Art &ANTIQUES FOR COLLECTORS OF THE FINE AND DECORATIVE ARTS

The Naturalist

Inspired by zoology, paleontology and astronomy, Nancy Graves used a variety of media to reflect on the variety of the cosmos and our place in it.

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Nancy Graves, *Camels (left to right, Camel VII, Camel VI and Camel VIII)*, 1969, wood, steel, burlap, polyurethane, skin, wax and oil paint

In the New York art world of the 1960s, many young artists felt that, despite its undeniable significance, Abstract Expressionism was too messy, too fervent, too unapologetically devoted to unfocused metaphors for the self. If all that was the problem, the solution was obvious: literalism, the salient quality of images and objects that simply are what they are. Andy Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* from 1962, for example, are no more and no less than precise and impersonal renderings of Campbell's soup cans. A Robert Morris cube is a cube, and Frank Stella's patterns of parallel stripes are just that. "What you see is what you see," said Stella in 1966, and viewers wandering into a gallery of the Whitney Museum of American Art three years later could be forgiven for thinking that what they were seeing was a trio of camels stuffed and arranged in life-like poses.

Collectively entitled *Camels*, the three figures were by Nancy Graves, a sculptor who gravitated to New York after receiving her Master of Fine Arts degree from the Yale School of Art in 1964. She had been invited to show these sculptures—the latest in a series of camel effigies begun in 1966—by Whitney curator Marcia Tucker. Opening early in 1969, this solo exhibition was the fifth in the museum's history to present

the work of a woman artist; at 29, Graves was the youngest of the five artists to have received this recognition.

Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and the other literalists of Pop Art went to the supermarket and the funny papers for their subject matter. Minimalism's literalists found theirs in the repertory of geometry's basic forms. Literalism, it seemed, gravitated toward the familiar. Graves's camels are exotic, creatures at home not in the everyday life of the average museum-goer but in distant, just barely imaginable reaches of the desert. And what you saw at first glance was not precisely what there was to see. For these objects are not, literally speaking, camels. The artist built them by attaching patches of sheep and goat skin to wooden armatures—a process that careful looking reveals, if only obliquely. Close acquaintance with the *Camels* reveals that they are the work of an imagination engaged as much with inner structure as with outward image. Their literal, physical being is inextricably interwoven with powers of allusion and symbolism that Graves exercised with unflagging originality until her death in 1995.

Nancy Graves assembling *Unending Revolution of Venus, Plants and Pendulum*, 1992, at the Walla Walla Foundry.

After showing us animal exteriors, the artist sculpted a sequence of skeletal forms. Most were fragmentary, though *Pleistocene Skeleton* (1970) shows the complete skeleton of an ancestral camel. That year, Graves made *Variability of Similar Forms*, which consists of 36 leg bones of another creature in that evolutionary line. Standing upright and crowded together, these objects are static, and yet, as one moves around them, they seem haunted by the ghost of ambulatory movement. One intuits a sequential energy, which Graves first encountered in Eadweard Muybridge's photographs of human and animal locomotion.

Spreading bone-like bits and pieces over the floor, *Bones and Their Containers (To Martin Cassidy*), from 1971, intermingles them with fragments of casings like the ones paleontologists use to transport fossils. This work's interplay of positive and negative curves is one of Graves' many contributions to what might be called the conversation of three-dimensional form, which sculptors launched in antiquity. Throughout her oeuvre, we see her addressing matters usually gathered under the heading of abstraction—

positive and negative, balance and imbalance, unity and dispersal. Simultaneously, she is a figurative artist with strong narrative impulses. With *Bones and Their Containers (To Martin Cassidy*), Graves evokes the long process of animal evolution and the parallel, but much shorter, history of paleontology.

Bones and Their Containers (To Martin Cassidy), 1971, steel, gauze, acrylic, plaster, burlap and wax, 20.3 x 335.3 x 152.4 cm.

Evolving at high speed, Graves' skeletal forms became totemic, then shamanistic, and then stopped appearing. By the end of 1971 she had turned to painting and drawing. Rendered in gouache and India ink on paper, the eight images of *The Metamorphosis of the Frog* (1971) show the amphibian's transformation from tadpole to adult. In her paleontological works, the artist invokes evolution at the scale of geology. Here it occurs in the lifetime of a single creature. While many of her contemporaries were keying their installations to the limits of gallery interiors, Graves sent the imagination—hers and her audience's—to the far reaches of space and time.

In *Four Snakes*, 1971, bright touches of gouache engender pointillist images of reptilian form. One snake, languorously stretched out, is easily recognized. The others, wrapped in their own coils, must be deciphered from patterns of color that live in a border region between abstraction and figuration. And Graves makes these visual modes her subject matter with the 1971 *Camouflage Series*, in which pulsing, high-keyed fields of color-dots fill large canvases edge to edge. See these paintings as abstractions and that is what they are—luminous contributions to the tradition of allover painting inaugurated by Jackson Pollock. Yet a shift in focus reveals that Graves has filled the *Camouflage Series* with images of fish and other creatures whose coloration blends them almost completely into their environments. Camouflage is a product of biological evolution, a process the artist invites us to compare to the perceptual evolution that allows us to see these paintings as abstract one moment, figurative the moment after.

Graves next made paintings from topographical maps of the earth's surface and bathymetric records of the ocean's floor. Satellite photographs of the moon provided starting points for further explorations; returning to earth, she sent meteorological imagery sweeping across her canvases. No matter how vigorously she transforms the forms, colors, and patterns of

her sources, Graves nonetheless makes it possible to see traces of her original data through intervening layers of abstraction. As the decade ended, however, her medium changed and so did her pictorial structures. She was now working in watercolor, wet-on-wet.

Kloe, 1977, watercolor on paper, 111.8 x 230.5 cm

Completed in a single sitting, each of the watercolors shows a heightened immediacy. *Klong* (1977) advances toward us, its colors ranging across the spectrum from blue to red to a glowing tangle of secondary hues. Soaked into the paper, its pigments have physical as well as visual impact. With these paintings, Graves comes as close as she ever does to confining her work to the moment of perception, and yet this confinement is far from absolute. *Klong* recalls her meteorological meditations of earlier years, and in *Kloe*, another watercolor painting from 1977, these allusions mix with reminiscences of her fossil forms. The present, no matter how intense, is always manifold in Graves's art. Moreover, she never limited herself to a single medium. Returning to gouache and oil paint, she continued with watercolor, often using it in conjunction with acrylics. And in 1977 she became, once again, a sculptor.

Molded in wax and marble dust over steel armatures. Graves's early sculptures of bones and fossils were sturdy but almost as vulnerable, physically, as paintings and drawings. Commissioned to produce a permanent piece for an outdoor installation at the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany, she made *Ceridwen, out of Fossils* (1977), which replicates in bronze the elements of *Fossils* (1969–70). For several seasons, she recycled certain earlier sculptures in this medium, which is of course one of the earliest to appear in the history of sculpture. Yet it was new to Graves, and by 1979 she was putting it to startlingly fresh uses. With guidance from Richard Polich, head of the Tallix Foundry, in Peekskill, N.Y., she mastered both sand-casting and the lost-wax method. Able now to turn perishable objects into nearly indestructible forms, Graves reinvented on her own terms the tradition that produced Surrealist assemblage, the quasi-organic sculpture of Alexander Calder, and the more industrially-flavored constructions of David Smith.

A residency at the American Academy in Rome having supplied her with forms redolent of the Mediterranean past, Graves built *Archaeoloci* and *Archacologue* (both 1979). As their titles suggest, these sculptures exchange paleontological motifs for archeological ones. A trip to India produced the allusions to Indian flora, fauna, and religious imagery that animate *Agni, Calubra* (both 1982), and other sculptures from the early '80s. None of these works was preceded by drawings or a maquette. Graves' method was to cast in bronze any object

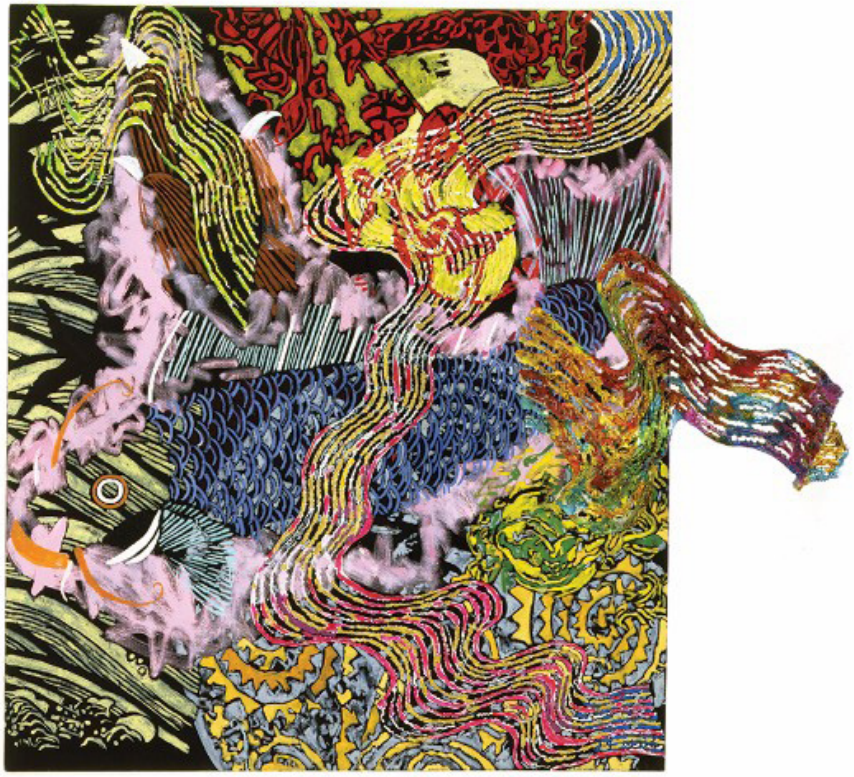
that caught her eye, with no thought for the part it might play in her sculptural future. At its height, her inventory of elements numbered over 1,500 and ranged from farm implements to chair backs to chunks of soundproofing material. There were bronze carob beans, lotus leaves, and sardines, raffia fans, scraps of bubble wrap, table napkins, and much, much more. Immediately identifiable or not, these forms symbolize the generative energy of the environments from which they came. And when Graves welds a selection of them into a discrete sculpture, she enacts in a hyper-consciousness mode the process of bringing order to our experience of the world's plenitude.

Though chains usually serve to grapple things together, the one in *Perceptual Threshold* (1990) functions more as a gesture liberating this sculpture's red, linear element to swoop and curl through space, seemingly at will. Its exuberance invites us to see it as a symbol of the artist's inexhaustible creativity, though, like all of Graves' forms, this one is open to any number of interpretations. Like the camels that appeared at the outset of her career, *Perceptual Threshold* stands directly on the floor, which it touches at remarkably few points, considering its multi-part anatomy. Graves' sculptures, she once said, "are balanced by imbalance"—a verbal paradox resolved by the visual harmonies she achieves with her startling juxtapositions of the objects she finds, casts in bronze, and then swathes in vivid patinas.

The thrusts and counter-thrusts of *Irrational Factor of Nature* (1989) give it the look of a figure—a dancer, perhaps, poised for a vigorous leap. Alive with explosive energies, this sculpture reconciles the surprises of wide-ranging allusion with the serenity of formal resolution, a measure of which is supplied by the bright palette that plays such an indispensable part in Graves's later sculpture. Commanding not one but three methods of applying color to bronze—traditional patination, fired enamel, and polyurethane paint—she united her sculptural medium with that of painting. Migrating to her two-dimensional work, this unity appears also in paintings from the late '80s and the '90s, with their mixtures of pigment and gold and silver leaf and their attachments of anodized aluminum elements.

Nancy Graves, *Permanent Tension*, 1989, oil on canvas with anodized aluminum attachment, 101.6 x 116.8 x 73.7 cm

Many traditions, definitions, and theories of art have emerged since the time of the Renaissance. Two are of primary importance—and adamantly irreconcilable. One is the idea of "pure art," which finds the value of an object or a text not in any connection with the world but, rather in its elaboration of exclusively aesthetic concerns. This ideal of purity first emerged in the poetry and theory of Théophile Gautier and other aesthetes of the 1830s. Enclosed by its formal clarity, the Minimalist box is perhaps purity's most convincing embodiment. Standing opposed to the box is all art that engages the full range of our experience, from the direct observation of natural phenomena to our most intricate processes of self-reflection. This is the tradition to which Graves makes a monumental contribution. In a work by her we encounter not a single image or idea but the interplay of many variegated images and a multitude of ideas and feelings too rich to summarize in adequate detail. Speaking generally, one might say that Graves' works are inexhaustibly complex meditations on the interactions between self and world—on the acts of imagination by which we locate ourselves in our surroundings, take stock of our locations, and, ultimately, achieve an understanding not only of where but of who we are.



Villain of Situation, 1989, oil on canvas with gold and silver leaf with anodized aluminum attachment, 124.5 x 124.5 x 53.3 cm.