

The Loud Whispers of NANCY GROSSMAN

Stefano Pasquini

It's hard to write about an artist I feel so close to. When I first saw the current exhibition of Nancy Grossman's work at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery I wanted to cry. Unfortunately, it was the opening night, I didn't know anyone, and even if I did, doing so would have been very inappropriate. You see, art doesn't make you cry very often. When was the last time you cried in front of a piece of visual art?

"I still don't know anything"

So I didn't cry. Instead, I asked halley harrisburg (the gallery director, who doesn't believe in capital letters) to have an interview with Nancy Grossman, and she accepted. I must be honest: I don't consider myself an art critic and I was unaware of her existence or her artwork until about a year ago. Many people warned me she's a very sharp woman, so I went completely unprepared, I had the feeling I didn't have to ask her any questions, all I had to do was listen. And I did. She preferred not to be tape recorded, so out of respect I only wrote what we talked about. Now I'm left with scribbled notes that read like: "all you have to do is touch something", "I'm as critical as I..." and so on.

Nancy Grossman is an incredible woman. It's hard to describe the energy that both herself and her work emanate. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery is currently filled with this magic, and Grossman being there made me feel like in the eye of a tornado. Though, as Robert C. Morgan put it, "she is unassuming both in her work and in her desire to make art. Grossman has never been a careerist in the trendy, market-driven sense of the word."¹ In fact, I plainly asked her: "Why aren't you world famous?"

"My work is not slick", she replied, and I disagreed. We then spent a good deal of time arguing on what was slick and what was not, and at the end I had to agree with her, her work is not slick or fashionable. Possibly, it's just too strong for this market. "When art is less viable as a product it becomes more accessible. Philosophically, I became an artist when abstract expressionism was around, and the way I work is still within the same approach. It comes out of necessities, irresistible necessities. It's like a compulsion I have to do this kind of work. Hadn't I been an artist I would be a criminal."

"the only time I feel alive is when I disappear"

Stefano Pasquini: "So do you find your work to be a struggle?"



Nancy Grossman, *H.U.F.*, 1980. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

Nancy Grossman: "I do, but that doesn't sound good, does it? It's always a struggle because sometimes it's hard to know where it's going. What I liked from Dada was the idea of chance. Accidents in the working process are very important and sometimes I try to capture, or present, an accident. But struggling in the working process can also be being afraid of accidents."

I guess that was a silly question. The energy that comes from her work is such that it would be impossible for it to come out of a smooth process. Her "infamous" heads, hand carved in wood and covered with leather, strapped and zippered (too often associated,

superficially, with S&M and fetishism) have the inner despair and the explosive anger of the true existence of humankind. They encompass the whole existential history of humankind, from Michelangelo to Van Gogh to Artaud to Marc Quinn to the future. Nothing has changed. The everyday frustrations may be different, but they're all there, englobed into a wooden portrait constrained by leather. Once again, I didn't have to ask her about her heads:

**"I can hardly contain myself.
If I hadn't been an artist I would have exploded"**

NG: "It wasn't just an idea, it's a whole world. I wanted to fill the space with friends. I have a lot of friends, but that can also be very lonely. The heads are self portraits. The reason I covered them with leather was because I was using found wood that I would laminate together in order to have a piece big enough for the work."

"One of the most stunning sights I've ever seen", writes Lowery Stokes Sims 2, "was an installation of over thirty of these heads on several tiers at the entrance to Grossman's 1991 retrospective exhibition at the Hillwood Art Museum". If I wanted to cry by looking at three of her heads, I probably would have fainted seeing that show. Earlier, halley harrisburg was telling me how she never associated a gender to those heads. Though they are all extremely masculine in their look, I couldn't but agree. These heads go far beyond issues of gender or sexuality, they engulf the whole of the human condition.

SP: "Do you consider yourself a conceptual artist?"

NG: "Definitions are so closed. You can define my work conceptual, as you can call it sensual. I like to think there's less to read and more to touch, less to say and more to feel... no, I can't say that, it's too poetical. Sculpture strikes me as being deaf and dumb. It's a necessity, more than anything else, a way to escape from all the rules with which you were brought up.

There's something very lucky about being able to transform the physical form. You should be as good as you can be to master what you do. When I studied at Pratt in the late fifties they tried to teach me this kind of Bauhaus idea of color, to me it was as impossible as the English grammar... Richard Lindner was a very important teacher for me. He taught me what are the tools you need to get where you want to get. And the most important thing is to get to that point yourself. You know, it's you, it's you, it's you!"



Nancy Grossman, *Gunhead*, 1991. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

And she pokes me with her index finger at each "you", as if I didn't get the message. I got the message. Not only that, I feel that this poking cast a spell over my troubled being of artist and writer. Half way through this article, I felt so inadequately equipped to write about Nancy Grossman that all I could do was stop and savagely make a huge expressionist painting. And I haven't painted in seven

"trying to sell the magic, that's the art market"

years. She herself told me she wished she could write. "Things would be much simpler," she said, "I could be anywhere and just write". Nancy Grossman was compelled into being an artist. She couldn't be anything else, not like so many young artists of today, who choose art as a profession. As halley harrisburg pointed out, she didn't choose. I can only complete this struggling transcription of the interview with her own words: "I left behind this document of the evidence of the unspeakable."

Notes:

1. Robert C. Morgan, *Nancy Grossman: Opus Volcanus*, *Sculpture Magazine*, August 1998 Vol. 17 No. 6.
2. Lowery Stokes Sims, *Loud Whispers*, Catalog for the exhibition, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, NY, 2000.



Right to Left: Nancy Grossman, *Untitled (Double Head)*, 1971. *Ozymondias*, 2000. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery