

NANCY GRAVES

SYNECDOCHE

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Fig. 1. *Fra Mauro Region of the Moon*, 1972, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 96 inches

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SYNECDOCHE: MOVING TOWARDS ABSTRACTION

A map of the moon is both a diagram of a landscape, and a remarkable artifact of a collective desire to explore worlds beyond our own. For most people, maps exist to describe where someone has been, or plan where someone could travel. When the artist Nancy Graves (1939–1995) began her work in the studio with lunar cartography and photography, the USGS and NASA moon maps she worked from were at the pinnacle of their navigational utility. The Lunar Orbiter program had used the latest in photographic and transmission technology to scout for possible Apollo landing locations that were compiled into detailed and colorful maps. In the era of manned-missions to the moon, the surface depicted represented a landmass that was being traversed physically by astronauts, ripe with possibility. But as the space program dwindled, these images were relegated to our historical imagination and stalled exploratory dreams. Graves's paintings in the late 1970s utilized a new abstract vocabulary, poetically echoing the growing distance between the wanderlust of the American public and the abandoned Apollo program that had enraptured a generation.

It was in 1972 that Nancy Graves began exploring imagery of the moon, producing large acrylic pointillist paintings (fig. 1) and an accompanying lithograph series at Landfall Press in Chicago. While seemingly a new direction for an artist

who had previously focused on fossils and camels, Graves was interested in the moon because it too was a fossil—a prehistoric remnant of the forces and matter that forged our home planet. Moreover, her interest in maps is demonstrative of an ongoing interrogation of systems of representation and perception. When Graves’s iconic camels first debuted, they were hailed as subversive for their incorporation of natural history in an era dominated by conceptual coolness. She would later respond that the subversion in her work was “only an effort to change the way we see.”¹

In this historical moment, perception of our expanding world was rapidly in flux and Graves’s work excitedly followed suit. 1972 would also bear witness to Apollo 17’s last manned voyage to the moon. By the time Graves returned to her moon-related work in 1976–77, the Apollo program budget had been cancelled and missions 18–20 had been deserted. Taking her own original lunar lithographs as source material and wildly abstracting them, Graves made a sister portfolio of etchings entitled *Synecdoche Series* (1977; pp. 54–59) at Tyler Graphics Ltd. in Bedford Village, NY. In stark contrast with the pseudo-scientific and matrix-based marks of previous works, the new aesthetic she embraced was far less literal and much more painterly, celebrating the calligraphic qualities of each gesture.

Graves continued to explore modes of pictorial representation based on Lunar Orbiter imagery through large oil paintings with sparse groupings of sensuous and intuitive marks. While many of the works were rarely exhibited, two paintings, *Kadsura, Lunar Orbiter Series* and *Straeo, Lunar Orbiter Series* (both 1976; pp. 12, 13) were installed at Documental 6 in Kassel, Germany in 1977. Other *Lunar Orbiter Series* works in this exhibition, *Simula* (1976; pp. 14, 15), *Tobira* (1976; pp. 20, 21), and *Plektra* (1976; pp. 22, 23), demonstrate that those two paintings were part of a



Fig. 2. Nancy Graves printing at Tyler Graphics Ltd., 1977



rigorous new undertaking in her studio, that would encompass over twenty paintings.

The focus of this exhibition represents a significant departure in the tenor of Graves's oeuvre, marked by bare expanses of canvas or paper, broken up by colorful marks echoing the arbitrary color palette of the USGS maps. In the paintings akin to *Vassei*, 1976 (fig. 3; pp. 16, 17), the negative space is activated with intermediary marks in subtle shades of beige. The paint application of the saturated colors is flat while the paler passages are impasto. Like cartographic information, each mark serves to make points of interest, while the pale textured paint reminds us to not ignore the canvas but appreciate it as representation of a greater spatial field. Occasionally, Graves drew or painted a distinct corner or edge as a reference to the images from which she worked.

While admiring Graves's hand in the work, a quote by art historian Max J. Friedländer comes to mind: "It's easier to change your worldview than the way you hold your spoon." While pushing towards abstraction, she could not shake brushwork that was fundamentally her own, stemming from her formal training at Yale. In these two-dimensional works, a distinct gestural alphabet emerges that embeds itself into the dense, vivid layers of her 1980s works. Between the paintings, drawings, and prints there seems to be some unspoken key to read these works: linear veins intersect each frame while hill-shaped squiggles and circular marks populate the ground. Like the personal symbol-based mapping codes explored in Aboriginal dreamtime paintings, Graves's works maintain an aerial all-overness—not assuming horizons or depth but exploring an active and vast expanse.

Paleoegyptus (1982; p. 37) and *Polytropos* (1982; pp. 40, 41) join these late '70s

Fig. 3. *Vassei* (detail), 1976

work as transitional pieces into the next phase of her career, providing a visual collision of one painterly language folding into another. The use of metallic paint foreshadows her experimentation with sculptural additions and metallic leafing in later paintings (fig. 4). The slight impasto of passages in earlier paintings has been taken to an extreme as Graves began to experiment with applying paint straight onto the canvas without aid of a brush, effectively drawing with the paint tube. In the background, the soft-edged forms of spray paint recall the subtle hand-applied pastel pochoir in the *Synecdoche Series* etchings.

In many ways Graves couldn't sit still; throughout the course of her career she moved fluidly between two and three dimensions, with equal curiosity for physical and time-based works (including film and dance). While she singled herself out from her peers by integrating science into art, these two-dimensional works align her exploration of abstraction alongside her esteemed Yale MFA classmates. Kindred to the gridded works of Chuck Close and abstractions of Brice Marden, Graves did not aim to depict objects and figures in real space, but instead focused on the intangible perceptions we have of them.

Her impulse to deny direct appropriation as part of her practice (by not presenting real taxidermic camel specimens and not directly reproducing maps) positions Graves as a radical in opposition to the Conceptual and Pop Art narratives of the time period. Appropriation was an increasingly viable and accepted tool for artists, yet Nancy Graves took the cutting edge scientific images she loved back into the studio and continued the tradition of painting. Emerging from this period, she would embark on a long exploration of working in bronze, a labor-intensive undertaking. Her dedication to having her hands in the process was a brazen challenge to the evaporating distance between reference and art



Fig. 4. *Be the Power*, 1989, oil on canvas with gold leaf and anodized aluminum sculptural attachment, 57 x 64 x 17 inches

object embraced by her peers.

In 1987, the late critic John Russell commented about Graves that, "The lesson of her work is that there is nothing in the world that cannot lead a second and more expansive life, if only someone is to release it from its everyday connotations."² To do this, Graves avidly reinterpreted source material, finding new modes of presentation to reincarnate the curiosities that fascinated her. Her

practice became a constant back and forth between the wholes and the parts: assembling objects to cast in conglomerate bronze forms while paring down previously completed works into their abstract fundamental pieces. Through this process, Graves shed the concrete connotations of her source material and found a mode of representation generously open to the viewer's own references, permeable to new impressions.

Regarding the patchwork of skins that comprised the camel sculptures, Graves stated that "I try to force the eye to move from part to whole and back again; to prevent it from focusing."³ How the eye reads a work was of great interest to her, and Graves actively read and referenced art theoretical texts that explored perceptual psychology. She purposely made work that would "prevent" the effect of a gestalt, hoping that the works would continue to yield more of their complexity in the process of looking. These two-dimensional works demand that the viewer jump from detail to detail, taking in each deliberate color and mark while trying to make sense of the totality of the entire image. The brain is programmed to seek a certain order, and Graves cleverly obstructed that tendency in the abstraction while leading our eyes on an ebullient dance.

This exhibition expands on key conceptual contributions of Nancy Graves's art through a body of work that has not been seen in several decades. Moreover, it is a crucial opportunity to celebrate the virtuosic and prolific range of a groundbreaking female artist. In 1969, Graves was the youngest female artist to ever be offered a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum. While exhibiting life-like camel sculptures, it may have seemed far-fetched to imagine that less than a decade later she would be ravenously questioning systems of representation in calligraphic and expressionist two-dimensional works. Graves's aesthetic

evolution was constantly in motion, and this formal inventiveness embodied her magnetic attraction to the changing world around her.

Examining this dynamic moment in Nancy Graves's career, the title of the 1977 etching portfolio, "Synecdoche" poignantly resonates with all of the pieces in this exhibition. Like the figure of speech where one references a whole by the name of a part (or vice versa), her language of abstraction is paradoxically panoptic and fragmented. The works elicit the unsettling feeling of being bombarded with new ways of seeing, a reality that was magnified intensely through the scientific breakthroughs of the late 20th century. As our contemporary attention spans and perceptions undergo a revolution in the era of digital imaging, Graves's shifts between the scientific gaze and our subjective perceptions feel especially prescient and urgent.

NOTES

1. Suzanne Muchnic, "A Nancy Graves Sculpture Grows at Crocker Center," *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 1986.
2. John Russell, "Sculpture as a High Wire Performance," *The New York Times*, March 29, 1987.
3. *Nancy Graves* (exh. cat.), ed. Wolfgang Becker (Aachen, Germany: Neue Galerie im Alten Kurhaus, 1971).