



Art in Review

By ROBERTA SMITH
Published September 27, 1981

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Nancy Grossman Exit Art 578 Broadway (near Prince Street) SoHo Through Oct. 12

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Nancy Grossman is best known for the leather-hooded heads she started making in the late 1960's; these works, creating an atmosphere of sexual violence and domination, were exquisitely crafted as objects and crudely sensational as art. "Collages, Constructions, Drawings, Sculptures, 1965-90,"

the survey of Ms. Grossman's art at Exit Art, is bisected by a row of six of these hooded heads on pedestals, as if by a line of snarling warriors. Also on view are the drawings of elaborately bound and tethered figures that make Ms. Grossman's work a precursor of Robert Mapplethorpe's most extreme images.

Fortunately, this revealing show has much more to offer and presents several sides of Ms. Grossman's prolific talent while also increasing one's knowledge of the art of the 1960's. It backtracks to the middle of that decade, when the artist was in her mid-20's and apt to fashion black leather and discarded metal parts (often from cars) into chaotic, tumbling reliefs that bring Abstract Expressionist brushwork into real space. In works like "Car Horn," "Eden" and "Ali Stoker," the sexual energy that is never far beneath the surface of her work finds more subtle, less simplistic expression. The human merges with the machine in forms that appear to materialize the inner workings of both.

From both the 1960's and the 70's, these are reliefs made largely of pockets, cut out of clothing and attached to canvas, row upon row. Gently vulnerable, these pieces evoke the body in even more ambiguous ways, both sexuality and innocence, connection and solitude. And several other phases and media are accounted for here in a small semi-abstract figure from 1968, made from scraps of wood, that predicts Joel Shapiro rather than Mapplethorpe; a number of diarylike drawings on which the entries have been crossed out, censored, and an exuberantly elaborate collage from 1990 in which one disparate image merges effortlessly into another, just as Ms. Grossman's metal and leather did in earlier times.

At nearly every turn, this exhibition speaks of an artist who is a genius with materials, able to dissect and reassemble, and thus transform, every article of leather, metal and cloth that came her way. But it also creates the impression that Ms. Grossman's taste has not always been equal to her talent and that her strongest pieces are those that are most open to interpretation, that leave the most to the viewer's own imagination.

This exhibition is organized in tandem with shows of Ms. Grossman's work at the Hillwood Art Museum in Brookville, L.I., through Nov. 10, and the Sculpture Center, 167 East 69th Street, Manhattan, from Oct. 8 to Nov. 9.

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