

Blind Ambition of Leather-Clad Heads

by KEN JOHNSON

Who is that masked man?

Anyone passingly familiar with American art of the past half-century will recognize the eerie, erotically menacing, leather-clad heads that Nancy Grossman produced between the late 1960s and 1990. Often including zippers, buckles, straps and chains, these sculptures most immediately evoke S-and-M bondage wear. Displayed in a high-end shop for the sexually adventurous, they would fit right in.

In a museum gallery they resonate on other aesthetic and metaphorical levels. For “Heads,” a strikingly elegant exhibition at MoMA PS1, Klaus Biesenbach, the museum’s director, has installed 14 examples in a stark white setting. Ten are displayed on a big chest-high plinth that enables you to study them up close. On a shelf in each of the room’s four corners stands another, like a watchful sentinel.

If you know Ms. Grossman’s heads only from reproductions in art books, you may be surprised at how lovingly they are made. An inattentive viewer might associate them with Haim Steinbach’s and Jeff Koons’s presentations of store-bought objects from the 1980s. But though she used found and bought materials, there is nothing ready-made about the final products. As a teenager Ms. Grossman (born 1940) worked in her father’s dress factory in upstate New York, where she learned the skills of pattern making and seam stitching that have served her so well in her sculptures. Hers is a rare example of leather-working craft raised to high art.



Nancy Grossman (b.1940), *No Name*, 1968, leather, wood, porcelain and hardware, 15" x 7" x 10", signed

Each piece involved much time and effort. She began by carving, filling, sanding, painting and polishing a chunk of found wood — a piece of a telephone pole, say — into something resembling a Classical or neo-Classical head. With their strong features and thick necks hinting at muscular bodies, they read as male, though Amazonian femininity is not out of the question. One is titled “Mary” and another “Arbus,” presumably in honor of the photographer Diane. Many have full lips suggestive of African derivation. As for the top layer of animal skin, only Ms. Grossman knows exactly how she fitted this covering and its hardware so perfectly to the complex topography of the underlying sculpture.

For all their singularity the 75 heads that Ms. Grossman created did not come out of nowhere. The ’60s brought a turn in mainstream attitudes about desire and sexuality. An unsentimental frankness became popular. Mel Ramos’s paintings, R. Crumb’s comics, “Portnoy’s Complaint,” “Midnight Cowboy,” “Deep Throat”: these and many other artifacts of the late ’60s and early ’70s brought a new species of unvarnished erotic fantasy to high and low culture. Insofar as they evoke ritualistic bondage, Ms. Grossman’s heads seem to partake in a chilling depersonalization of sex at the same time as they celebrate demonic, thrill-seeking anonymity.

But there are other dimensions too. They can be taken as allegorical figures of extreme states of male consciousness. With the war in Vietnam peaking at the time when Ms. Grossman began making them, in 1968, questions about the kinds of minds that were driving the war machine were in the air. The heads with exposed glassy eyes gaze forward with intense purpose. Some have all their orifices covered, which adds to the feeling of hidden, pent-up intentions and blind ambitions. Some have single animal horns protruding from



Nancy Grossman (b.1940), *Historic Exploding Fire Field*, 1993, mixed media collage drawing, 32 1/4" x 40", signed

their foreheads. Others bellow and howl with toothy maws. Altogether they radiate a primal warrior's spirit. Yet at the same time they appear captured by the gear they wear. They cannot escape their own archetypal natures.

In a catalog essay for the previous museum show devoted to Ms. Grossman's work (organized by the Hillwood Art Museum at C. W. Post, Long Island University in 1991) the art historian Arlene Raven alluded to physical abuse in the artist's early years and to some disturbing, inappropriate sexual attention from a male relative in her adolescence. Ms. Raven quoted Ms. Grossman: "After 25 years, I see that all of the head sculptures are self-portraits that refer to the bondage of my childhood." That could partly explain her seemingly obsessive repetition of the image of the enigmatic, scary yet alluring, possibly predatory man.

But the heads might also be flirtations with a powerful but otherwise buried part of herself. The potential of the female artist had yet to be widely acknowledged in the late '60s. Ms. Grossman's early heads were ferocious harbingers of the coming feminist insurgency.

That quality of strange otherness is less evident in the considerable amount of nonrepresentational sculpture and drawing that Ms. Grossman has produced over the years. "Nancy Grossman: Combustion Scapes," an exhibition at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery featuring abstract collage drawings on paper and framed assemblages of found junk hand-painted black is a case in point. Made in 1993-94, they were inspired by a helicopter flight over an active volcano in Hawaii. But compared to the heads they are conventional. They are more about composition, varieties of mark making and Cubist-Surrealist-style transformation of rubbish than about anything specific to Ms. Grossman's own sensibility.

Whoever or whatever that masked being was, he, she or it possessed Ms. Grossman like an occult spirit and led her to create figures that are as darkly weird as they are sensually beautiful.

"Nancy Grossman: Heads" continues through Aug. 15 at MoMA PS1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, at 46th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens, (718) 784-2084, momaps1.org. "Nancy Grossman: Combustion Scapes" is on view through Aug. 5 at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, Manhattan, (212) 247-0082, michaelrosenfeldart.com.

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/22/arts/design/nancy-grossman-at-moma-ps1-and-michael-rosenfeld-gallery.html?_r=2&ref=design

MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY LLC

24 WEST 57TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10019
 TEL 212-247-0082 FAX 212-247-0402
 INFO@MICHAELROSENFELDART.COM
 WWW.MICHAELROSENFELDART.COM

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