

ARTnews



Nancy Graves, *ABC*, 1977, acrylic and oil on canvas, 44" x 96". Locks.

Nancy Graves

Locks

Philadelphia

It was a surprise and a pleasure to view these paintings, made between 1976–77 by the late American artist Nancy Graves, when she temporarily put sculpture aside to concentrate on two-dimensional work. Accompanied by more widely known prints and drawings from the same period, the paintings were a surprise because they have been seldom shown before. They were also a pleasure to look at—the brushwork elegant, the pale surfaces luminous and etched by delicate squiggled or vaulting lines that superficially recall Cy Twombly's more mythic jottings.

Graves was a prolific artist who worked across multiple mediums. Driven by an extraordinary curiosity about the natural world and a propensity for meticulous research, she adeptly paired art with science. This exhibition, "Synecdoche," brought together a selection of her gestural abstractions, whose titles—such as *Polytropos* and *Simula*—underscore their roots in the humanities and technology. Although shaped by a lyrical vision, they are still based on hard data, such as the satellite maps, lunar photographs, motion studies, fossil records, and maps of the ocean floor that consistently inspired her art.

Two 1976 canvases of special interest are from her "Lunar Orbiter Series," derived from mappings of that groundbreaking space mission of 1966–67. The canvases offer a fluid, more calligraphic re-interpretation of earlier pointillist lithographs of the same name. In the '80s, Graves moved toward creating tactile, densely layered paintings, two of which were also shown here. Taken all together, the show offered a rewarding sampling of the artist's rich and idiosyncratic visual language, which artfully maneuvered disparate systems into sophisticated, subversive alliances.

—Lilly Wei