

MAN IS ANONYMOUS: THE ART OF NANCY GROSSMAN

BY CORINNE ROBINS

Heads and bodies, the male figure squared off. We count men by heads, by heads register their presence. Men, an army, a faceless mass stands up to be counted. In union, there is anonymity. The individual is lost in the shadow of number, and yet is a crowd. A mass is a moving thing, bodies responding to other bodies, only it has no face on which to register its feeling. It has by-passed the personal. Mass art is propaganda art, the marching bodies of the Third Reich or Soviet Russia or Roman Centurions. The march toward larger ideals of state, country or world domination is as old as we are, and the thrill of submission to the needs of the group begins young in children's camps with boy scouts, girl scouts, cubs and brownies. The great idea is always a welcome thing, a relief from the burden of individual decision in the positing of a larger good, an escape from personal isolation. Heads may be separate, bodies are together. But to isolate men from their cause, to shut off sound — music and rhetoric — is to see the human figure as a darkened upright shape, illogically and inexplicably pushed forward.

And yet identification is there. Figures upright, figures bent and bound, helmeted heads, faces masked by leather: warriors and prisoners are sightless, bound to their roles. The line "Anatomy is destiny" takes on new meaning vis-à-vis the sculpture, drawings and collages of Nancy Grossman. Destiny, what is to be, fate for her figures is now, this minute, in drawings such as *Restriction*, *Gun-*

Horn, 1974. Wood and leather.

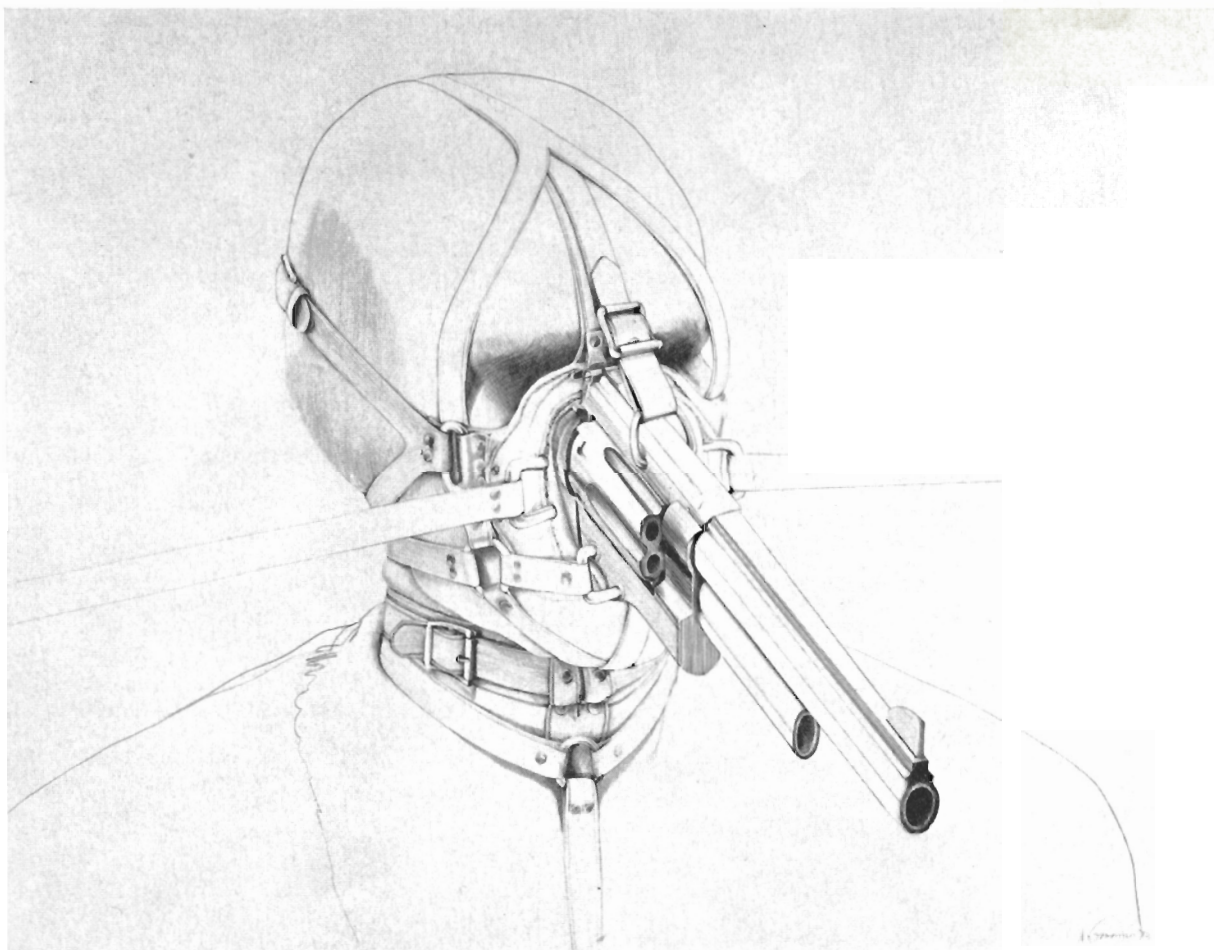


head, *Deadstandstill*. But in Grossman's art, anatomy also equals energy, the bulge of muscle, breast bone and thigh. Critics have gone back to the Renaissance to find parallels for the force and strength of these drawings. Grossman, a young artist now in her mid-thirties, spent a year carving the figure out of wood. "I was," she says, "reclaiming the body." First in leather-encased heads at Cordier Ekstrom in 1968–69, then in the series of black and white drawings and, in 1970–71, in a free-standing, leather-bound and buckled torso, the head and arms straining against its confines, Grossman's dealing with the human body, dealing with dammed up and corseted energy has been an awesome thing to see. Nancy Grossman's anonymous men are all concealed individuals whose particular features, the setting of bone and brow, open mouths and pressed lips are partially concealed but also perversely heightened by the black leather covering that acts as their second skin. In the mid-sixties, leather was an integral part of her abstract collages, and it was natural to continue using leather when she began working with the figure. "If my figures are closed in," she says, "it's a state of being."

This state of being continues in her most recent work, though it also represents another departure in terms of both material and color. In 1973, Grossman began a series of paper collage paintings of men. Each is a single frontal figure. The faces of Grossman's memorable heads here are lost in shadow and yet by the joining of head to neck, the slope of shoulder, each is distinct and, with or without atavistic helmet, still a warrior. They began by chance, Grossman explains, when she had accumulated a series of paper patterns which she had made for cutting out

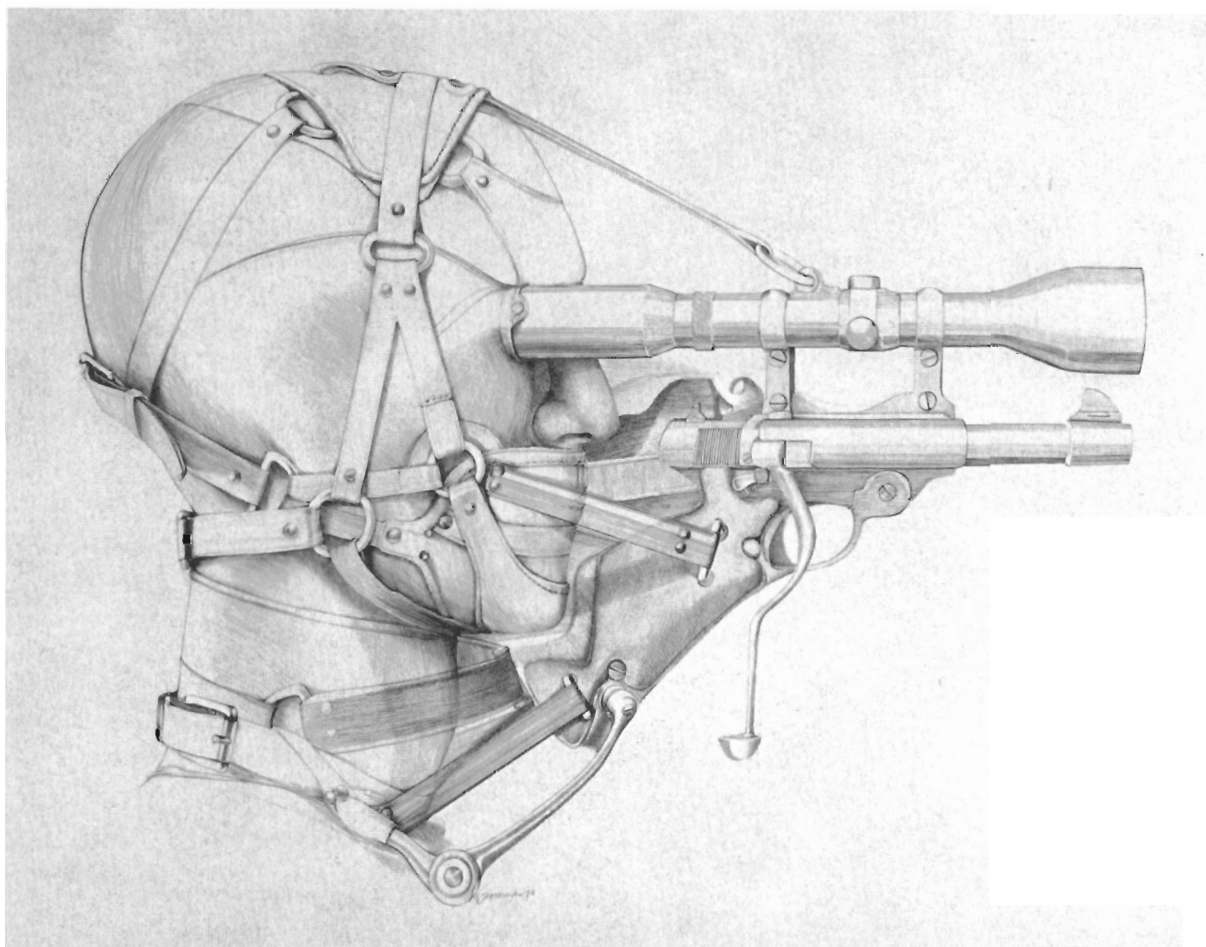
Kazakh, 1971. Leather, height 16". Coll. S. Schweber.



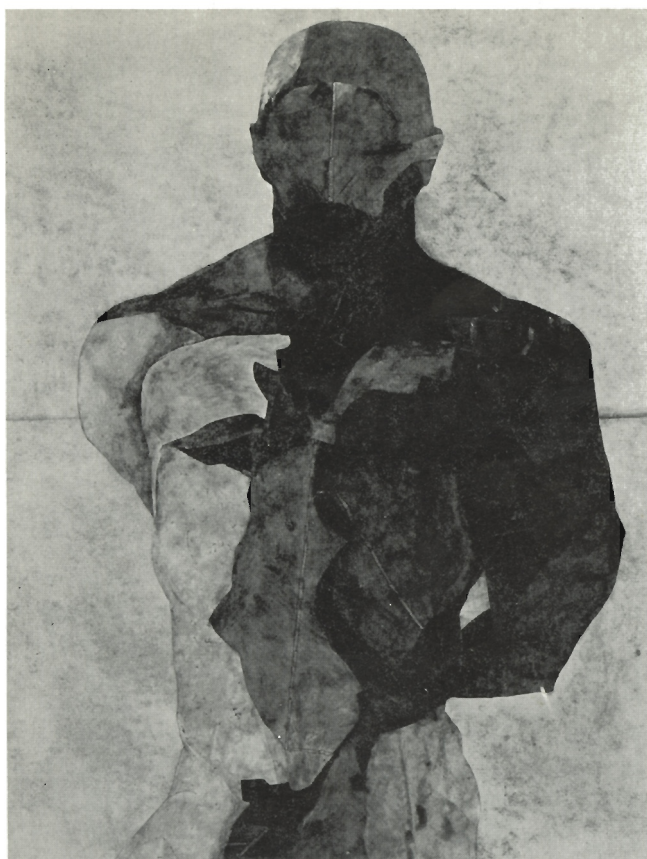


Gunhead No. 1, 1973. Pencil drawing, 19" x 24".

Gunhead No. 2, 1973. Pencil drawing, 19" x 24".







Untitled collage, 1973. 48½" × 36½".

her leather. As with her earlier, semi-abstract collages, Grossman says, "then and now I use everything in the world because I feel it all belongs to me." What is in the world are an artist's natural materials. In 1962, the year she went to Europe, she found herself making collages, working out of the things she had in her suitcase, and this attitude prevails to this day. The things in her studio, the things she has in her head and feels with her body are her primary source material.

Starting with these individual paper shapes, Grossman began dipping them in water and then painting them with dyes. After each strip dried, she repeated the process with the other side, the colors often bleeding through. In the beginning, "it was all very accidental." Today, some of the colors become translucent, others are transparent while suggesting a color within a color, and the paper itself acquires a stiff, leathery texture. Each of the solitary collage figures is built with these papers and looks out from 45" × 48", 48½" × 36½" and, the tallest, 64" × 36" canvases. In scale, they are reminiscent of 17th and 18th century portrait paintings, in contrast to most out-size modern American wall works. The range of muted color Grossman achieves is also rather unique. Her 1973 untitled collage moves from the left side chest of antelope yellow to a face masked in red bronze and grays. The figure is a classical torso and, at the same time, a landscape, a map of earth colors in the form of a man. Another portrait from this series shows a blue helmeted figure made up of dark gray, blues and reddish purples. One is struck by the distance of these collage portraits, their almost ghostly presence as if each is marching forward from a long ago past.

The classical torso and the table size, free-standing heads recall ancient sculpture, in particular funeral busts as they grow from their neck-base pedestals. These heads, which Grossman began making in 1968 and continues to work on, represent for the artist "a personal fantasy." In contrast to her constrained figures, the idea of making an isolated human head is done "with the idea of making something that exhibits no possibility of movement." The heads followed a period of intense isolation in the artist's life. In 1967, Nancy Grossman accepted a commission to illustrate four children's books and for nine months shut herself in the studio and did no other work. It was as if her life had come to a standstill. "My whole life became the life of my head, a life severed from the body." When she set to work again, it was in terms of two pairs of masked heads in front and profile view. From these

works developed the series of sculptured heads, each carved in wood and then wrapped in tightly stretched layers of nail-studded leather, straps, chains and zippers. A few of these heads offer an exposed nose with a shiny white porcelain finish which heightens the effect of shiny black and brown leather, nail studs and straps that otherwise make up the composition. To unite the classical with the dramatic and/or morbid, to impose form and structure on an obsession, to take an emotion and build it into a state of being for all to see is the artist's task in the twentieth century. The ritualization of feeling and the unchanging nature of man is a constant in the history of art and, in this sense, Miss Grossman is very much a traditionalist.

The two artists Grossman acknowledges as her biggest influences are the painter Richard Lindner and the sculptor David Smith, the two men who first recognized her as a fellow artist while she was still in school at the Pratt Institute of Fine Art. Born in New York City, she grew up on a small farm in upstate New York, grew up not knowing that there was such a thing as an artist. In high school, she learned there was such a thing as an illustrator and on the strength of this information used her regents scholarship to get to Pratt Institute. New York City meant abstract expressionism in the early sixties and while a student, Grossman was aware of the work of De Kooning, Kline and Rothko. It was during these years she made her own series of semi-abstract figurative works in pastels as well as worked first on paper and then wood collages. She had her first one-woman show at the Krasner Gallery in 1964. Her collage works for a while began to incorporate a series of found objects and it was David Smith who gave her the leather harness and straps with which she made her first giant leather collage *Potawatami* in 1967. Smith's death and her nine month absence from her own

Figure Sculpture, 1971. Height 68" (see also facing page)



All illustrations:
Cordier & Ekstrom, New York



work — the nine months she worked on children's books in order to buy time to work again — represented a painful turning point. All the heads that followed, she says "were self-portraits. I perceived nothing about myself except my head and my thoughts involved in a physically stone wall." She was and is an intuitive artist. "The work is me, my experience. It begins at the gut level. If I knew precisely why I made my heads, I probably wouldn't have to do them any more," she admits. But she simultaneously qualifies this by admitting a fascination for the potency

of the erect head with an intellect and a mouth. "It all begins with the head," she says, "the head has a mouth and we kill with words and we are wounded by words." Her vision of man is of a fragile creature forced to live in society at the expense of his feelings, knowing from the first he is going to die. Her work for her is on one level a way of finding out about herself. "If I survive in my life it's because I externalize whatever good parts of it there are in me." And meanwhile as an artist, "the work goes ahead of me and I have to catch up, see what I've made."