

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

OCTOBER 2011



Nancy Grossman: *Blunt*, 1968, leather, wood and hardware, 17½ by 7½ by 8¾ inches; at MoMA PS1.

NANCY GROSSMAN MoMA PS1 AND MICHAEL ROSENFELD

The Tang Museum at Skidmore College will mount a retrospective of Nancy Grossman's work in early 2012. In the meantime, two recent shows in New York whetted the appetite for that survey, offering select works from different stages of her career. For "Nancy Grossman: Heads" at MoMA PS1, curator Klaus Biesenbach populated a second-floor gallery with 14 examples of the leather-clad head sculptures that Grossman began making in the late 1960s. While four of these sculptures rested on corner pedestals, the remaining heads were arranged along the edges of a large central platform, providing viewers a series of face-to-face confrontations as they circled the display.

Grossman carves her life-size heads from blocks of wood, carefully articulating different bone structures and thick necks before sheathing them in taut skins of hand-sewn black leather. Unique facial features remain legible beneath the leather, but the heads are mainly distinguished by various harnesses that bind and adorn their surfaces. In *Blunt* (1968), for example, an elaborate network of

leather straps encircles the entire head. Linked together with metal rivets, O-rings and buckles, the straps intersect at the forehead, just above an exposed and lacquered white nose. The equally leather-bound *No Name* (1968) may be laden with much less hardware, but its lips are replaced with two rows of tightly whip-stitched metal grommets, creating a powerful image of enforced silence.

Grossman's heads are frequently tethered to the climate of violence, protest and social upheaval that surrounded their initial creation in the late 1960s. Today these representations of restraint and sensory deprivation continue to resonate against a backdrop of war and debates about "enhanced interrogation techniques." Yet many of Grossman's heads appear quite serene and self-possessed. Their facial expressions are rarely pained, and the sadomasochistic gear they wear can be described as elegant and regal, as if the sculptures are proudly celebrating a marginal identity. The numerous leather chin straps that muzzle *T.O.K.* (1969-70), for instance, ultimately secure an inverted vacuum brush that is worn atop the head like a crown.

The figure was largely absent from a concurrent show at Michael Rosenfeld Gal-

lery, which featured 10 abstract works that Grossman created after a 1992 trip to Hawaii, where she surveyed an active volcano from a helicopter. Eight large collages (most measuring 38 by 50 inches) are partially covered with patches of brown and gray paper. Their torn and burnt edges effectively convey tectonic rupture and seem to release scribbled passages of drawing and lavalike flows of black and orange ink. Leather is the main ingredient in two mixed-medium assemblages, where irregular swatches are folded and hammered among various found objects to create low reliefs on large rectangular supports. In *Black Lavascape* (1994-95) pockets of leather support deconstructed shoes, a cluster of mechanical parts and a bent broom that arcs across the 49-by-36-inch composition. By painting these assemblages a uniform matte black, Grossman stills the fiery energy of the related collages, creating images of postapocalyptic sludge, of nature slowly reclaiming the detritus of the man-made world.

—Matthew Nichols