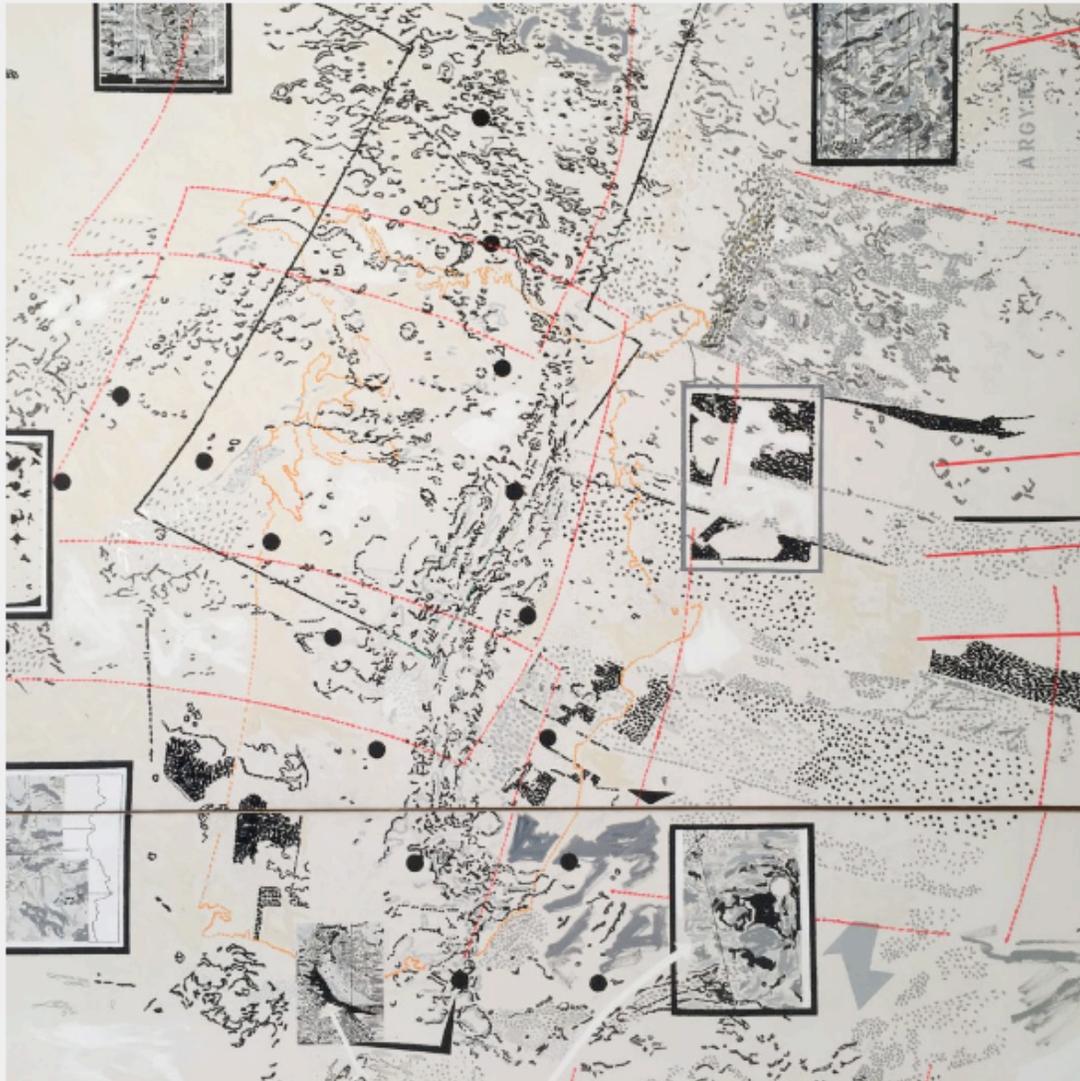


TWO COATS OF PAINT

March 30, 2019

Nancy Graves: Sorting the cosmic haze

4:04 pm by Editor



Nancy Graves, Mars (1973), detail, acrylic on canvas, 4 panels, overall: 96 x 288 inches. unless otherwise noted, images are courtesy of the Nancy Graves Foundation via Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Contributed by Jason Andrew / In 1959, British scientist and novelist C.P. Snow, struck by the inability of intellectuals and scientists to communicate and thereby to make sense of and tame nuclear weapons, delivered a lecture at Cambridge arguing that the divide between the sciences and the humanities was intensifying world's problems. *Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, the book

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encapsulating his ideas, became one of the strongest post-World War II influences on Western public discourse. Nancy Graves (1939–95), whose paintings and works on paper are now on display at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, took Snow's ideas to heart by creating art that was at once aesthetically challenging and intellectually probing – the humanities and the sciences all rolled into one. The root of her inspiration, however, was endearingly humble: “I was born and raised in Pittsfield, Mass., where my father worked as a guard in the Berkshire Museum of Art and Natural History,” Graves told the *New York Times* in January 1979. “In that way I came to think of art and natural history as one.”



Nancy Graves, *Mars* (1973), acrylic on canvas, 4 panels, overall: 96 x 288 inches

Although unknown to many, Graves was a key figure of postwar art, working prolifically in sculpture, painting, printmaking, and film. She is most celebrated for her life-size fur-covered Mongolian Bactrian camels and variations on that theme that included installations of their bones. Their ambitious presentation as sculpture had the art world intelligentsia on both sides of the continent scratching their heads. “This is the most subversive thing that has happened to art since the early modernists abolished the subject altogether,” wrote Alfred Frankenstein in the *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle* in April 1969. Writing for the *New York Times* in December 1971, Peter Schjeldahl was “hard put to decide which was more preposterous, the object itself or the theory that was to make the object comprehensible.”

Explaining the far-out radicalism of this particular work, Graves said that “the psychological experience of confrontation with the camel is the occasion to think about the nature of experience.” Graves was claiming the natural world as a topic of artistic interest. If a pile of Brillo boxes could be called art, why not a room full of fabricated camels? She concerned herself not only with nature but also with the technological advances that challenged and sometimes threatened it: Sputnik, lunar exploration, moon landings, space probes, satellites, television, computers, and the nuclear arms race. Jackson Pollock's observation that “new needs need new techniques” clearly rang true for her. In the early 1970s, 30 years into the Cold War and the postwar onslaught of technology, Graves gave

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sculpture a rest and focused on interpreting scientific developments in the intrepid work now on view in Chelsea.



Nancy Graves, Untitled #127 (Drawing of the Moon)(c. 1972z0, Watercolor, gouache and pencil on paper, 30 x 22 1/2 inches

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At the entrance of the show is *Untitled #127 (Drawing of the Moon)*, (c. 1972). It's a brightly colored watercolor, gouache and pencil drawing on paper depicting the moon in highly artificial hot pinks, yellows and blues. Its unusually perky patina and graded pointillist application set the stylistic tone for a show that focuses on Graves' fascination with satellite imagery of the Earth, the moon, and Mars that had recently become available.

Hanging close by is *Apollo 14* (1973), a grey-tone horizontal-jutzy work of graphite and gouache on paper. It's Graves' interpretation of NASA's eighth manned mission to the moon, rendering still the televised moment when starman Alan Shepard took a golf swing on its surface.



Nancy Graves, installation view

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Nancy Graves, installation view



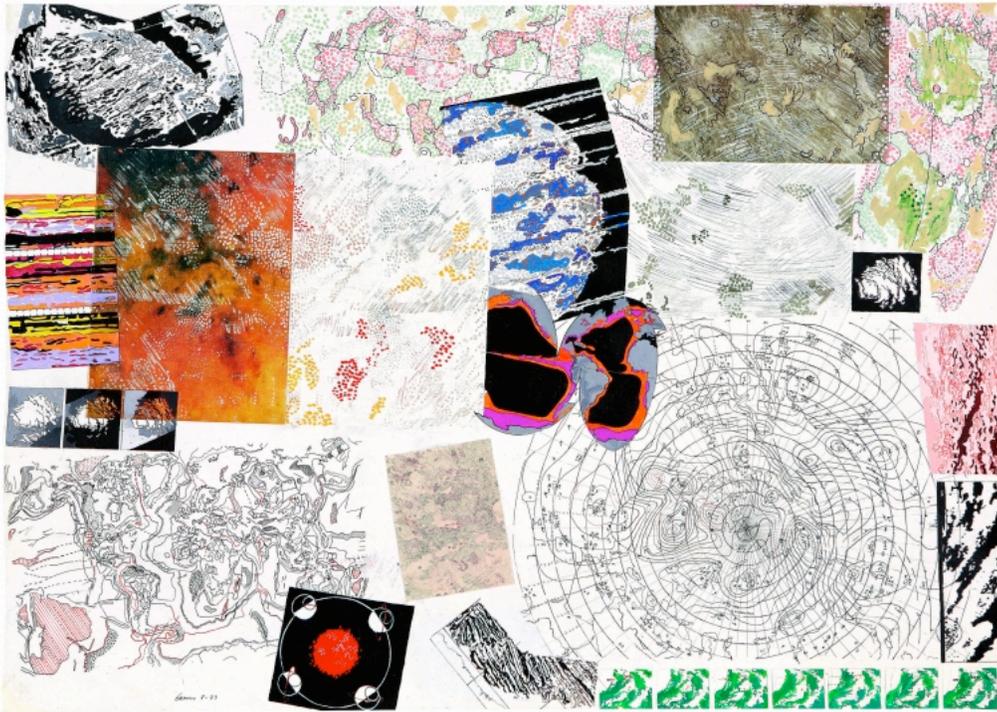
Nancy Graves, Installation view

Around the corner hangs *Indian Ocean Floor II*(1972), a towering painting in black and white. This piece and its companion (not on view) are based on

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bathymetric recordings from satellites of the floor of the Indian Ocean. Executed with the same sort of analogue directness, it depicts underwater ridges and trenches abstractly yet somehow accurately. This work's dot-and-dash makeup is reminiscent of the important enamel-on-steel-plate compositions of Jennifer Bartlett, Graves' classmate of Yale.

Hanging on the large wall across the gallery is *Mars*(1973). Measuring twenty-four feet over four canvases, the painting is the largest work in the show. On view for the first time in the United States in 45 years, this monumental work depicts the topography of Mars based on 21 photographs sent back by NASA's *Mariner 4* satellite. Restricting herself to a pale palette and relying solely on the transcription of raw data, Graves charts the topography of the red planet, painting section by section and rendering black those areas for which no data was transmitted. Between the first and second panel from the left, perhaps to reference scale, Graves camouflages an outline of the United States. "Graves found a way to replace the mythopoetic aura of Abstract Expressionism with natural wonderment," writes Robert Storr in his essay accompanying the show. I agree.



Nancy Graves, *Earth, Moon, Mars* (1973), Collage, India Ink, acrylic, gouache and graphite on paper, 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 42 inches.

The space-oddy five-part painting *Untitled #6 (White)*(1974) illuminates Graves's sculptural attentiveness to form and structure. Polka dots in a range of colors

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impart the transmission of some unknown data; as the eye rockets from one dot to the next, hidden images and vibrating patterns emerge.



Nancy Graves, *Untitled #7* (1976), oil on canvas, 64 x 128 inches. Photo by the author

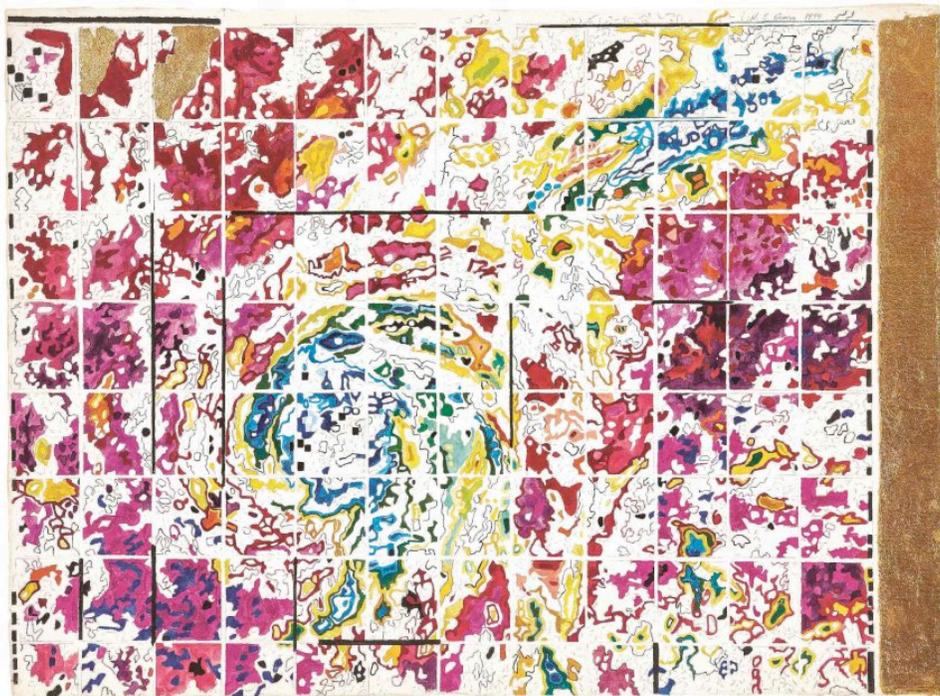
Two paintings – *Untitled #1* (1975) and *Untitled #7* (1976) – offer a systematic kind of improvisation in which colored boxes, fussy gestural marks, and circumferential lines function with strategic precision. The effect is surprisingly provocative. In these paintings, Graves seemed to welcome multiple inputs and to recognize that all of it is in motion.

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Nancy Graves, *Untitled #97 (Blue Map Triptych)*, 1972, Gouache, acrylic and pencil on paper, three sheets, overall: 30 x 67 ½ inches

Among the many meticulous works on paper is a cosmic *Untitled #97 (Blue Map Triptych)*(1972). Blue dots jive with off-grey ones to form what looks like a Rorschach test. The work's trippy symmetry brings to question the very psychology of "looking." Are we analyzing a drawing or is it analyzing us?



Nancy Graves, *Untitled (Heat Density Cyclone)*(1974), Watercolor, gold leaf and graphite on paper, 22 1/2 by 30 inches

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Two drawings titled *Untitled (Heat Density Measurement of a Cyclone)*, and *Untitled (Heat Density Cyclone)*, both finished in 1974, have an increased relevance considering Tropical Cyclone Idai's recent landfall on the southeastern coast of Africa. Drama with destructive force prevails in these relatively small sized watercolors (with gold leaf). Given Graves's concerns about the technological assault on the environment and our own alarm about climate change, these 45-year old works make it ominously clear the we had strategic warning, albeit ignored until recently and still denied by some. Reverberating throughout the exhibition is the quiet terror of knowing what the world is about and sensing where it is headed.

For Graves, the natural world and its compass points contain a wealth of secrets to explore. Her work embodies a vitalist balance between humanity the unknown and nature the incalculable. As for the exhibition, it tightly and purposefully re-presents an artist critical to the evolution of art in America. With a heavy foot on the throat of art history, Graves' work urgently requests that we rethink the insularity and implores an inter-disciplinary embrace. Bring on the retrospective.