

NANCY GROSSMAN GAMBLES EMMA BERNHARD
WINSTON CHMIELINSKI DENA CANYON CASTATOR
MAKODE LINDE OLIVIA STEELE

INTER MISSION VIII ION





WORKING DEEP BENEATH

NANCY GROSSMAN HAS SPENT THE PAST FIVE DECADES
CREATING SUBVERSIVE WORK IN THE NEW
YORK ART SCENE AND HAS THE SCARS TO PROVE IT.

PORTRAITS OF NANCY BY BJARNE JONASSON
INTERVIEW ALESSANDRA CODINHA

THE THINK

UNTITLED (DOUBLE HEAD), 1971, MIXED MEDIA COLLAGE ON PAPER 21 X 29 INCHES, UNFRAMED, SIGNED & DATED. COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. COURTESY OF MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY, NEW YORK.
 RIGHT PAGE: UNTITLED, 1971, WOOD, DYED LEATHER, METAL & THREAD 67 X 27 X 23 INCHES. COLLECTION OF THE ISRAEL MUSEUM, JERUSALEM. COURTESY OF THE FRANCES YOUNG TANG TEACHING MUSEUM & ART GALLERY AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE & MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY.



"I HAD LOCKED MYSELF OUT OF MY STUDIO, AND I FINALLY WENT BACK AND HAD A PEN AND STARTED DRAWING AND IT WAS THIS HEAD. BOUND UP IN LEATHER. IT FELT DIRTY AND SECRET AND PRIVATE AND NECESSARY AND TRUE. LIKE SURVIVAL. NOBODY SAW THEM FOR ALMOST TWO YEARS"

NANCY GROSSMAN'S WORK is both familiar and inescapably foreign, brutal, delicate, room-spanning and intimate. It is intricately, lovingly wrought and physically obtrusive, challenging, contradictory, often large, generally dark, and so extremely far at odds from the artist herself—a friendly, petite, sinewy and slight jumble of bright eyes, curly hair and tightly gesturing limbs—that it requires a significant leap of imagination to align the two. This isn't such a bad thing: viewing the scope of humanity's attempts at beauty through art usually requires a significant wrenching apart of the creator and the created, the act and the thought. When confronted with both Grossman and her art, the questions that come to mind are so basic and so deceptively simple that to ask them is to subvert centuries of carefully honed art critique and, in effect, begin again: 'How?' and then, of course, 'Why?' The answers, as you may have guessed, are not so simple.

Grossman, who has been present in the New York art scene for over five decades and can speak affectionately and authoritatively about any number of New York's most pivotal boldfaced names as friends or acquaintances, displaces no more air in a room than one of Gauguin's Tahitian sylphs. And yet her works are often large and imposing, leaving a considerable dent in the psyche. Her mixed media canvases consume walls, protruding outwards and upwards in violent clashes of texture, her sculptures loom and menace and thrust. Her most famous works are a

series of leather heads; carefully sculpted wood then covered with stitched black leather masks, sometimes adorned with gaping, screaming mouths, laces and hook-and-eyes, zippers and ropes and chains, brushes and the occasional hand-crafted automatic weapon. Her work is harsh, engrossing, physically present and difficult to ignore. "Write that I'm tall," Grossman groans as she gives me entry into her Bed-Stuy studio. She has lived here since the early 1980s, far before gentrification reached its manicured grasp into the outer boroughs. Her stature, however inflated or abbreviated by an author, would be dwarfed by her works—most humans' are—and yet she is undiminished by their size, nor by her small jungle of ceiling tickling potted trees and wall-hung framed photographs by past compatriots and masters like Diane Arbus, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon and Robert Mapplethorpe; she swells under them, and you are held rapt.

"I think I've always been a fugitive," Grossman says, methodically slicing a cantaloupe in her kitchen, watched through heavy-lidded eyes by a favored (if slightly over-indulged) cat. We are talking about the scope of her career; from her studies with Richard Lindner at the Pratt Institute to her Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, her adventures in real estate with her various past studios (one, an abandoned store-front on then largely Mafia-controlled Prince street, another an Eldridge street loft that became vacant when the previous tenant was stabbed to death),

her feelings about being a woman and a feminist artist in what was and to some extent remains a largely male-dominated field. For men there was always mystique; a back-thumping boys club bravado. For women, there was a blind eye and silence, broken only by rare successes and subsequent accusations of using sexuality for career advancement. Grossman met this world with the occasional misdirection. "My friend Anita [Siegel, another artist] and I would go to parties and tell people that we were a manicurist and a hairdresser," Grossman says, and there is an Avedon photograph of her and Siegel from 1970, clad in dark knits and heavy coats, their heads bound together by a loosely braided rope belt "to explain why I had paint on my fingers. They wouldn't have let us come, if they knew. Or maybe they would have, but they wouldn't have talked to us." Her cover was effectively blown to smithereens in 1971, when a rave review of her solo exhibition appeared in the New York Times and the art critic John Canaday declared her to be both 'the most impressive young American artist that I know of' and 'the least cruel artist alive.' "Oh, there were a lot of... accusations thrown around," Grossman says of the fall-out, "'You obviously slept with that critic, you didn't deserve that review,' you know..." She shrugs, unbent by years of being yoked to a feminine conceit she never personally held. "The [other artists] were always out to get you, if they couldn't get something out of you they wanted to put something in you."







THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
POTAWATAMI, 1967, LEATHER ASSEMBLAGE
USING HORSE HARNESSES & CHAIN,
63 X 37 3/4 X 13 INCHES, SIGNED & DATED,
GUNHEAD, 1991, BRONZE WITH PATINA &
COPPER WIRE, 16 X 8 X 18 1/2 INCHES,
SIGNED & DATED, NO NAME, 1968, MIXED
MEDIA ASSEMBLAGE, 15 X 7 X 10, SIGNED
& DATED, BLACK THUNDERCLOUD
LANDSCAPE, 1963, MIXED MEDIA COLLAGE
WITH VARIOUS PAPERS & WATERCOLOR
ON PAPER, 22 1/2 X 22 3/4 INCHES, SIGNED
& DATED, ALL WORKS COURTESY OF
MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY, NYC.



Some outrage would be understandable, encouraged, even, as Grossman unspools other related tales of inappropriate advances from would-be mentors and one-time gallerists, from the offhand comments of peers and the trials of navigating the gender landscape in the '70s. But the artist isn't angry: her leather heads are. Grossman regularly refers to the heads as "self portraits," though they are both obviously male and not made to resemble the artist herself. Their creation is an act of daring almost irreconcilable with her background (the eldest of five siblings, born in New York and raised upstate in Oneonta on a farm where she honed her drawing skills entertaining the younger children) and the time period in which they were made. "It was a wild time," she nods, and lists country-changing events from 1968 on her fingertips; the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the Chicago riots at the Democratic Conventions, Andy Warhol's shooting, Gore Vidal's 'Myra Breckinridge.' Canaday recognized these sinister-looking specters as 'victims [who] have fallen to whatever forces are peculiar to our century in their powers to violate the spirit, to render giants impotent and to make maniacs out of what should have been reasonable creatures.' The heads are all constrained by their masks, some howl and writhe in pain ('M.L. Sweeney,' (1969-70) was a reaction to the Vietnam war, "a combination of my own scream and the screams of those being murdered," she says), some have their eyes and mouths zippered shut, only their noses exposed ('Mary' (1971), "a sissy boy," according to the artist), some wear guns or large conical spikes down their crown, most have grommets, buckles and rings. Less the trappings of later-day punks and S&M, more an equestrian tack room, Grossman notes. "I hadn't had any idea what S&M was when I started [making the heads]," she shrugs, living on a farm had, however, taught her about reins and saddles and modes of restraint.

"They came, really, from the depths of a time when I was at my most... frustrated," Grossman recalls, "I needed money to work. I had had the Guggenheim grant before [in 1965, for Fine Art], and I thought, okay, I'll give myself a grant. I'll work for a year, I'll save the money, I'll work. I was chained to my desk illustrating these children's books [Grossman's drawing talent was discovered by famed publisher Ursula Nordstrom, who worked with luminaries like Maurice Sendak, among others], and I just felt so wrapped up, these jobs were consuming all of my creative energy, all of me and the work wasn't even for me. I had locked myself out of my studio, and I finally went back and had a pen and started drawing and it was this head, bound up in leather. It felt dirty and secret and private and necessary and true, like survival. Nobody saw them for almost two years." She began carving, filing, sanding, painting and polishing chunks of found wood, like that from felled telephone poles, using worn-out old boots and leather jackets she had worn "out dancing" years earlier to make the masks. "It wasn't a conscious thing, there's no real consciousness to it...I can't really take the credit," Grossman has said, recalling showing up to the Cordier and Ekstrom gallery with a few drawings and one of the heads in a shopping bag. Her solo exhibition followed short after. In a 2009 interview with David J. Gelty for 'Preposterous Parts,' Grossman described her inspiration and where she makes her art as "from below the think, and I want you to

receive it from below the think." It was an act of survival, making the heads, it was through showing eschewing restraint to convey accurate constraints and her bondage that she could set herself free.

In her studio, an inherited lambswool jacket is waiting to be dismembered and repurposed; she turns it inside out and coos over the visible seams of the burgundy lining. It looks like thick, ropy veins. Against the far wall, a sculpted wooden head is perfectly carved and denuded, wearing a vice that looks like a top hat and a pair of mountain climber's sunglasses. "I need to get back to that one at some point," she murmurs. Its ears, she points out, were made from the heels of a pair of her old leather sandals. The laces around the perimeter of the heel are still lightly visible. Her craft is remarkably, intensively physical. She cites memories of working with welding equip-

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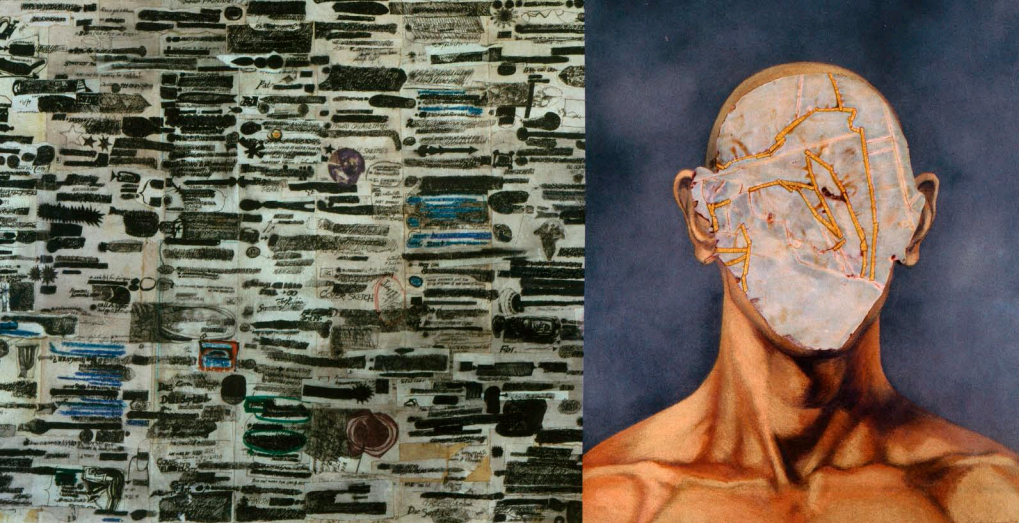
ment in an unventilated Chinatown basement, of dragging bent tires, rusted pipes, cracked hoses and the remains of crumpled car wrecks to her studio to dismember and reform. Some of the works born of these found objects are in the Bed-Stuy studio, some are in the Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, the Whitney Museum and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. "I used to wear these boots with this high heel on them, down in the pitch-black basement with the blowtorch, with my welders mask on," Grossman laughs. There was a bookie working down there, too, she recalls, they both rented from the same landlord, and once she says she could feel there someone else down with her in the darkness, though she kept welding and nothing happened. As she remarks, "there was no point being scared."

It's hard, anyway, to imagine her being scared, even though she is physically small and has lived in some of the most patently dangerous areas of New York during their most un-policed times. For one thing, she works with her hands, and a lot of heavy equipment. This is a woman who once told an interviewer (Cindy Nemser, for 'Art Talk: Conversations with Twelve Women Artists') that "I could draw with

straps, I could draw with thirty pound pieces of steel, if I had to." 'She hammers nails through leather into wood, poured liquid rubber in molds for noses, rubbed paint on soft surfaces - follows a logic and knowledge of innards, their placement, coverings and how they make up the shape of the whole. Intricate and beautiful forms lie under the surfaces, never seen except in a few photographs by Guido Mangold and Richard Avedon, or in her studio,' wrote Arlene Raven in her eponymously titled book on Grossman's work. Raven was Grossman's partner of several decades, Grossman invokes her periodically in conversation; it was after Raven's death of cancer in 2006 that the stray (now very tame) cat arrived, it was Raven's gift with writing that Grossman had envied, the clear and universal ability to convey meaning through words, no heavy lifting required, it was Raven's book on her that had "best understood" her. The not-present partner's smiling portrait faces our conversation, prominently positioned on a sideboard surrounded by crawling green vines, and what is clear is that Grossman's grief is not a thing emerged from cleanly, as Julian Barnes puts it in 'Flaubert's Parrot,' not like from a dark tunnel into the bright sunlight. Emergence from grief is as a gull comes through an oil-spill: tarred and feathered. "I'm getting too old, I'm too weak for some of it," Grossman says of her art, and shoots a glance at Arlene's portrait and a glare at her extended hands, held palms up in front of her chest. "Getting old is terrible for all the obvious reasons, but one of the things that really hurts is how difficult it is for me to work."

Beyond the heads, a buoyant aggression of sexuality, a tense, turgid humanity prevails in her relief sculptures. 1967's 'Ali Stoker,' depicts tumbling leather skins (straps, shoes, part of a leather clad figure) that are penetrated by roiling metal parts (steel cable, zip-pers) and suggest what Grossman calls hybrid "animal machine figures and human machine figures," all in a monochrome writhing tableau of in flagrante delicto. Her collages and assemblages are dense, abstract compositions of frenetic energy, assertions of feats of strength and jumbled loops of hope. Women can and shall express the unwomanly! is the scream of her work, with its coils of rusted metal and unbuffed leather and muddied paint tonalities, but beyond even that, it asserts that we are not beholden to our captors. We can locate the powerful, buried self. We can remove the tools of restraint, our masks, reins, zippers and buckles and hooks and recognize that what is monstrous is so often constrained and disguised in what is 'normal.' Grossman's heads were ferocious harbingers of the coming feminist insurgency, sent as darkly weird and sensually beautiful sentinels and signposts. She does not look like her art, sure, but it is invigorating to be reminded that great art is not linked in any reductive, linear way to the body of the artist. Grossman's leather heads are "of her but are not her," as George Saunders once said of artistic heroes, "[the artist's] reach, her attempt to be more than she truly is." We can, they announce, follow her lead decades later, break and be free of the repressions fostered by society that imprisons people and sentiments, emotions and sensitivities, and join her, deep below the think. "Anyone who does anything great in art is...out of control," she says, leading me down to the basement of her studio, where rest some early unfinished works. "Artists are people who are possessed," she continues, "who are





PREVIOUS SPREAD: CORRIDOR, 1977. FABRIC, LEATHER, PAINT & CHARCOAL ASSEMBLAGE ON CANVAS, 72 X 48 X 2 INCHES, SIGNED & DATED. THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BAYAMON, 1982, MIXED MEDIA COLLAGE OF VARIOUS PAPERS ON MASONITE, 36 X 48 INCHES, SIGNED & DATED. TOUGH LIFE DIARY, 1967-73. INK, PASTEL & COLLAGE ON PAPER, 22 1/4 X 29 5/8 INCHES, SIGNED & DATED. COLLECTION OF HALLEY K HARRISBURG & MICHAEL ROSENFELD, NEW YORK (DETAIL). COLLAGE PASTEL NO.2, 1976. COLLAGE OF DYED PAPER, TAPE, WATERCOLOR & PASTEL ON PAPER 26 X 20 INCHES, SIGNED & DATED. FIGURE WITH FOLDED ARMS, 1974. COLLAGE OF VARIOUS PAPERS WITH WATERCOLOR ON BOARD 55 3/4 X 35 3/4 INCHES, SIGNED & DATED. OPUS VOLCANUS (TRIPTYCH), 1994, MIXED MEDIA ASSEMBLAGE, 50 X 80 X 7, SIGNED & DATED (DETAIL). ALL WORKS BY NANCY GROSSMAN. ALL WORKS COURTESY OF MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY, NEW YORK, EXCEPT WHERE OTHERWISE INDICATED. MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY WILL BE SHOWING A SOLO EXHIBITION FOR NANCY GROSSMAN IN MAY 2014, WHICH WILL FEATURE HER LARGE-SCALE WALL RELIEFS FROM THE 60'S.

swept up in ideas that take hold of them and don't let go. There's this idea of formalizing art, to contain it, to hold its bowels. Everyone is trying to hold their bowels, to be properly toilet trained! But the whole exciting, important thing about art has to do with being out of control – it has to do with real things." Later, Grossman and I walk through the tree-lined streets of her neighborhood, dodging the occasional shards of dropped glass bottles. I ask her about a quote from her 1975 interview with Nemser, when she said "I know male artists experience making art in a so-called very female way, it's not about getting a hard-on. The whole concept of inspiration is about being filled. Actually in this art making we are really bisexual, and it's too bad the word is so distorted and politicized. People feel so fugitive about saying it and will insist everything is black and white while the world is graying all around them." She grins at me and the memory and says, "I think it's getting grayer all the time." "We talk about gentrification

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and change and she is reluctant to disparage of other artists, though she finds a certain lack of originality at play, a certain eagerness to create works for money versus for love or for the desire to expunge something from the depths of your soul. Inspiration beyond an overall awareness of what sells seems to be in short order these days. "Now, people just sign up for things. 'I want to be a part of this movement. Yeah, this stuff is selling, I can do this stuff... Whoo! Here we go,' " she interrupts herself, distracted. "Come and look at this," she breathes, rushing over to a black wrought-iron fence and a gnarled grey tree. "Isn't that the most beautiful thing?" Above arm's reach, where the bark is un-papered and unpunctured by fliers and their fixtures it is smooth and grey, wrinkled and sagging in parts, like an elephant's leg. "It's like skin," she shakes her head slowly, "it's just incredible. And nobody looks up. People just walk right by." — ALESSANDRA CODINHA

