

Nancy Graves: *Synecdoche II*

By Elizabeth Johnson

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Nancy Graves, *Plektra*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 64 x 88 inches. Courtesy Locks Gallery, Philadelphia.

Complementing *Synecdoche* (December 2013 – January 2014), Locks Gallery presents *Synecdoche II*, a collection of Nancy Graves's mid-1970s paintings and drawings that evolved from her "Lunar Orbiter" series, which extrapolates NASA lunar surface maps into fragmentary, mysterious, abstract spaces. Oil paintings and pastel drawings of *Synecdoche II* interpret visual data from vast moonscapes that only machines could visit. Graves died in 1995, but it's tempting to imagine her using high-resolution images from satellites, drones, telescopes, and microscopes. As part of the Land art movement of the late sixties and seventies, along with Robert Smithson and Robert Morris, Graves absorbed Anton Ehrenzweig's idea of "dedifferentiation."¹ *Synecdoche II* suggests entropy and movement beyond boundaries as metaphors for very large, very small, or remote environments.

According to Ehrenzweig, "dedifferentiated perception" connects us with the unconscious and the possibility of new, whole, randomly patterned, equally weighted impressions rather than logical perception. Opposing Gestalt psychology, it allowed for cumulative impressions and ones deemed real and abstract to exist simultaneously.² In 1968 NASA created lunar maps to determine the best Apollo landing targets.³ Building on earlier drawings, paintings, and prints she made of Antarctica, the ocean floor, the moon, and Mars,⁴ Graves used these maps to express technology meeting personal choice: random features are re-mapped as gestures suggesting particles, matter, energy, trajectories, or simply marks on a white surface (Though not in the show, in 1972 she

made “Landfall” series, a suite of ten pointillistic lithographs at Chicago’s Landfall Press, from which, in 1977, she developed the “Synecdoche” series of etchings at Tyler Graphic Ltd. in Bedford Village, New York.⁵ These etchings were contemporary with the paintings in both *Synecdoche* shows. The tendency to return to prior images and incrementally recombine distance and longing feels even more romantic today, fifty years later.)



Nancy Graves, *Vassei*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 64 x 76 inches. Courtesy Locks Gallery, Philadelphia.

The predominately white oil paintings *Plektra*, *Vassei*, *Tobira*, and *Simula* (all 1976) are the standout pieces of *Synecdoche II*. They make me think of landscape and cell structure. Marks recede into the white canvas, easing the viewer into a tangle of line and dot structures that characterize relaxed generalization, the result of “reading” a landscape, another work of art, or in this case photographs. One shocking aberration, a small crimson blip in *Vassei* conjures a fugitive asteroid or a returning comet. *Vassei* and *Simula* are structured around vertical and lateral gestures that reference lines of longitude and latitude, and linear crossings that melt rather than punctuate the specificity of locales. A snaking gesture seems to claim broad zones, breaking up into “V” shapes and smaller squiggles that would denote grass and hills in children’s drawings. *Plektra* and *Tobira* evoke landscapes turning into living cells, as denser clumps of gestures pull apart and press themselves into corners, reminiscent of cell cleavage and division. Seen together, the four paintings equate macrostructure and microstructure, and underpin universal rules of physics, chemistry, and biology.

Graves started her “Lunar Orbiter” series in 1972, when the Apollo Program was concluding, long after Apollo 1 exploded in 1967, after Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Conspiracy theories followed the Apollo 11 Moon landing in 1969, TV coverage became mundane, and anti-NASA demonstrators cried “waste of money.” Consciously avoiding gestalt-based abstraction, encompasses the Apollo Program’s successes, failures, the possession of the moon, and subsequent protest or disinterest, since the

work accommodates opposing and multiple points of view without favoring the artist as the primary observer.



Nancy Graves, *Antarci*, 1973-75. Oil on nine canvases, 46 x 143 inches overall. Courtesy Locks Gallery, Philadelphia.

Synecdoche II includes two paintings from 1978: *Gweet* and *Hekt* seem to blossom into lyricism superimposed upon the structure of the previous, sparer work. They are beautiful paintings, but one misses the decaying drawing and the diminishing momentum of the earlier canvases. On the other hand, *Antarci* (1973-75) supports Graves's anti-Gestalt reading of the Apollo mission by serializing separate painterly views into nine canvases that resemble satellite film images spliced together. As the series is read left to right, a dividing line in each panel appears lower and lower, giving the impression of decline, a lowering of expectations or a film skipping in its sprockets. Containing ladders and tilted rectangles that act as temporary windows or satellites adrift in space, *Antarci* imposes rigid boundaries onto the vastness of *Plektra*, *Vassei*, *Tobira*, and *Simula*. The piece suggests permeable membranes of living cells as colorful fleshy voids or fabric-like substrates. One can consequently relate the work's motion and mutable shapes to the chemical soup that connects every part of a living cell. Repeatedly reading the piece like frames of film and flourishing cells mutes the ego-noise of Eisenhower, Kennedy, NASA engineers, astronauts, and rocket technology. *Synecdoche II* elicits vegetable or mineral—more than animal—nostalgia for this profound cultural event.



1. Brigitte Franzen, Annette Lagler, eds. *Nancy Graves Project & Special Guests*. (Aachen: Hatje Cantz, 2014), pp.162-164.
2. Ibid. pp. 99-101.
3. Kelsey Halliday Johnson. *Nancy Graves: Synecdoche*. (Philadelphia: Locks Art Publications, 2013), p.3.
4. Thomas Padon. *Nancy Graves: Excavations in Print*. (New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1996), p. 16.
5. Johnson. *Nancy Graves: Synecdoche*. pp. 3-4.

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