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ART IN REVIEW; Nancy Grossman

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'Loud Whispers'

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

24 West 57th Street

Over the years Nancy Grossman has produced a group of sinister-looking signature pieces: life-size heads (and occasionally bodies, too) carved in wood, then stitched, zippered and nailed into masklike black leather coverings, with various openings for a nose, a mouth, eyes. Sometimes the coverings are garnished with straps and bullets or more disturbing attachments.

Ms. Grossman writes in the show's catalog that most of her work over the last 30 years "may revolve around my own body," but these creepy heads with their hints of inner violence breed multiple associations: S-and-M activities a la Robert Mapplethorpe, sci-fi film creatures, even comic-strip heroes like Batman. It has also been proposed that they express the artist's own -- otherwise unstated -- experiences of oppression. Or the repression fostered by society that imprisons emotions and sensitivities.

Ambiguous as they are, they succeed in being powerfully evocative. Of the several examples here, the one that echoes most graphically the stress and aggressiveness of American life is "Gunhead," a bare pate that sports an evil-looking gun with eyepieces worn over most of the face like a muzzle, the business end pointing directly at the viewer.

But the real emphasis in this miniretrospective of 30-odd items, dating from the mid-1960's to the present, is on Ms. Grossman's highly expressive use of collage and assemblage, mediums that obviously play into the makeup of her heads. Working often in heavy relief, she uses all kinds of detritus. In earlier days, she was prone to use big messy wads of cloth and hunks of leather, like

old, torn-apart shoes, making them into assemblages that refer to body experience, some more explicitly than others.

In one of the earliest, "Ali Stoker" (1966-67), pieces of vacuum hose, pipes, steel cable, leather straps, shoes, zippers and even part of a leather-clad figure constitute an all-black tableau of writhing, interpenetrating parts that have distinctly carnal references. A 1974 work, "Vom Ertrunkenen Madehem (Concerning a Drowned Girl)," a jumbled but artful arrangement of lumpy cloth shapes in various lingerie shades, may take clues from the "soft" sculpture of Ms. Grossman's contemporary, Eva Hesse. But the work has more emotional resonance, suggesting the disarray of a provisional life.

Ms. Grossman's later collages and assemblages are more discursive, like "Snake Still Life With Swimming Pool" (1993), a flat collage whose forms, dominated by two snaky, diamond-patterned vacuum hoses in bright red, include both soft and hard-edged elements, or the more recent "Ozymondias" (2000), in which a jumble of long typewriter keys hangs like a metal beard among more collage-y inclusions, like printing blocks, a medallion and pieces of "found" wood.

But although the show affirms that Ms. Grossman's long involvement with collage, drawing and sculpture is the firm foundation of her work, the mute heads evolving from these pursuits are the most original part of it. GRACE GLUECK