

Degree Critical

Life on Mars: Nancy Graves and Mary Beth Edelson

by Jessica Holmes



Nancy Graves, *Mars*, 1973; Installation view; Courtesy of the Nancy Graves Foundation and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

In 1974, the United States fissured metaphorically, divided in so many ways by an onslaught of political and cultural crises coming to a head. As troops withdrew from Vietnam, Americans were only beginning to reckon with the war's failure, not to mention so much of the needless devastation the mission had wrought. Public exposé of the Watergate scandal was in full swing; 1974 would see the unprecedented resignation of a sitting U.S. president. The Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movements were

unraveling social paradigms that had held sway for generations. Five years before, in 1969, the pictures and video of Buzz Aldrin's and Neil Armstrong's historic moonwalk had briefly united the nation in a sense of wonder—that even amidst riots and war and assassinations, humanity was capable of such an awe-inspiring feat. It reminded people that the questions of how and where we—both as individuals and as a nation—fit within the universe were questions that have been repeatedly asked and answered in countless ways. Humanity continually tries to reconcile its veritable smallness within the cosmos with its self-perceived importance in the material world. And in that interim between a moonwalk and a mass betrayal by government of its citizens, two artists completely independent of each other looked to cosmology. With very different approaches they began important bodies of their work, which attempted to make sense of their current moment and what it might mean in the greater schema. In New York, these bodies of work are now on view in “Nancy Graves: Mapping” at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, and “Shape Shifter,” a solo exhibition of work by Mary Beth Edelson at David Lewis Gallery. With Graves taking a scientific approach while Edelson a more spiritual path, the exhibitions show two women grappling with these ponderous questions at a critical historical moment.

In the years following Aldrin's and Armstrong's walk on the moon, images taken by NASA from space—once an unimaginable phenomenon—became ever more common. Graves, whose past work had mined both scientific systems and also cartography, began using this satellite imagery to create maps of the moon, Mars, and Mercury. At Mitchell-Innes & Nash, her work in this vein is culled together, including six major canvases of these maps, along with a number of works on paper, all dating between 1972-1976. *Mars* (1973) indisputably dominates the gallery: a four-paneled work that measures 24 feet long, it was made at the same moment NASA's first images of the planet's surface were released to the public. With satellite pictures now such a ubiquitous component of the imagery with which we are now continually bombarded, it's easy to forget that we are not so far removed from the time when they were completely new. But in the vastness of Graves's canvas, one feels the tremulous marvel that so many must have experienced when witnessing these images from another planet for the first time. It's easy to become absorbed in the elegant marks on her canvas as one traverses its span, trying to make sense of the extraordinary topography of Mars.

A similar sense of monumentality infuses Edelson's work in “Shape Shifter,” at David Lewis. A series of large, flat wooden sculptures that she

made in 1974-1975 lie flush to the wall and invoke great goddesses of past civilizations. The eighteen works, which all stand between seven and eight feet tall, encircle the gallery's perimeter, with one, *Light/Dark Sophia* installed in the center of the gallery's threshold, rather than against a wall, so that one must physically engage with it in order to pass by and enter. Standing in the center of the space, the presence of these imposing mythical females makes palpable that sense of looking up into an unknown that makes one feel small. You've entered a temple that teems with a powerful, female force. Yet for Edelson, who was deeply involved in the feminist movement, the works were likewise intended to empower. Writing of them in 1975, she noted, "They encompass the multiple forms of the Great Goddess – reaching across centuries we take the hand of our ancient sisters." Smallness does not necessarily equate to weakness. The small working together can reach the moon. The small rising together can help end an unjust war, topple a president.

Looking at Edelson's and Graves's works roughly 45 years later, a viewer might be tempted to not only to try and comprehend what it felt like to be a woman amidst the cultural rubble of that moment, but also to understand what these works mean for us now. Within the grand plan of the universe, we are still miniscule; that has not changed. But as we stand at another critical point in our nation's history, another crossroads where we're being asked to both reckon with our country's past sins, and also resist current nefarious forces working within our power structures, it's crucial to remember our power. Edelson and Graves gift us that.