

BeauxArts

*Celebrated in the 1970s, American artist Nancy Graves is back in the spotlight at Ceysson & Bénétière**

By Juliette Theureau
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*This article has been translated from French to English. Originally titled, "Célébrée dans les années 1970, l'artiste américaine Nancy Graves retrouve la lumière chez Ceysson & Bénétière"

How could an artist whose work was exhibited at MoMA and the National Gallery of Art in Washington have almost completely disappeared from art history? Thirty years after her untimely death, Nancy Graves is gradually being brought back into the spotlight. The Ceysson & Bénétière gallery in Paris is dedicating a solo exhibition to her, featuring a collection of drawings and paintings from the 1980s, on view through June 20. A must-see.

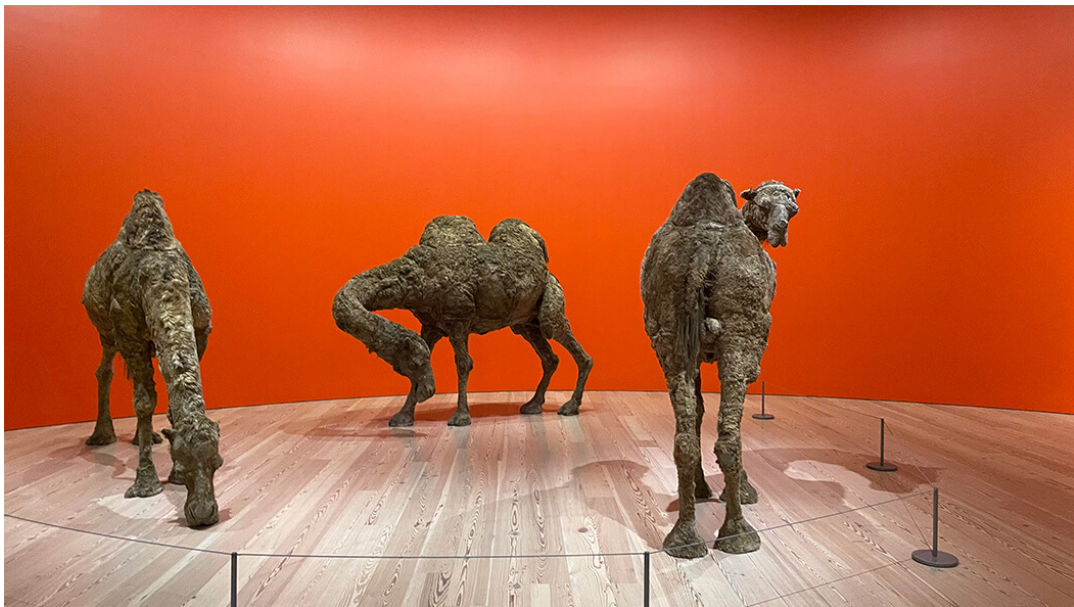


Nancy Graves at the Walla Walla Art Foundry, 1992

Paintings, sculptures, prints, films, and stage sets: Nancy Graves (1939–1995) experimented with almost everything. She was the subject of countless exhibitions, notably at MoMA and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, before dying of cancer at the height of her career, at the age of 55. Born in 1939 in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Nancy Graves first studied literature at Vassar College in New York State before enrolling in the prestigious master's program in the Department of Art and Architecture at Yale University. In 1964, a scholarship enabled her to study in Paris and then travel to Morocco, where she shot her first films.

A Meteoric Rise:

Upon returning to New York, she was briefly married (from 1964 to 1970) to the minimalist sculptor Richard Serra and moved to SoHo in 1966. She was part of the first generation to move into lofts—which served as both living spaces and studios—in this industrial neighborhood, which was then becoming increasingly popular among artists and has since become legendary. As early as 1969, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York offered her a solo exhibition: at age 29, she became the youngest artist to receive this honor. Her career took off in the United States and Europe.



Nancy Graves, Exhibition view of *Camel VI*, *Camel VII*, and *Camel VIII*, 1967–1969

In the late 1960s, she produced her first series of naturalistic works that explored the boundary between art and natural history. With the three life-size camels that launched her career, she explored the theme of illusion: Are these animals still or in motion? Are they taxidermy specimens or sculptures created from scratch by an artist?

A Painting Inspired by NASA's Discoveries:

In the 1970s, the space race was in full swing, but Graves couldn't care less about the political dimension of this frantic competition between the United States and Russia: what fascinated her were the new images produced by this research. Long before Google Earth, satellite images still looked like huge, imperfect puzzles.



Nancy Graves in her studio on Mulberry Street with *Mars*, 1973



The brightly colored maps that encode information are visual representations of data related to temperature, humidity, and so on. Graves then uses these images—created and compiled by scientists—to reconnect with painting—without abandoning sculpture—by collaborating directly with NASA researchers.

Art History Reconstructed in Expressive Paintings

Over the next decade, she devoted herself to art history by scouring newspapers and both general-interest and specialized publications. She cut out, photocopied, and pasted. From this vast collection of images, hundreds of works emerged, forming her own narrative of art history.

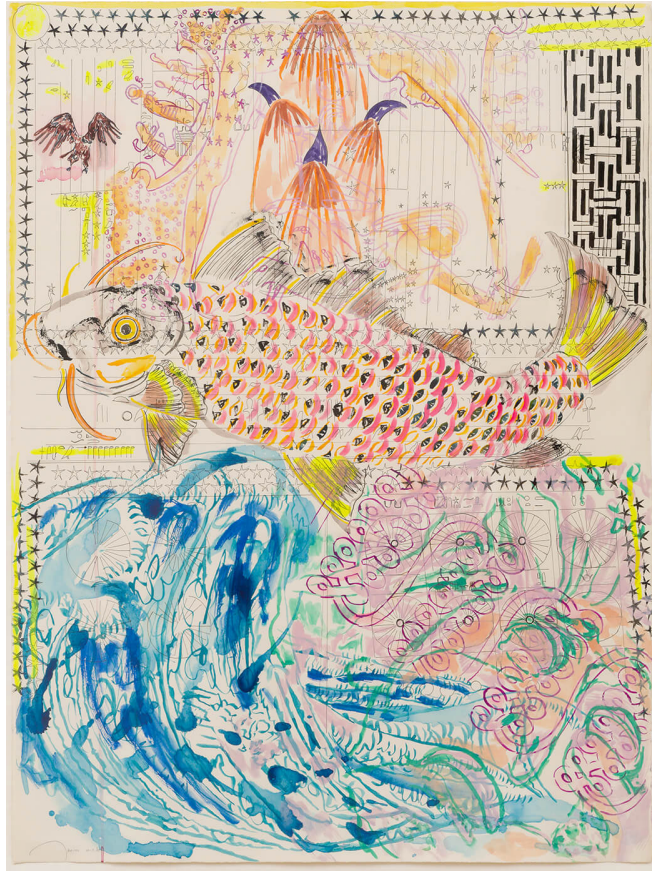


Nancy Graves, *Everyone Scurries*, 1989



In contrast to the immediacy of Pop Art from the same period, visitors first see abstract, colorful forms. The borrowed motifs do not appear overtly; they blend into the layers. It is up to the viewer to seek them out—or not.

Nancy Graves fragments famous or lesser-known paintings and blends different eras. For example, in *In Memory of My Feelings* (1988)—whose title is taken from a poem by Frank O'Hara—she creates a dialogue between a Greek marble sculpture, a Japanese print, and ancient Egyptian frescoes in a composition where colors echo one another. However, it is not necessary to grasp the scholarly references to appreciate these paintings. Both abstract and figurative, Nancy Graves's unique work—right up until her death—brought together meticulous reproduction and expressive gesture.



Nancy Graves, *In Memory of My Feelings*, 1988

Thirty years after her passing, the time has come for a rediscovery: in recent years, curators and gallery owners have been revisiting her work and bringing it back into the spotlight on both sides of the Atlantic. In France, she is now represented by the well-known galleries Perrotin and Ceysson & Bénétière, the latter of which is dedicating its second solo exhibition to her in Paris, featuring a collection of drawings and paintings from the 1980s.

At a time when recent technological developments are raising questions about how art appropriates existing images, Nancy Graves's work seems ahead of its time; she had already understood how our view of the world would henceforth be shaped by fabricated, fragmented, and recomposed images.