interaction that Lassaw's work had in relation to other contemporary sculptors (Fig. 28; Fig. 1). Roszak worked in multiple media and began as a painter. He created conceptual drawings before beginning sculptural works, as demonstrated by *Study for "Firebird"* which is also part of the Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman collection (Fig. 29). This work of pen, brush and ink, watercolor, and pencil on paper is not a simple line drawing or cursory preparatory sketch, nor does it have technical notations, such as scale or potential materials, but rather stands as a work on its own with delicate shading and thoughtful variations of medium.[32] Roszak first drew an outline and then filled the interior—this highly linear mode of thinking and process of recreating the drawing does not translate particularly well into

[32] Many contemporary discussions and exhibits about sculptors (such as Smith of Giacometti) focus on their sketches, displaying them concurrently, partially in order to celebrate that artist as draftsman and the drawings as artistic in their own right, but this stress can also serve to legitimize the sculptures as artful, which unfortunately propagates the hierarchy between works on paper or canvas, and sculptural works.

spontaneous sculptural construction.[33] The process of sketching also gives the work a preferred angle of viewership, which mimics the side depicted in the study.

Firebird, like much of Roszak's post-WWII work, has a mythological or natural allusion, which was rather representational throughout the late forties and fifties. The sculptural form, rises off its base, with expanding wings and reaching spiked forms, which seem both organic and unnaturally harsh. The work references Igor Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*, which rises and swells in cycling crescendos, while persistently marching toward a final, violent climax like the mythological Phoenix' transformation and rebirth. Roszak's work has a similar sense of violence and torture, with its rough texture and spiked forms. There is also a sense of a cycle, created through multiple crescent shapes that lead the viewer's eye around the horizontal orientation of the work; although Roszak's lines are not smooth and unbroken, as in Lassaw's open-lattice shapes, the crescent shapes, which mirror each other, give the work some graceful lines and a sense of repetition. The form is bird-like with swooping wing features, but because the iron forms have been irregularly brazed with bronze and brass, the encrusted surface is heavy and the form appears weighed down, as if in the sickly moment just before rebirth.

Monoceros, like *Kwannon*, could be read as an abstracted human figure, but due to its height of about four-feet and overall unity, the form is best understood as an open work of cyclical harmony and graceful movement. While composed of materials similar to *Firebird*, Lassaw's process yields a very different effect for *Monoceros*. The brilliant metals of the work, protected from oxidation by flux agents, gleam and glitter, reflecting

[33] Douglas Dreishpoon "Theodore Roszak" in *Abstract Expressionism and Other Modern Works: The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London), 88.

the light and casting wavering shadows of pale thin lines. Like many of Lassaw's open-lattice works, *Monoceros,* has a tactile surface, but its irregularities and jaggedness are less pronounced than in others like *Kwannon,* giving the work a relative smoothness. *Monoceros* also has more repeating forms than *Kwannon*, with the shape of a square, bisected evenly through the middle, repeating many times, particularly at the end of the outermost sections that come closest to the viewer.

Although Andrew C. Ritchie's description of *Monoceros* as "baroque," is overblown, its materiality is rich, glittering, and aesthetically pleasing, especially when compared to the more industrial works of David Smith, or *Firebird*'s encrusted outer shell. Resting on three irregular, willowy feet, *Monoceros* has a delicacy about it, while *Firebird*, although it too rises from a slight strip of metal, seems heavy and compressed. *Monoceros,* with its openness, simultaneously creates a sense of expansion and contraction that encompasses without capturing the viewer's body. *Firebird* evokes a different spatial experience, with a feeling of pressurized interior space, and compressing and suffocating space above the work. This sense of oppression, gives the work its violence, as a fight against gravity, and its heaviness, as if pressurized to the point of explosion. *Monoceros* is also heavy, made of high-grade galvanized wire that has been coated with bronze. It cannot be easily moved by one person and takes great force to be bent or shaped without heat; however the openness and delicacy of the uniform metal lineament create an airiness and lithe otherworldliness that distances it from physical weight. Although Lassaw's process, which requires no preliminary drawing or finishing processes, did not include the hand of the artist, the open lattice works activate the hand

of the viewer and produce a tactile consciousness that allows the viewer to enter and touch the works.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Lassaw created open lattice works throughout the 1950s, and extended the concept of openness and tactile awareness throughout the rest of his career, while also continuing with the metal accretion process. Lassaw also completed many large-scale architectural commissions throughout the fifties. The material variations increased throughout the decade as the artist built up an arsenal of differently colored metals. In the latter half of the decade, Lassaw began to manipulate large sheets of metal, such as manganese bronze or copper. He would crumple them, shape them into organic cones, like those found in aquatic vegetation, and burn through multiple layered sheets to reveal inner fused forms. These layered works are usually small in scale and therefore, have an additional interactive level whereby the viewer wants to pick up the work and closely study it. Lassaw continued to make sculpture until the 1980s with a consistently abstract style, that referenced the texture and form of natural, slow-growing forms and completed multiple series, such as *Carayatids*. Lassaw projection paintings, created in the 1940s, were displayed on a large scale in the last years of his life and some of his watercolor works, which are not part of his sculptural process but feature similar geometric lattice forms, generated some exhibition interest. It is the open-lattice works of the 1950s and their immediate precursors, however, that deserve association with Abstract Expressionism and can, in turn, offer a reimagining of the movement.

Perhaps due to its place in the creation myth of America, the story of the Abstract Expressionist movement has largely been told through key figures, painted as all-American cowboys. This “artist hero” approach was challenged by feminist art historical

interventions, but still holds weight in exhibitions of the movement and auction sales. By looking at Ibram Lassaw's work with close attention the formal and physical nature of the work, limited conceptualizations of the Abstract Expressionist movement that rely too heavily on the understanding of art through politics and a lingering "artist hero" approach can be broadened.

Abstract Expressionism, as a stylistic designation aligns with the artist's biography in terms of his social circles and his early turn to abstraction, but it is most applicable in this exercise in terms of artistic process and on a formal level—in the ways that the viewer interacts with Lassaw's work, which I contend relates to works by other Abstract Expressionists. Although I am claiming that Lassaw's sculpture belongs in this grouping, it is with the understanding that he holds a unique position rooted in spatial concerns.

APPENDIX

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig 1. Ibram Lassaw, *Monoceros*, 1952, bronze and manganese bronze over wire, 46 ½ x 24 ½ x 18 ¼ in. (118.1 x 62.2 x 46.4 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (< http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/210010449?rpp=20&pg=1&ft=*&what=Manganese&pos=6>).

Fig 2. Clay Club visiting the natural clay deposits at Tottenville, Staten Island (Lassaw, age 16, left center), 1929 (reprinted from *Ibram Lassaw: Space Explorations: A Retrospectvie Survey 1929-1980* (East Hampton, NY: Guild Hall Museum), 2)

Fig. 3. Ibram Lassaw with his *Bust of Aphrodite*, 1927 (courtesy of Ibram Lassaw Studio Archives).

Fig. 4. Ibram Lassaw, *Gravity Tension,* 1945, stainless steel, plaster, cast and carved painted plastic, 19 x 11 ½ x 10 in. (48.3 x 29.2 x 25.4 cm), collection of the Lassaw family (courtesy of the Ibram Lassaw Studio Archives).

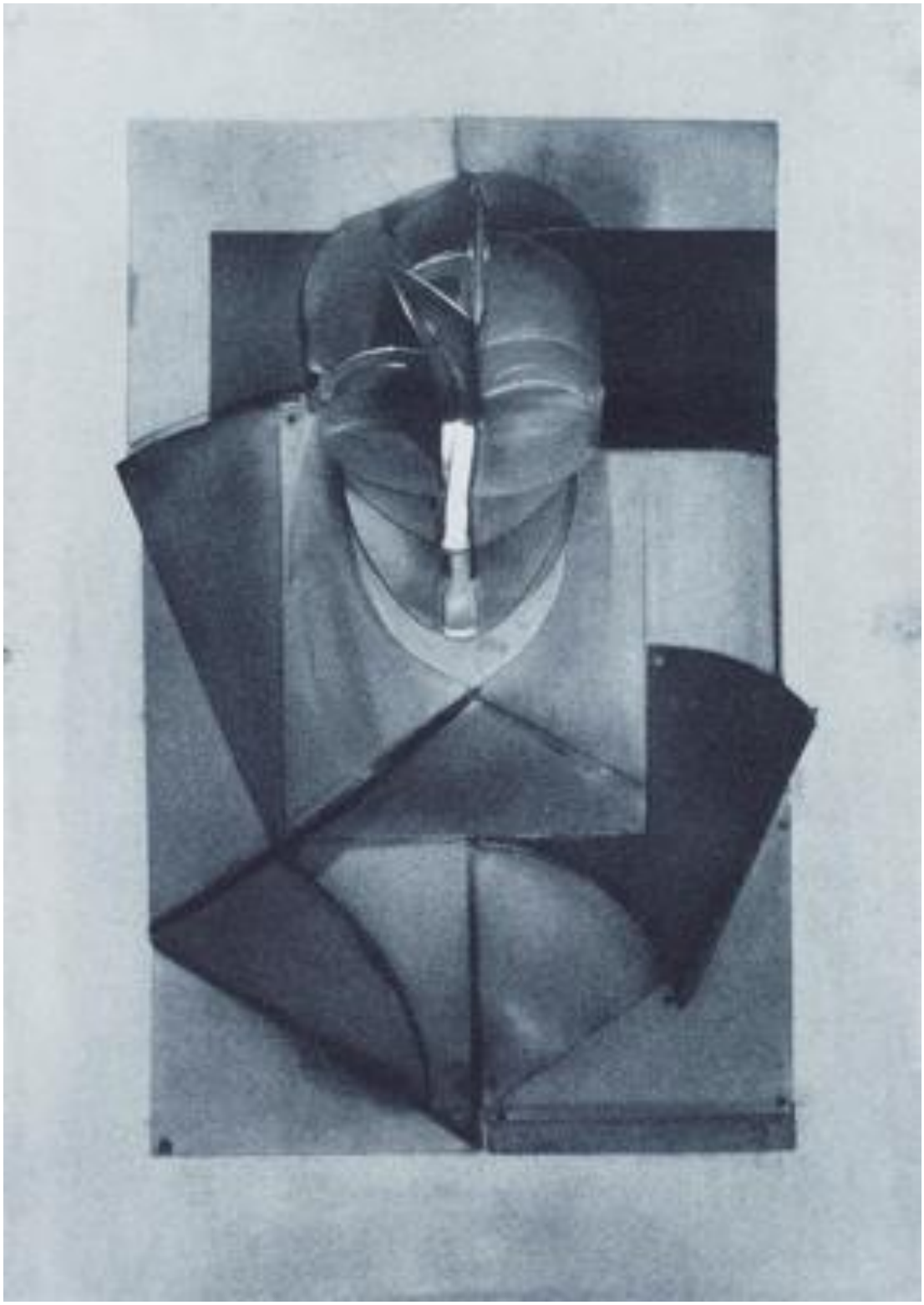


Fig. 5. Antoine Pevsner, *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*, 1926, Cellulose nitrate on zinc with iron, 25 ¾ x 37 in. (65.4 x 94 cm), Yale University Art Gallery (<http://library.artstor.org/library/iv2.html?parent=true>).

Fig. 6. Naum Gabo, *Column*, 1923 (reconstructed 1937), perspex, wood, metal and glass, 41 ¼ x 29 ½ in (104.5 x 75 cm), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/show-full/piece/?search=Column&page=&f=Title&object=55.1429>).

Fig. 7. Jean (Hans) Arp, *Mountain, Navel, Anchors, Table*, 1925, gouche on board with cutouts, 29 ⅝ x 23 ½ in. (75.2 x 59.7 cm), Museum of Modern Art, New York (<http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=33669>).

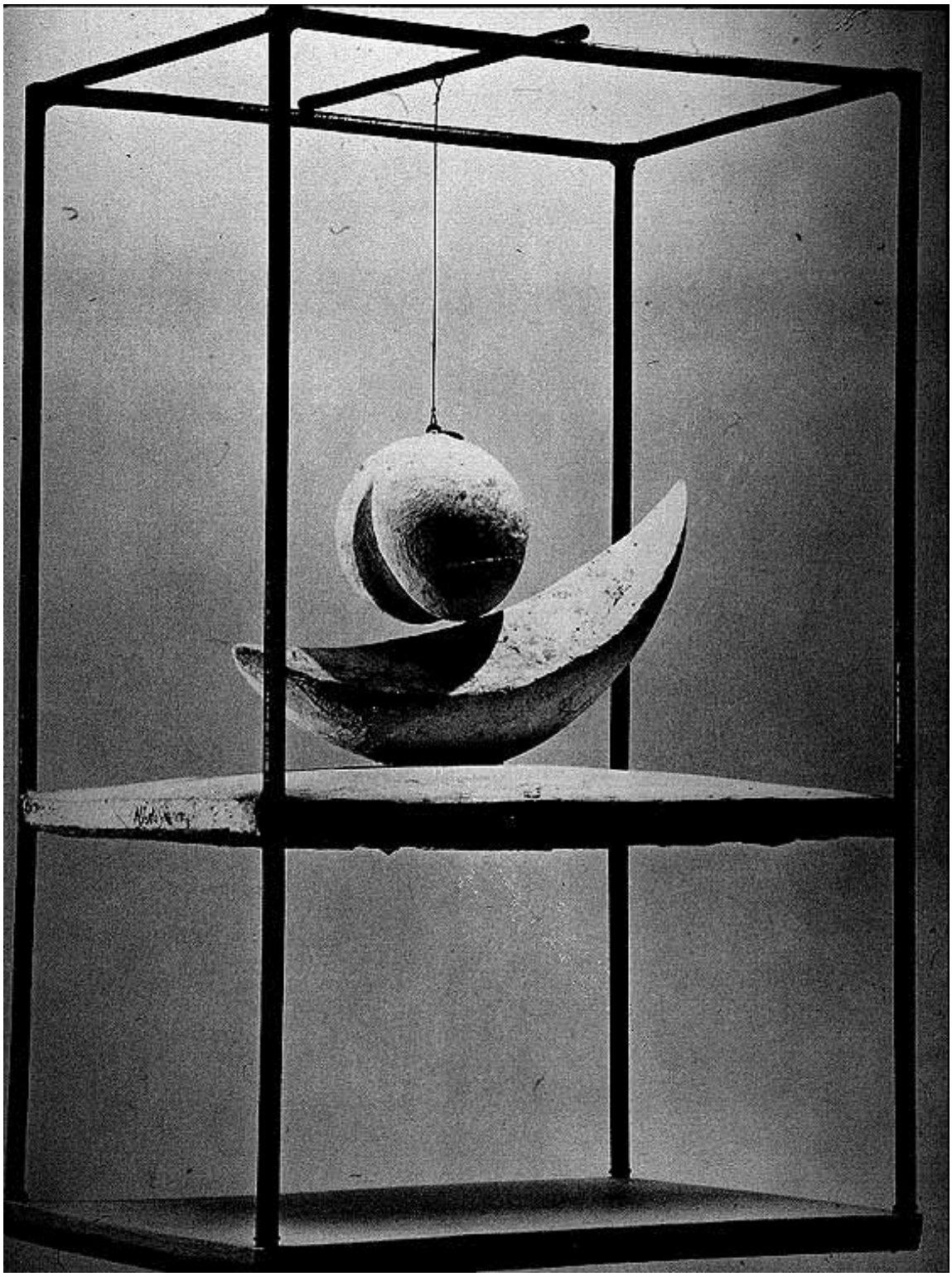


Fig. 8. Alberto Giacometti, *Suspended Ball*, 1930, 24 in. high (61 cm), Tate Gallery, London, Alberto Giacometti Foundation, Kunsthaus, Zurich.

Fig. 9. Isamu Noguchi, *Lunar Infant*, 1944, magnesite, electricity, wood, 22 x 16 x 16 in. (55.9 x 40.6 x 40.6 cm), The Noguchi Museum, New Jersey (<http://www.noguchi.org/museum/collection/lunar-infant>).

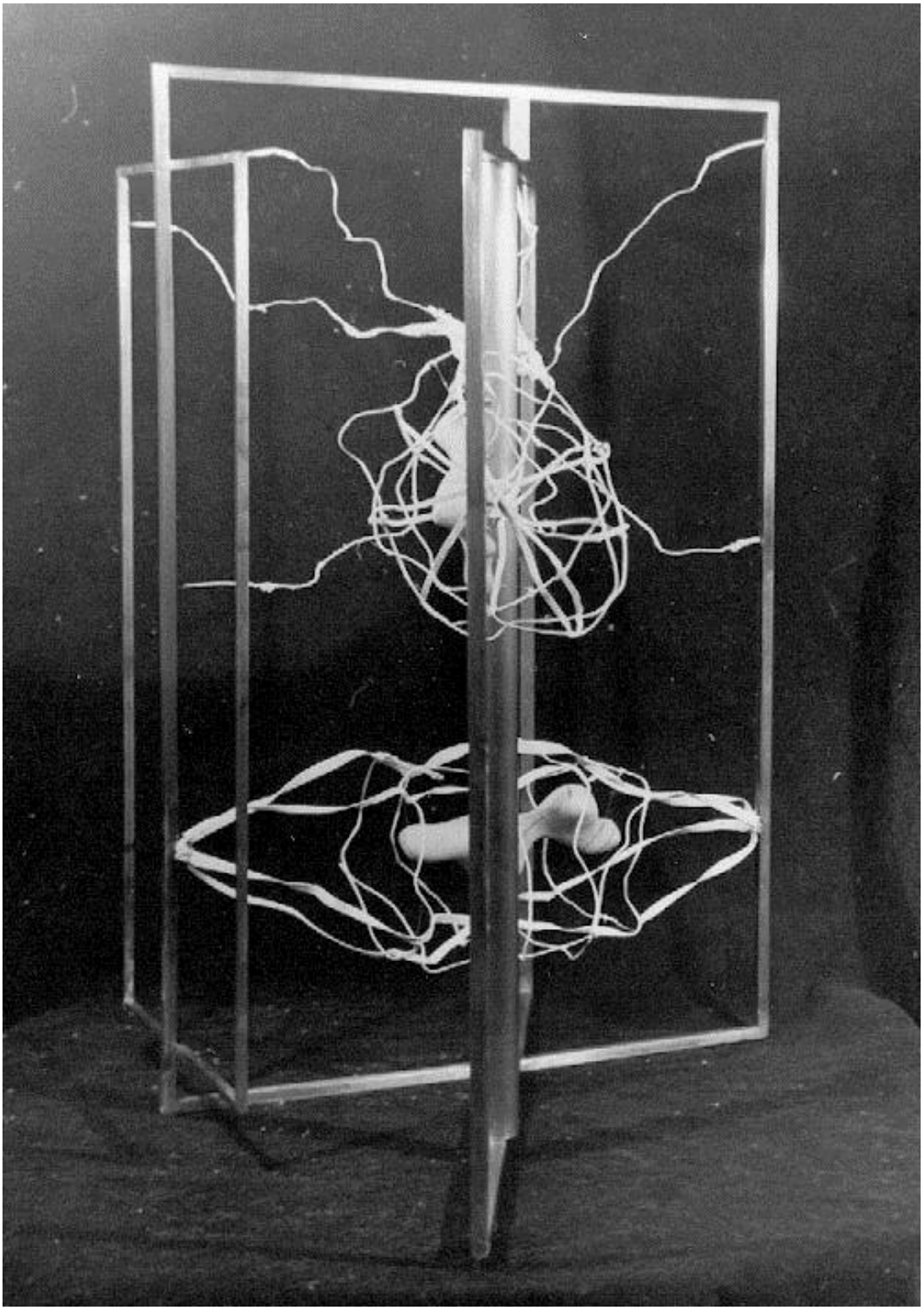


Fig. 10. Ibram Lassaw, *Arachnide*, 1944, steel, wood, zinc, plastic, 25 x 20 ½ x 16 in. (63.5 x 52.1 x 40.6 cm.), collection of the Lasssaw family (courtesy of the Ibram Lassaw Studio Archives).

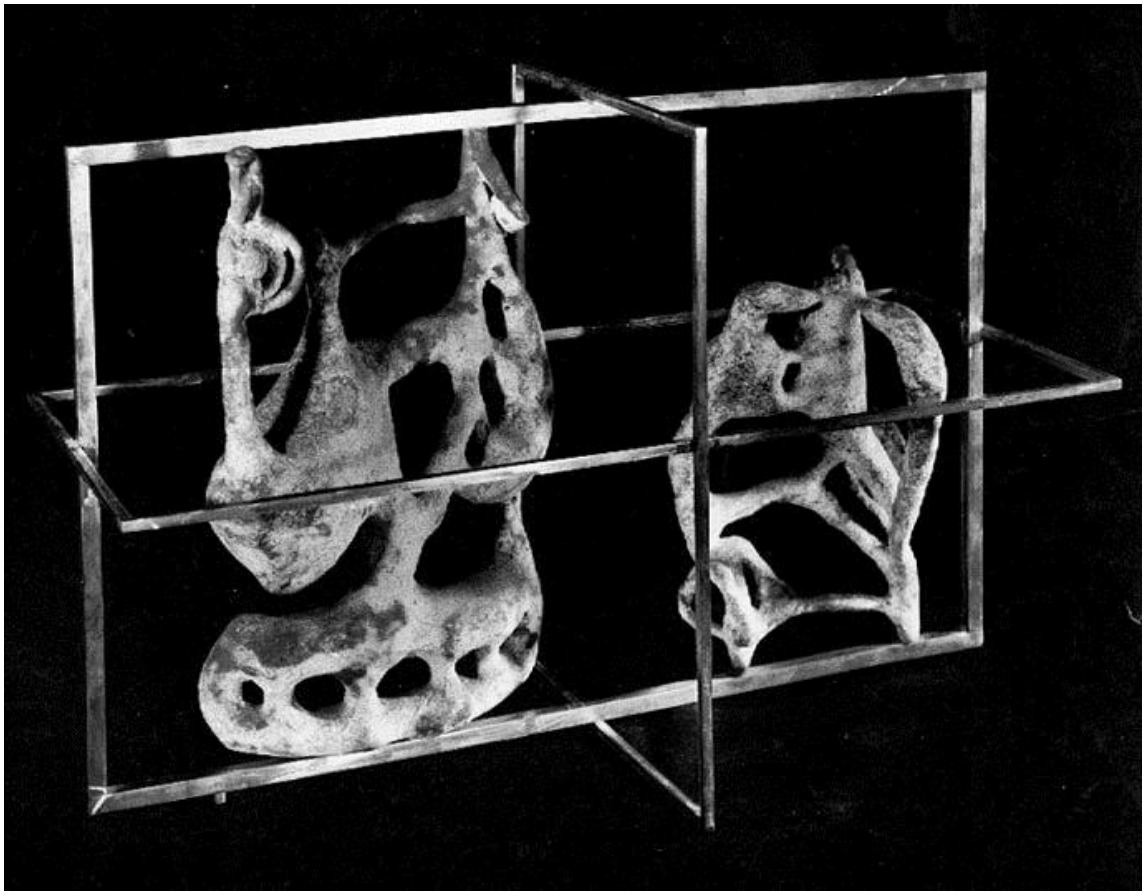
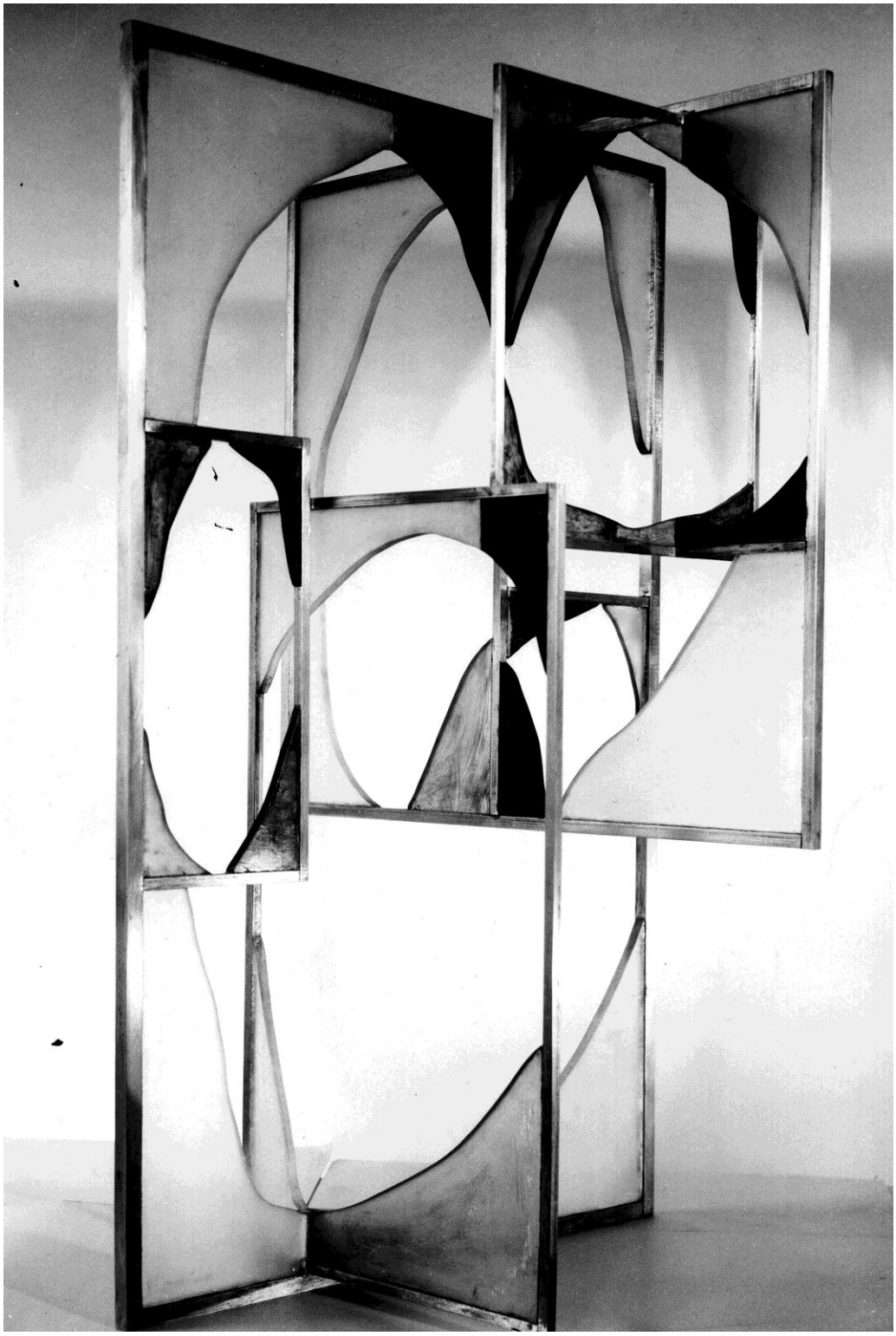


Fig. 11. Ibram Lassaw, *Urageod*, 1946, steel and cast alloy, 11 x 17 x 8 in. (27.9 x 43.2 x 20.3 cm.), collection of the Lassaw family (courtesy of the Ibram Lassaw Studio Archives).

Fig. 12. Ibram Lassaw, *Charms of Four*, 1946, polychrome plastic and stainless steel, exact dimensions unknown, destroyed (courtesy of the Ibram Lassaw Studio Archives).

Fig. 13. Seymour Lipton, *Imprisoned Figure*, 1948, wood and sheet led, 7’ ¾” x 30 ⅞ x 23 ⅝ in. (215.2 x 78.3 x 59.9 cm.), Museum of Modern Art, New York (<http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=81521>).



Fig, 14. Ibram Lassaw, *Somewhere Window*, 1947, polychrome plastic and stainless steel, 33 x 21 x 20 ½ in. (83.8 x 53.3 x 51.1 cm.), collection of the Lassaw family (courtesy of the Ibram Lassaw Studio Archives).

Fig. 15. *Ibram Lassaw with Somewhere Window* (courtesy of the Ibram Lassaw Studio Archives).

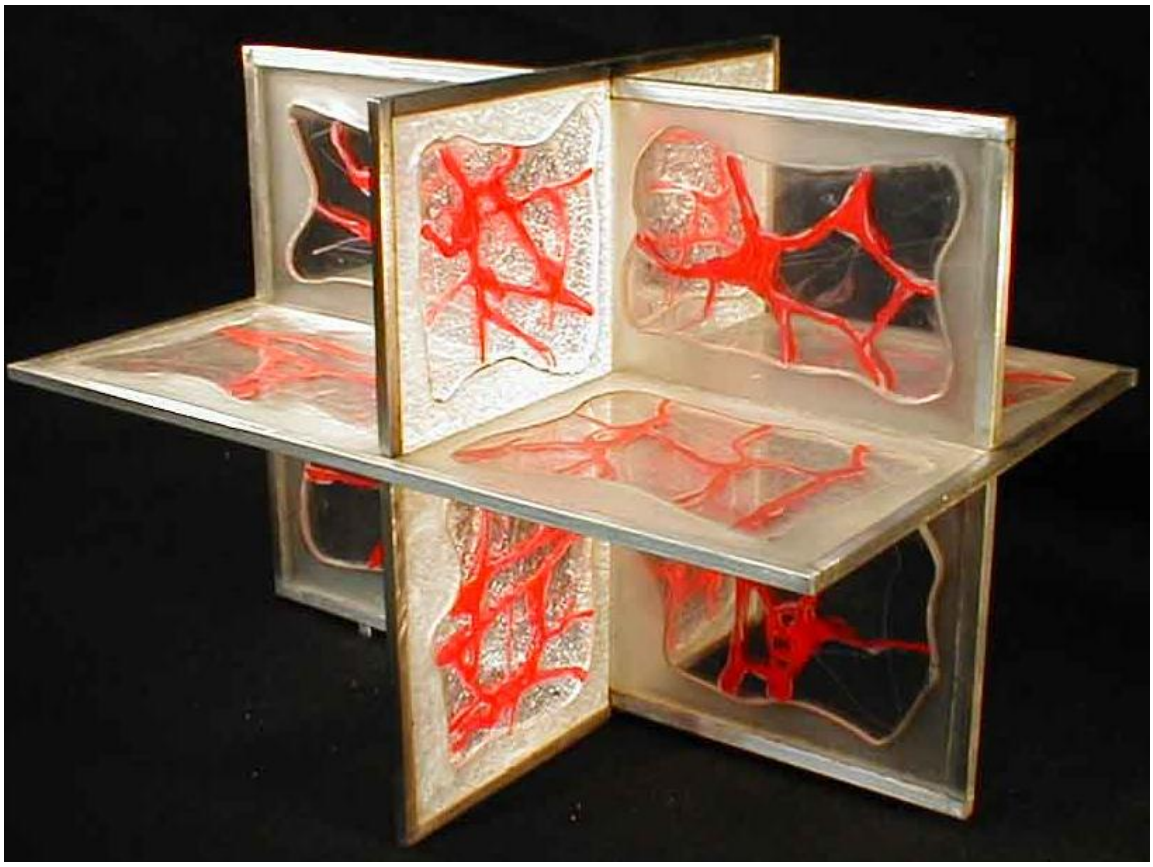


Fig. 16. Ibram Lassaw, *Star Cradle*, 1949, polychrome plastic and stainless steel, 11 ¼ x 16 x 11 ¼ in. (28.6 x 40.5 x 28.6 cm.), collection of the Lassaw family (courtesy of the Ibram Lassaw Studio Archives).

Fig 17. *Star Cradle*, in context at the Lassaw studio with other, later works, photo taken by author, December 13, 2011.

Fig. 18. David Smith, *Blackburn, Song of an Irish Blacksmith*, 1949-50, steel and bronze on a marble base, 46.1 x 40.7 x 58.1 in. (117 x 103.5 x 58.1 cm.), Wilhelm Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg (<http://www.davidsmithestate.org/exhibition_files/Gmurzynska2008/0000.228.html>).

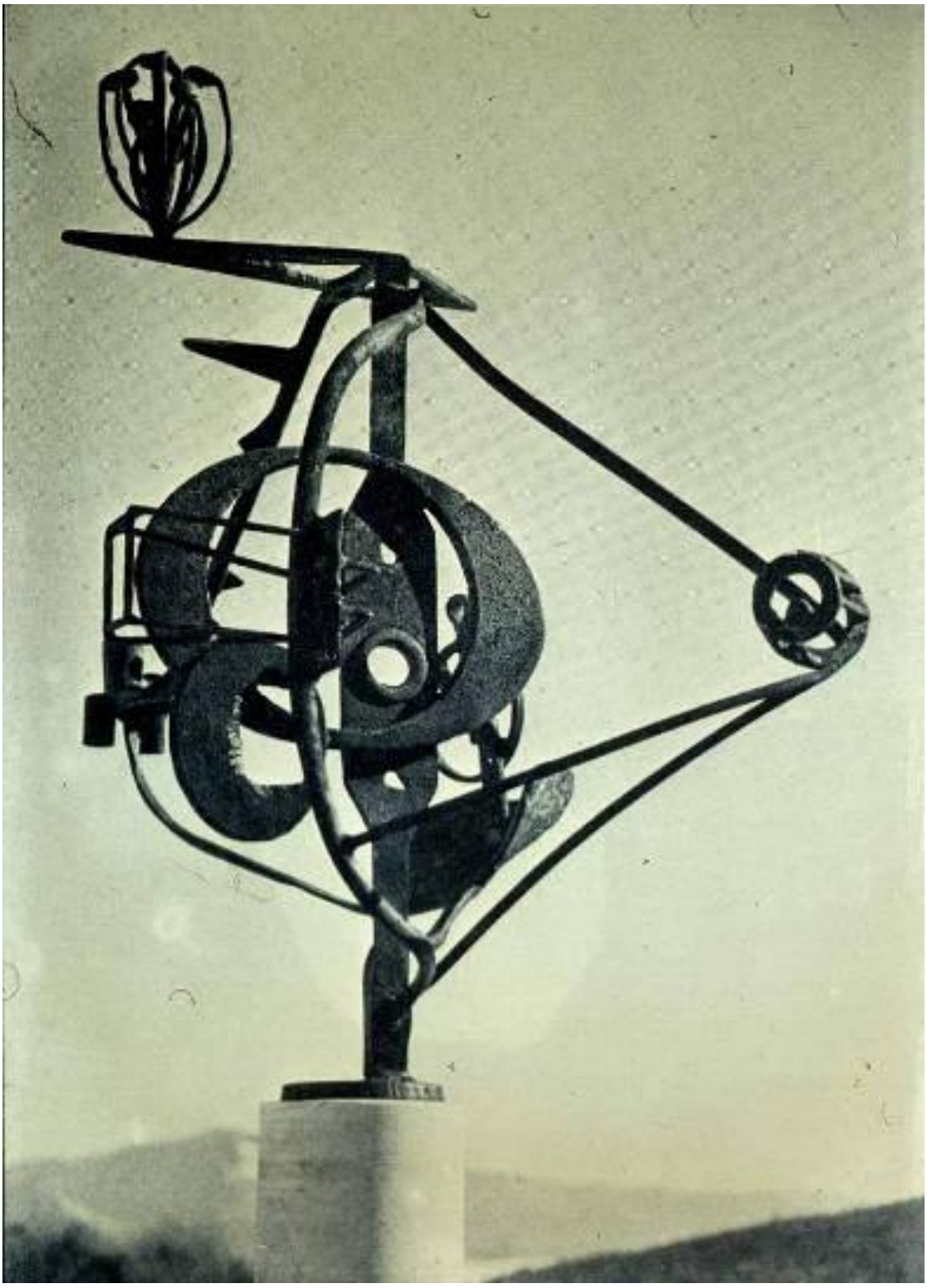


Fig. 19. Alternative view, *Blackburn*

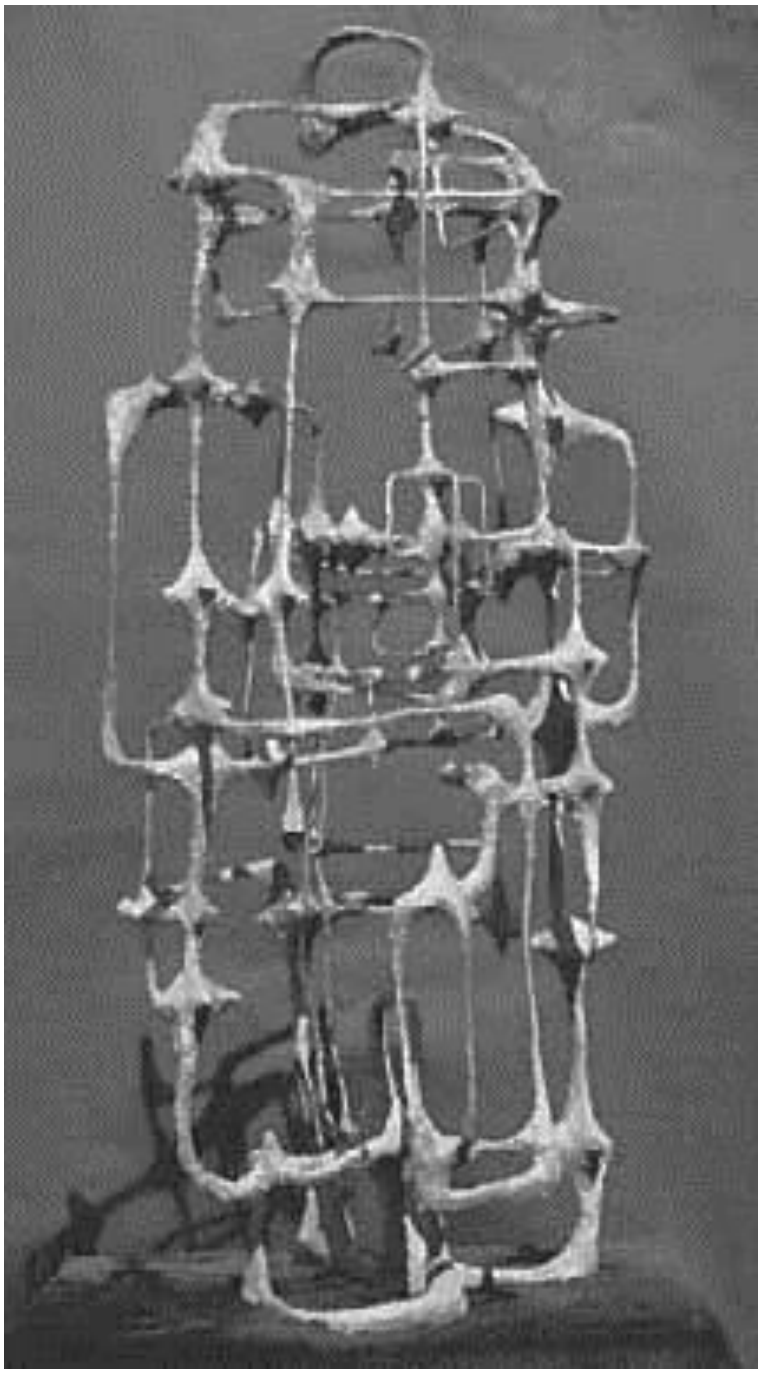


Fig. 20. Ibram Lassaw, *Milky Way: A Polymorphic Space*, 1950, plastic over wire, 44 x 26 x 24 in. (111.8 x 66 x 61 cm.), collection of the Lassaw family (courtesy of Ibram Lassaw Studio Archives).

Fig. 21. *Milky Way* interior detail, photo taken by author, December 13, 2011.

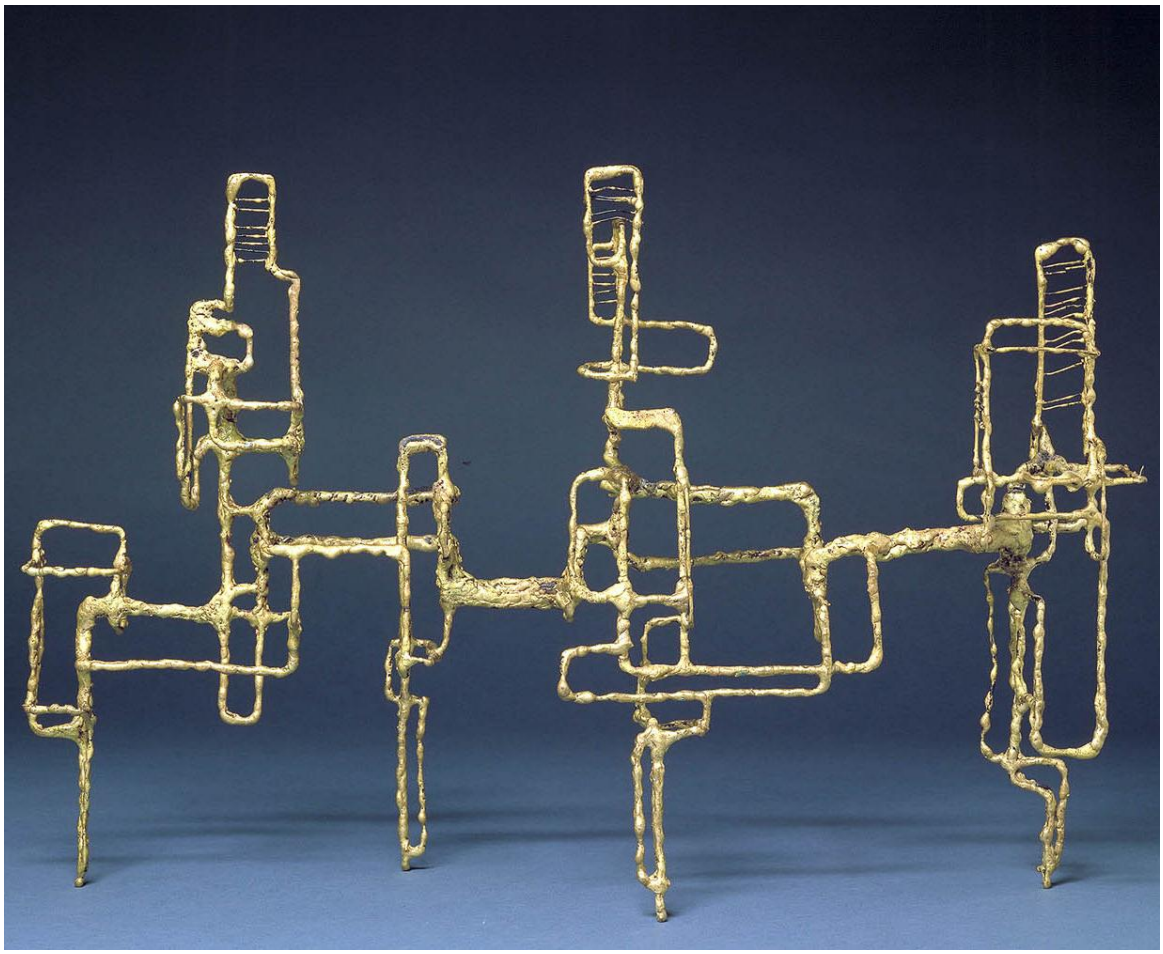


Fig. 22. Ibram Lassaw, *The Hyades*, 1951, bronze over wire, 13 ¾ x 21 ½ 6 ½ in. (34.9 x 54.6 x 16.5 cm.), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC (<http://americanart.si.edu/images/1986/1986.92.64_1a.jpg>).

Fig. 23. . Ezra Stoller, photograph of "Pink Room" in Philip Johnson's *Guest House*, New Canaan, CT, 1953, <http://library.artstor.org/library/iv2.html?parent=true>.

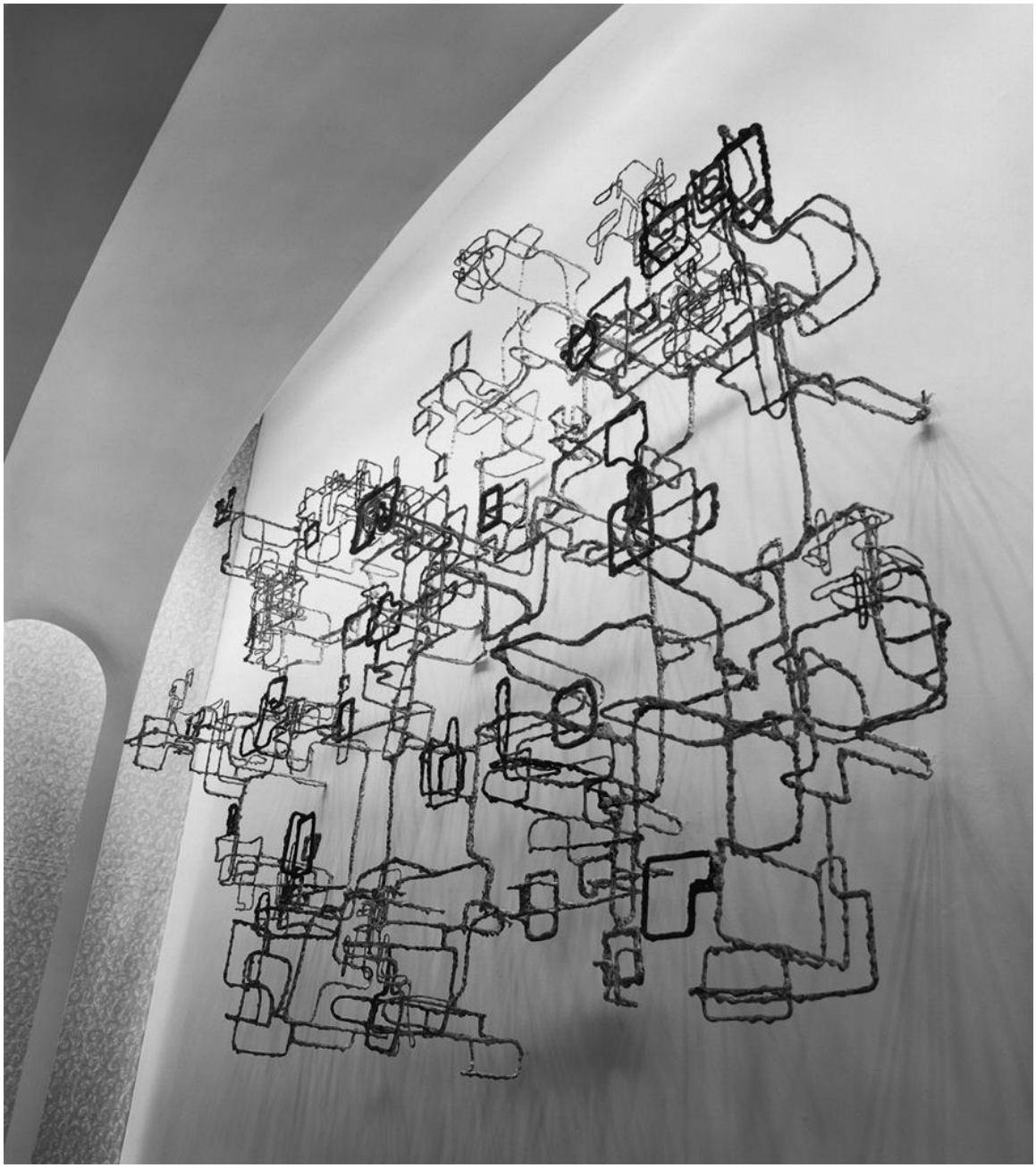


Fig. 24. Ezra Stoller, photograph of Ibram Lassaw's *Clouds of Magellan*, in Philip Johnson's *Guest House*, New Canaan, CT, 1953, < http://library.artstor.org/library/iv2.html?parent=true#>.

Fig. 25. Ibram Lassaw, Kwannon, 1952, welded bronze and silver, 1952. 72 ½ x 43 x 29 in. (184.2 x 109.2 x 73.7 cm), Museum of Modern Art, New York (<http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81118>).

Fig. 26. Detail of lower section of *Solstice*, photo taken by author, December 14, 2011.

Fig. 27. Jackson Pollock, *Number 28, 1950*, 1950, enamel on canvas, 68 ⅛ x 105 in. (173 x 266.7 cm.), Metropolitan Museum of Art, (<< http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2006.32.51>).

Fig. 28. Theodore Roszak. *Firebird*. 1950-51. Iron brazed with bronze and brass. 31 x 41 x 27 in. (78.7 x 104.1 x 68.6 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Reprinted from Gary Tinterow, Lisa Mintz Messinger, and Nan Rosenthal. *Abstract Expressionism and Other Modern Works: The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2007), 87).

Fig. 28. Theodore Rozak, “Study for Firebird,” pen, brush and ink, watercolor, and pencil on paper, 28 7/8 x 34 7/8 in. (73.3 x 88.6 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (reprinted from Gary Tinterow, Lisa Mintz Messinger, and Nan Rosenthal. *Abstract Expressionism and Other Modern Works: The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2007), 87).

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