

# Marlborough

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For press inquiries please contact Janis Gardner Cecil at Marlborough Gallery at 212.541.4900 or [jcecil@marlboroughgallery.com](mailto:jcecil@marlboroughgallery.com)

Marlborough Gallery, Inc.

40 West 57th Street

New York, NY 10019

t. 212.541.4900

f. 212.541.4948

[www.marlboroughgallery.com](http://www.marlboroughgallery.com)

[mny@marlboroughgallery.com](mailto:mny@marlboroughgallery.com)

## KENNETH SNELSON *SELECTED WORK: 1948-2009* MARLBOROUGH CHELSEA February 19-March 21, 2009

The Directors of Marlborough Gallery are pleased to announce that a major exhibition of works by Kenneth Snelson will open at Marlborough Chelsea, 545 West 25th Street, on February 19 and continue through March 21, 2009. This will be Snelson's third exhibition with Marlborough in New York.

The show will feature fourteen selected sculptures that span the length of Snelson's career to date and will include such seminal works as *Moving Column 1st study*, 1948-1981, *Wood X-Piece*, 1948-1981 and *Bead Chain X-Column*, 1959, plus important works from the Minimalist period including *Three Reds*, 1966; *Sun Run*, 1967 and *Six #2*, 1968. Additionally, the complex and imposing 72-foot-long *Sleeping Dragon* from 2003 will be shown. *Sleeping Dragon* was last exhibited at the exhibition *George Rickey, Kenneth Snelson: Two Americans in Paris* held at the Jardins de Palais Royal, Paris, France in 2006.

Through *Sleeping Dragon's* undulating aluminum and stainless steel tubes, cables and fittings, Snelson pushes the aesthetic and structural possibilities of *tensegrity* to an extreme of size and complexity. In her forthcoming essay on Snelson, Eleanor Heartney remarks that the artist's sculptures often "... thrust upward in a series of diminishing modules as if straining towards infinity and they meander horizontally above the ground in defiance of gravity. Sometimes they suggest collections of pick-up sticks thrown up into the air and suspended there."

If Max Bill, the artist and Bauhaus teacher, was right when he claimed that art can greatly evolve from the basis of mathematical thought, then one could assert that the theory and practice by which Snelson has developed his art is the ideal amalgam of science and art, of breathtaking engineering and visionary structural purity. The art critic Richard Huntington said, "In Snelson's hands *tensegrity* ... gives his sculpture a characteristic look that reflects both scientific pragmatism and high art refinement... Snelson's particular method and material choice has spawned a sustained and wondrous dialogue between the nature of physics and the nature of vision. How a sculpture appears to the eye and how it manages to stand up are inextricably mixed." Fundamental to Snelson's work is his idea of structure;

he has said, "Structure to me is involved with forces, the stressing of pieces together, the kind of thing you find in a suspension bridge, for example. It is a definition of what is going on to cause that space to exist."

When one looks at a Snelson sculpture, one can't help but wonder at the elegance of the work's design. It is at the same time both complex and simple, and the power of this duality lends to his sculpture the intellectual tension of rational thought and the poetic imagination of an art distilled through intuition. In an essay *A Perspective on the Science and Art of Modeling Atoms* the physiologist, Robert Root-Bernstein wrote, "It seems a mistake to me to categorize Snelson's work as one thing or another—as art or science, truth or imagination. Snelson's work is a new perspective on structures in nature and the nature of structure. This perspective, in turn, makes new things imaginable and therefore new things possible. Few are those who have made such a contribution or done it so beautifully. In consequence, we may be assured, the truth will out."

The exhibition's concentration of seminal early works outlines Snelson's artistic evolution from his invention of *tensegrity* through the art historical eras of Minimalism and Primary Structure to his current and ongoing investigations into rendering atom structure three-dimensionally. Snelson's sculptural explorations with *tensegrity* structures, a word created by the philosopher Buckminster Fuller to describe Snelson's structural innovation by combining the words tension and integrity, manifests itself in webs of stainless steel tubes and cables that are held in highly stressed, configured structural arrangements through the push-pull balance of compressive forces in the tubes and tension forces in the cables. As Snelson comments, "The sculpture could be put into orbit in outer space and it would maintain its form. Its forces are internally locked. These mechanical forces, compression and tension or push and pull are invisible—just pure energy—in the same way that magnetic or electric fields are invisible." Significantly, Snelson is not working with someone else's invented structural system, such as the post and lintel, arch or dome — Snelson invented *tensegrity*, and has spent sixty years composing brilliant, wholly new

sculptural propositions through this physical system. Snelson's accomplishments in this regard are historically unique.

Born in Pendleton, Oregon in 1927, Snelson graduated from the University of Oregon and served in the US Navy in World War II. After the war he enrolled at Black Mountain College in North Carolina where he studied with Josef Albers and encountered Buckminster Fuller. In 1951 Snelson studied with Léger at the Academie Montmartre in Paris and by 1960 created his first large-scale works whereby he entered a new, innovative artistic territory. He lives and works in New York.

Snelson has received numerous honors and awards among which are the following: New York State Council on the Arts Sculpture, 1971; American Institutes of Architects' Medal, 1981; Honorary Doctorate, Arts and Humane Letters, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, NY, 1985; American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Art Award, 1987; Membership, American Academy of Arts and Letters, 1994; Lifetime Achievement Award, International Sculpture Center, Hamilton, NJ, 1999; The Elizabeth N. Watrous Prize, National Academy of Design, New York, NY, 2002.

His work can be found in public and corporate collections all over the world, including: The Art Institute of Chicago, IL; Dallas Museum of Fine Art, TX; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; Rijksmuseum Kroller-Muller, Otterlo, Holland; Rijksmuseum Staedelijk, Amsterdam, Holland; Shiga Museum of Modern Art, Japan; Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN and The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

A monograph on Kenneth Snelson's work by Eleanor Heartney entitled *Kenneth Snelson: Forces Made Visible*, published by Hard Press Editions, Lenox, MA in association with Hudson Hills Press, Manchester, VT will be available in April 2009.

Advance copies will be available at a book signing hosted by Marlborough Chelsea on March 19th, 6:00 to 8:00 pm.

An illustrated catalogue, with an essay by Eleanor Heartney, will accompany this exhibition.

Marlborough Chelsea / International Public Art Ltd., 545 West 25th St, New York, NY 10001	t. 212.463.8634	f. 212.463.9658	<a href="mailto:chelsea@marlboroughgallery.com">chelsea@marlboroughgallery.com</a>
Marlborough Fine Art (London) Ltd., 6 Albemarle Street, London W1S 4BY	t. 44.20.7629.5161	f. 44.20.7629.6338	<a href="mailto:mfa@marlboroughfineart.com">mfa@marlboroughfineart.com</a>
Marlborough Monaco, 4 Quai Antoine 1er, MC 98000 Monaco	t. 377.97702550	f. 377.97702559	<a href="mailto:art@marlborough-monaco.com">art@marlborough-monaco.com</a>
Galería A.M.S. Marlborough, Nueva Costanera 3723, Vitacura, Santiago, Chile	t. 56.2.228.8696	f. 56.2.207.4071	
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