

AACHEN, GERMANY

## Nancy Graves

LUDWIG FORUM FÜR INTERNATIONALE KUNST

Nancy Graves is probably best remembered for her life-size, ostensibly realistic camel sculptures. When, in the late 1960s, über-collector Peter Ludwig discovered his passion for contemporary art—at the time, mainly for US Pop art—he acquired Graves's *Kenya Dromedary* and *Mongolian Bactrian*, both 1969, for his newly established Aachen museum, Neue Galerie Sammlung Ludwig. The camels were a hit. And this didn't change when they later moved into the Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, where the furry creatures stood stoically next to works by Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Duane Hanson, and Chuck Close—Graves's colleagues and companions, but bad company, perhaps, for the *Dromedary* and the *Bactrian*, which were then repeatedly and erroneously placed in the context of Pop and hyperrealism.



View of "Nancy Graves," 2013–14.

In any case, Graves—who died of cancer in 1995, at the age of fifty-five—had a much greater range in her art. Her interest in the handmade puts her in the orbit of those in the Pattern and Decoration movement and her fascination with the past is akin to that of "relic hunters" like Anne and Patrick Poirier—all likewise in the Ludwig Collection, but not so prominently displayed. A great deal of her inspiration came from the sciences, including paleontology, geology, astronomy, and anthropology. *Paleolithic Cave Painting, Southwestern United States, Depicting Camelops Migration*, 1970, a drawing for a large-scale, faux-cave painting blending skeletal and living, extinct and modern camels, would sit comfortably in any contemporary exhibition that examines the construction and the fallibility of (scientific) knowledge. Her work also has a feminist twist. With the camels, it is evidenced in their vagina-like orifices and perhaps through the use of handicrafts traditionally considered women's work—for instance, the patchwork facture of the animals' skin.

Maybe today's renewed interest in research-based work allows us to now fully appreciate Graves's oeuvre. "Nancy Graves Project & Special Guests," the first major exhibition of her work in Europe since 1971, gave vivid testimony to the artist's many fields of interest. Curated by the Ludwig Forum's Brigitte Franzen and Annette Lagler, it offered a survey of Graves's career, placing particular emphasis on her early work from circa 1968–75. Paper works such as *Crab and Sea Anemone on Ocean Floor*, 1971, with their radiant pointillist surfaces, are exercises in perception as much as depictions of the camouflage skills of various flora and fauna. Similarly, the vibrant canvases from her "Camouflage Series" of 1971 appear as abstractions when seen close up; their hidden plants and animals can be perceived only from a distance. Graves applied the same antithetical optical principle to her

paintings of lunar, Martian, and oceanic surfaces. *Mars*, 1973, comes across as a patchwork rug made out of a variety of patterns, yet the painting is a giant map of the Red Planet's surface, relying on early orbiter images, while works such as *Apollo 14*, 1973, translate the optical noise of their source photographs into a Richtersque blur. A highlight of the show was *Shaman*, 1970, Graves's contribution to Documenta 5 in 1972: a group of hanging, life-size assemblages that evoke shamanic costumes and headdresses to form an installation that is part ethnographic display, part ghostly ritual, in which the "authentic" is a fabrication, maybe a confabulation, relying on "inauthentic" materials such as latex, wax, steel, and copper. Later works, including the multicolored, skeleton-like sculpture *Spun*, 1983, seem to mark a departure from Graves's often messy, earthy work of the 1970s. Yet given the precarious contrast between their fragile, bony legs and solid, robust-looking parts, these sculptures explore the same kinds of improbable balance that Graves's camels do.

This smart and thorough exhibition (and catalogue) was long overdue, and it's a shame that it will not travel to the United States. After all, in 1969, Graves was the youngest (female) artist to have a solo show at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, yet she is still little more than a footnote in the canon of American art history. Her broad and well-informed play with science—including its modes of representation and narrative construction—as well as her fascination with perception and the acquisition of knowledge all feel strikingly contemporary. It's the right moment for her rediscovery.

—Astrid Mania