

ESSAY

“Nancy Graves”

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Nancy Graves defies categories. Her work is modernist, post-modernist and neither one. She is reverent and irreverent, accessible and incomprehensible. Widely honored since her first years as a professional artist, she has never ceased exploring the edges of what is possible in sculpture and painting. Even as she pursues an apparently modernist agenda of concern with media and form, she uses paradigms and convergent sign systems that suggest post-modern concerns.

Nancy Graves first moved beyond the boundaries of bourgeois artistic acceptability with her camels. Inspired by the work of Clemente Susini, an eighteenth century Italian anatomist. Graves created twenty- five life-size camels between 1965 and 1969. In these works she turned from her Yale University training as a modernist painter to experimentation with wood, burlap, animal skins, fiberglass, wax, steel, aluminum, marble dust, polyurethane, cotton gauze and acrylic paint. The camels challenged all the acceptable definitions of sculpture and the ban on realism in art. They are Graves's first essay in her lengthy explorations of the immense complexity of both scientific and artistic structural systems, the interconnections of art and nature, and the process of both acknowledging and undermining modernism.

In the late 1960s in New York, Graves interacted with such artists as Yvonne Rainer and Eve Hesse who were challenging the austere boundaries of minimalism with new media and forms. Graves's sculptures like the *Variability and Repetition of Variable Forms*, 1971 (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa) paired with her films, were conceptually moving beyond the reductivism of late modernism. Variability was far from minimalism and closer to Jackson Pollock's abstract expressionist painting with its series of vertical poles from which dance an immense variety of airy forms created with steel, latex, gauze, wax, oil and acrylic. Dazzling in its complexity and layers of subtle reference, it cannot be conclusively deciphered, but it evokes the mysteries of art, science, and knowledge all at once. Other early 1970s sculpture also explore the art/science discourse, by creating fossils in cast bronze, combined with welded metal, and fired and glazed clay.

During the later 1970s Graves withdrew from her exploration of three dimensions, and turned to painting. No longer working with galaxies of assistants, she utilized vast conceptual systems including quarry, bathymetric, and topographic maps, phylogenetic charts, submarine, terrestrial and lunar cartography, orbital photographs of Antarctica and paleontology. During a residency at the American Academy in Rome she began to look at archeological maps. On her return to New York, she resumed sculpture with a series that translated the archeological site plans into three dimensions.

During the 1980s, Graves used the lost wax bronze casting technique to create complex, composite plant forms. While not overpowering as sculptures, as vegetal forms

these works suggest bizarre, oversized fossils of exotic species altered by nuclear warfare or climactic adaptation. Structurally, the sculptures look to the work of David Smith in their defiance of gravity, particularly in the use of a "base" that contradicts our expectation of stability. Graves differs from Smith, though, in her emphasis on plants directly cast into bronze and her recasting of found objects. No element of her sculpture is unmanipulated. Her use of sensual, almost cloying, color applied in the tradition of an abstract expressionist-controlled accident argues with, and subverts, the seriousness and complexity of the form and material of bronze as well as the concept of a plant.

One remarkable example is *Wheelabout*, 1985 (Museum of Modern Art, Fort Worth). The piece includes bronze cast plant forms (Graves favors tropical and exotic types) incorporated into a cart-like form on wheels, paired with the sweep of a stainless steel halo created by an arcing curve that echoes the shape of the plant form. Bronze castings of C-clamps appear serendipitously, as though the entire construction were jerry-rigged in a back room shop. Accidents of bronze castings are intentionally incorporated into the piece. Within this panoply of forms the extraordinary brilliant color, spattered, dripped, and layered, pulls us back from analysis of structure to the surface, and from three dimensions to two dimensions. It is a Hegelian argument that we witness here, and ultimately, amazingly, this piece does leave a sense of synthesis, beyond any of its many intricate components.

In the late 1980s Graves again expanded her vocabulary. Her most recent work incorporates quotations from famous art works, such as the Empress Theodora as depicted in the mosaic in Ravenna or the Hand of Adam from the Sistine Ceiling. In *Canoptic Legerdemain*, 1990 she uses fiberglass to suggest a "waterfall," papyrus plants made of laser-cut stainless steel, a three dimensional metal snake with an aluminum mesh screen "skin," painted references to Egyptian friezes, and the large, and iconic, Empress Theodora complete with a suggestion of mosaic and gold ornament. The piece can be read as another level of discourse that is expanding the terms of Graves' original exploration of art/nature/science systems. The "great art" sign system becomes as metamorphosed and re-constituted as the plant forms, the maps, and the camels.

A 1992 sculpture *Unending Revolution of Venus, Plants, and Pendulum*, includes, for the first time, "literal" time, as opposed to the conceptual time of history or science, or the physical time of making and looking. The sculpture incorporates a "weight-driven dead beat escapement clock." The weights for the clock are a small, bronze-cast Venus head, a Laocoon head and a horseshoe crab, connected by pulleys and cables. Thus, the miniaturized icons of historic and scientific time literally drive the clock by their weight. The clock in the sculpture actually works on an eight-day cycle (note, not a week) and needs to be wound by a key, already an archeological reference in today's digital world. By including a device that might render the entire piece into a decorative clock frame, Graves takes yet another chance. But, rather than rendering her sculpture a frame, she makes the clock another quotation removed from an accepted conceptual system, juxtaposed to others, and thus rendered suspect.

Graves can be categorized, finally, as a subversive. She affiliates her work with a modernist tradition in its medium of bronze casting, its scale, its play with gravity, its paint application, but subverts that affiliation with eccentric color and a bizarre choice of image. Graves is ironic, but not in a post-modern allegorical, or metaphorical way because ultimately, her work is still about form, process, and exploration. Even as she demonstrates the arbitrariness of systems of knowledge, she still invests her art with the weight of the tradition of the grand manner. Through her virtuosity, Graves gains a certain power over us, comparable to that of a shaman, but she denies that power and blocks our access to its energy by her trickster-like shifts and layers of meaning. Graves is extraordinary, maddening and phenomenal.