

It's Time to Rediscover Nancy Graves: Post-Minimalist, Anti-Pop Lover of Camels

By Mark Guiducci

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Nancy Graves in her Wooster Street studio, 1980

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In 1969, Nancy Graves was 29 years old and had a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She was the youngest person, and only the fifth woman, to be given such an honor, and it landed her work on the cover of *Artforum* the following year. Graves, as it happened, was also rather glamorous, an heir to the Crane paper family and at the time married to **Richard Serra**. (Archival photos of her in the studio allude to the kind of unstudied American chic that has to be inherited—call it Waspy *sprezzatura*.) Later, Graves would go on to work in such a variety of media that she arguably invented some of her own. She was, simply put, an art-world sensation. And yet, there's a good chance that you've never even heard of her.

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“There is a whole generation who does not know the work,” says **Christina Hunter**, director of the Nancy Graves Foundation. “Anyone under forty years old—unless they *happen* to know the camels as a post-Minimalist conceptual gesture—doesn’t know her. For most people, learning about Graves is a rediscovery, or a new discovery altogether.” (The “camels” are verisimilar sculptures of wood, metal, polyurethane, wax, paint, burlap, and real skin, some of which were exhibited in the Whitney show—they are Graves’s best-known pieces.) With that in mind, and on the twentieth anniversary of Graves’s untimely death in 1995, Mitchell-Innes & Nash has staged a show of the artist’s early work, from the synthetic camel paraphernalia of the late sixties to the pointillist-looking canvases of the seventies to her exuberant watercolor paintings of the early eighties. The accompanying catalogue includes an essay, subtitled “Nancy Graves: The Subversiveness of Sculpture,” by no less an art historian than **Linda Nochlin**, Graves’s fellow student at Vassar.

“One of the things that people find confusing about her, and maybe a reason she’s fallen under the radar,” Hunter suggests, “is that she worked in so many media. People got confused, asking, ‘Is this all by the same person?’” Take those early camels, for instance. Sculptures made to look like taxidermy—Graves’s father worked at the Berkshire Museum, which houses natural science adjacent to fine art—they are an intellectual experiment that Nochlin compares to Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 *Fountain*. (One might wager that **Hiroshi Sugimoto** took a good look at them before shooting his “Dioramas” series.) Then there are the Graves paintings which take topographical maps (satellite images of the ocean floor and surface of the moon, for instance) and images from nature books (a halibut blending into the sand) as inspiration and wind up as brilliantly hued, layered, abstract musings. Looking at them is like seeing shapes in the clouds. And they couldn’t be more different than the hyperrealist camels.

Binding her disparate oeuvre together is Graves’s fascination with data, translating scientific information into visual wonder. “She sensed she was making art in the ‘information age,’” according to Hunter. “And people like **Julie Mehretu** have looked very closely at her work.” One can only imagine how Graves would have dealt with Big Data.

Perhaps the other unifying feature of her work is its reactionary stance toward both Minimalism and Pop Art. Graves was unlike anything happening in the art world around her. “She refused to brand herself,” Hunter says. “Some of the topics that have been of great interest in the past several decades—identity politics, feminism, celebrity, sexual deviancy, consumer culture—none of those themes interested her. She lived some of them, and was an absolute feminist, but she didn’t want to be pigeonholed.”

At the risk of pigeonholing Graves, then, it still seems worth asking to know more about her relationship with Richard Serra. Having met at Yale’s MFA program, the couple graduated in 1964 and married in Paris the following year, while Graves was on her Fulbright Scholarship. (Just take in the snapshot below, of Graves and Serra with **Chuck Close** and photographer **Stephen Posen**, father of **Zac**, taken in Florence during that time.) According to Hunter, both Graves and Serra tossed a lot of their early work into

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the Arno simply because it was too expensive to store and ship, making a comparison of their work nearly impossible. Since then, Hunter says, “Serra has all but excised Graves out of his biography.”

Nancy Graves is on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash (534 West Twenty-sixth Street) until next Saturday, March 7.

*At 2:00 p.m. on March 7, the gallery will host a panel discussion on Graves’s work and life, featuring **Christina Hunter, Lucy Mitchell-Innes, MoMA curator Laura Hoptman, critic Christopher Lyon, and artist Jessica Stockholder.***