



Nancy Grossman: 'Out of Control' at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

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by Gabrielle Selz

"Art is not about being safe." Nancy Grossman said. "Anyone who does anything great in art has to be out of control."

The occasion for this comment was a talk Grossman gave at [Michael Rosenfeld Gallery](#) in Chelsea last week. She was there to discuss the exhibition of nearly 40 of her historic assemblages and drawings created during a pivotal period of her development: "Nancy Grossman: The Edge of Always, Constructions from the 1960s," an exhibition that has been extended to run through July 25.

A petite woman with a head of brown curls, at first glance Grossman stands in sharp contrast to these large, muscular reliefs. It's hard to imagine her a half-century ago, living in a storefront on Eldridge Street in her early 20s, scavenging at night through vacant lots for the discarded objects—vacuum hoses, steel pipes, biker jackets, discarded luggage, tin cans—that she took back to her studio to resurrect in her reliefs. But it is the push-pull of contradiction, of interior versus exterior, chaos versus form, of the appearance of dynamic movement apprehended by Grossman on these constructed canvases that is at the heart of this body of work.

The artist is widely known for her sculptures of muzzled, [leather heads](#) from the late 1960s through the 1980s. And her early assemblages are obvious predecessors to her later work, in which Grossman explored more formally the idea of skins and multi-layered selves.

She speaks in a hesitant voice and freely admits to being more comfortable communicating through the physical qualities of sculpture. Back in the '60s, she was just out of art school and considered herself a painter when she began to create the collages. Made on 1' x 2' stretcher bars reinforced with plywood and covered in canvas, she approached these heavy, weighty structures as she would have a gestural painting.

It was the tail end of the era of Abstract Expressionism. Influenced by the combines of [Robert Rauschenberg](#), which broke down the boundaries between painting and sculpture; and the crushed, compacted and welded automobile pieces of [John Chamberlain](#), Grossman's forms are rampant explosions of contained energy. A gifted draftsman, she used her found objects, scraps of metal and hides of leather to create improvisational drawings across the surface.



“Bridey” by Nancy Grossman, 1965. Black ink on paper, 16 3/4 x 13 3/4 inches, signed and dated. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.



“Nancy Grossman: The Edge of Always, Constructions from the 1960s” at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY. Photography by Joshua Nefsky.

Grossman grew up on a farm in Oneonta, New York. She was in charge of the care of younger siblings; an overwhelming responsibility that she said left her desperate to break free. She attributes these early constraints to the elements of both the self-imposed and societal restrictions that her work embodies.

As a young girl, her great passion, her freedom, was her horse. Not just riding it, but the saddling and dressing of horses. Grossman loved the bridles and harnesses, the buckles and straps and reins.

Her father was a glove maker, and for a time Grossman joined her parents in the garment industry, sewing darts and gussets until she escaped into art. Still, she retained a passion for stitching, sewing and constructing, for working with the tough skin of leather and for the way material covers and reveals the object underneath.

In 1964, when she visited [David Smith](#)—the great American sculptor whose welded steel forms ranged from Constructivism to Abstraction—she expressed interest in some old harnesses he was throwing out. He promptly sent them to her, and shortly thereafter died in a car crash. In the resulting piece, a tribute titled *For David Smith, 1965*, she warped and wrapped the harnesses into a powerful collision of forms exploding across a white background.



“For David Smith” by Nancy Grossman, 1965. Mixed media assemblage on canvas mounted on plywood, 85 x 85 x 6 3/4 inches, signed and dated. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

“I am always trying to get my sculptures to talk,” Grossman said. Again, there is that sense of paradox: an object can only “talk” through implied movement. The found trash that she has

brought back to life in her art, she covered in black tar and paint. Dark as the earth from which they have been retrieved, they are also full of energy and vitality.

Grossman would go on to create a large body of work, figures and heads bound in leather strappings and collages of [words, fragments and lists](#). Still, at the core of even those later pieces, and already apparent in the assemblage collages of the '60s, is the idea of abandonment.

The objects Grossman collected in vacant lots had been tossed aside, they were refuse. She then submerged herself in the dictates of these materials to the point where they took over.

“Nothing was planned. It got away from me,” she said. Form emerged from the process.

In the end, Grossman’s art challenges us to consider the imposing quality of the progression of time itself. How time both contracts and expands; how it changes tempo; how, layer by layer, time destroys as it rejuvenates.



“Nancy Grossman: The Edge of Always, Constructions from the 1960s” at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY. Photography by Joshua Nefsky.

BASIC FACTS: “Nancy Grossman: The Edge of Always, Constructions from the 1960s” has been extended until July 25, 2014 at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 100 Eleventh Avenue, New York, NY 10011. www.michaelrosenfeldart.com.

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