

Preposterous Parts: Nancy Grossman's Relief Assemblages, 1965–67

THE POET AND CRITIC BILL BERKSON wrote in an early review of Nancy Grossman's work that it conveyed "a nostalgia for parts."¹ This enigmatic phrase comes from a dense but short review of Grossman's Spring 1965 exhibition at New York's Krasner Gallery, her first of two that year. Because of the brevity of his one-paragraph commentary on the works, Berkson left this phrase unexplored. Nevertheless, it encapsulates a key issue for the ambitious and intense body of work she would create over the next two years—abstract relief assemblages that immediately preceded the signature mode of her leather-bound head sculptures. Taken as a whole, the relief assemblages from 1965 to 1967 exhibit a mounting tension between their ostensible abstraction and their increasingly recalcitrant

figuration. While the early assemblages to which Berkson referred—such as *East of the Sun* (1964) and *Eden* (1965)—had seemed to him nostalgically to long for their lost parts, the subsequent works would locate those parts ever more brashly. In 1965, Grossman began to employ repurposed leather as the primary material of her assemblages, and it allowed her to evoke the body more and more by making new parts from old skins.

In what follows, I will discuss three relief sculptures as exemplary of this body of work that has received little attention in the literature on Grossman.² For *David Smith* (1965) (pp. 26–27), *Bride* (1965–66) (p. 49), and *Ali Stoker* (1966–67) (pp. 50–51) each mark different points along Grossman's traversing of abstraction and the nostalgia for the body that it incited. In

1 [William] B[erkson], "Nancy Grossman," *Arts Magazine* 39, no. 9 (May–June 1965): 70.

2 The works before 1968 have rarely been discussed in detail. Notable exceptions are Arlene Raven, *Nancy Grossman* (Brookville, N.Y.: Hillwood Art Museum, C.W. Post Campus, Long Island University, 1991); Arlene Raven, "True Grit," in *True Grit*, ed. Halley K. Harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2000), 2–5; Lowery Stokes Sims, "Loud Whispers," in *Nancy Grossman: Loud Whispers: Four Decades of Assemblage, Collage, and Sculpture* (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2000), 6–11; and

Mark Daniel Cohen, "Review: Nancy Grossman: *Loud Whispers: Four Decades of Assemblage, Collage, and Sculpture*," *Review: The Critical State of Visual Art in New York* (15 December 2000). Of related interest is Robert C. Morgan's essay on Grossman's return to relief assemblage in the 1990s: Robert C. Morgan, "Nancy Grossman: *Opus Volcanus*," *Sculpture* 17, no. 6 (July/August 1998). A key source for these works is Cindy Nemser's interview with Grossman published in 1975 in Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 327–67.

and among the dense and abstract twisted leather strata, discernible body parts start to pop out. Unmistakable, these absurd genitalia signal Grossman's frank and often preposterous confrontation with the sexed body, treating it as raw material to be remade. Increasingly, her relief assemblages detached "parts" from wholes and extended that detachment into areas of black humor and subversion. These works—and their answering of the "nostalgia for parts" through their exposure of sexual organs—were the arena in which Grossman digested the body before leaving it behind to focus on the head.

These relief assemblages moved into three dimensions some of the concerns of her earlier drawings and collages, becoming the most assertively sculptural and abstract of her works to date. Leather, which would become Grossman's signature material, came to be central in these works. The early assemblages such as *Eden* had used leather along with scrap, metal car parts, and rubber, but in 1965 it became her dominant material. In the works between 1965 and her transition to making head sculptures encased in leather in 1968, Grossman increasingly used repurposed leather that did not wholly disguise the original objects from which it came, unlike her subsequent sculptures. Jackets, harnesses, boots, and shoes, though partially broken down, remained visible in the concentrated surfaces. As Grossman's long-term partner, the art critic Arlene Raven, once wrote of these works, "There were 'ghosts' in the leather jackets, wood, and metal she used that she felt were activated in her work."³

Consequently, the source materials for all of these works are important to an understanding of the meanings they put into play. Nowhere is this more evident than in the first major leather relief assemblage Grossman made in 1965, *For David Smith*. 1965 was a pivotal year for her: she had recently moved to a larger loft on Eldridge Street on New York's Lower East Side, and she had won a 1965 Guggenheim Fellowship in painting. The financial resources of the fellowship, plus the greater amount of space in her new loft, immediately resulted in these larger, more ambitious works. She experienced a concerted burst of activity and created a heroic number of relief assemblages over the course of the year. She had two one-person shows in 1965, both at Krasner Gallery, that showcased these works. All of this was inaugurated with the work *For David Smith*, which she created for the prominent sculptor from materials he had given her, and which established the terms of the relief assemblages she would develop over the next two years.

Grossman had met Smith in 1960 while she was still a student at the Pratt Institute, and the two had a sporadic relationship over the next five years. She recalled, "I had such an incredibly pure and simple and lusty relationship with David Smith.... What happened between us was totally real and sturdy enough to last a lifetime. It wasn't cynical."⁴ Grossman was a regular visitor to Bolton Landing in upstate New York, where Smith lived, and she would create many of her figure drawings in Smith's drawing studio there. On one of her last trips to Bolton Landing before his 1965 death in an automobile accident, Smith gave Grossman a number of leather horse harnesses, purchased in an auction along with the rest of the contents of a bankrupt farm. Smith had been interested in the cast iron tractor wheels and other metal implements, but Grossman admired the horse tack instead. (She had ridden horses since she was a child.) They were Smith's challenge to Grossman, and she took the bundle of leather objects back to New York City to create an ambitious work for him. She completed it before Smith's accident, but unfortunately he never saw the completed work.

For David Smith, at 6'9" by 7'3", was the largest relief assemblage Grossman would make and her most extensive use of leather to date. She said of this moment, "I was looking for material I could break down and build up and change midway," and the harnesses gave her materials that she could de-construct and remake.⁵ More than the found objects that populated her earlier works, the harnesses needed to be meticulously unstitched and taken apart. A significant component of the labor in this and subsequent works involved the breaking down

³ Raven, *Grossman*, 105.

⁴ Interview with the author, 30 October 2009. They initially met at the Museum of Modern Art café. Someone had knocked Grossman's coffee over, and Smith offered to buy her a new one. They struck up a conversation, and Smith was intrigued by the black cigarettes Grossman smoked at the time. She sent him a pack, and he eventually invited her up to Bolton Landing.

⁵ Telephone conversation with the author, 2 December 2011.



For David Smith, 1965, Leather, metal, and paint on canvas mounted on wood, 81 x 87 inches, Collection of the artist (detail opposite)

of these harnesses and garments. Once de-constructed, the odd shapes of these leather components suggested to Grossman new patterns and new ways to combine the elements.

She put these elements into play against a large canvas support where she compressed leather and metal. The materials have been torn apart and fused to make the two dense masses floating on the otherwise white canvas. Black paint has been sparingly applied, creating on the left a ragged outline tailed by a splatter. The harness straps are used as lines, connecting and reconnecting within and across the two major shapes. While the masses do not form familiar contours, component objects within them are nevertheless recognizable. In addition to reins and bits, more than one boot is visible (most noticeably in the right mass at the near center of the composition). In what would prove a characteristic move in these reliefs, Grossman pierced the disassembled leather garments and harnesses with tubes and openings, around which writhes an infernal tangle of horse tack, stirrups, and straps. Wryly, Grossman used elements to suggest other bodily shapes—as with the mask-like form suggested by a folded element from a de-constructed harness at the top of the right figure.

Grossman has said that she worked on these reliefs in an active and often rapid fashion, moving from one element to the next intuitively. “I did them in the same spirit as Abstract Expressionist action painting,” she recalled of her energetic and determined process.⁶ On the stretched canvas, reinforced with a wood backing to support the heavy objects, Grossman continued to add density. The work doubled in size, and she merged another canvas with the first to give more space. “Sculpture is usually something that is planned and sketched for, but I never did anything like that,” she recalled.⁷ The result is a concerted and almost frantic layered density within the two masses. These two halves of the work, on separate but conjoined canvases, reflect each other’s shapes in a pas-de-deux.

For David Smith is predominantly abstract, but Grossman saw these piled-on masses as figures—part animal, part machine, part human. The vestiges of shoes, the folds of leather skin, the open orifices, and the pliable tubes give the masses a bodily resonance. In an interview with Cindy Nemser in 1975, Grossman recounted her trajectory from the earlier drawings, collages, and lithographs to these works:

First I would make the whole figure and then I became more involved with the torso. Then the work became more and more abstract and involved with the visceral and the internal. When I look back on it now, it was always saying the same thing—just where I am in myself is where my work is. At the same time they became more and more like machines. There are animal machine figures and human machine figures. First I made them from the outside. That one is not noisy but they look as if they were yakking or moving.⁸

Nemser then remarked, with regard to *For David Smith*, “I find it hard to find a figure,” to which Grossman replied,

It is rather like an organic machine. It has insides and an outside. There are two figures in outer space. It’s funny because I would [previously] imagine these things in outer space. (This was before the Russians went into outer space and when they did I said, “Oh I know about that.”) I saw the space men floating there suspended without gravity. I knew what it would look like. These were done in ‘65.⁹

Even though she was working on the scale of monumental painting, she dealt with these assemblage reliefs as if they were drawings. They are formally analogous to the compacted ink on paper drawings she was creating at the same time, such as *Bridey* (p. 32) and *Beever Slats* (p. 37). Both articulate unorthodox hybrid forms against white grounds, and the narrow chromatic range of *For David Smith*’s source materials reinforced this connection. Grossman later recalled that

6 Interview with the author, 30 October 2009.

7 Telephone conversation with the author, 2 December 2011.

8 Nemser, *Art Talk*, 336.

9 *Ibid.*, 337.



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she wanted to make sculpture from her drawings at this time so that “I could make them more real.”¹⁰ Despite their obdurate and heavy materiality, these dark brown and black masses jump out from their white ground as if they were large drawn figures on white paper. This was intentional, and Grossman repeatedly referred to these and related works as representing free-floating and tumbling figures “like spacemen.” Raven reiterated this intention for the work, saying that, “The two figures in this work are bodies in a gravityless outer space.”¹¹ As she indicated above, images of Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin’s 1961 pioneering space journey had been crucial to her as visual analogs to the kind of floating bodies she had wanted to draw and, starting with the reliefs in 1965, sculpt.¹² She had been carrying these images with her well before 1961, however.

It was the bundle of horse straps Smith had given her that had prompted her to see this long thin pieces of leather as lines with which she could draw in three dimensions.¹³ She explained her process to Nemser:

*It seems a funny thing to do with such cumbersome material but when I am working this way those materials are nothing to me. I could draw with straps, I could draw with thirty-pound pieces of steel, if I had to. I set them in place and it becomes a great challenge to me that they be well made and solid. I do it quickly and with no sweat. I was always good with my hands in terms of drawing.*¹⁴

Ultimately, *For David Smith* is a kind of drawing of figures floating in space, made with horse harnesses. As such, it offers a humorously different kind of “drawing in space” than the kind for which Smith had become famous.¹⁵ Smith had used repurposed metal, but Grossman demonstrated how the straps, harnesses, and boots could be orchestrated as lines capable of making equally “gravityless” forms.

Smith’s own work had sought to eschew gravity and logical structure, presenting figures that not only vary from every side but also that are often held together in unorthodoxly structured ways solely by the sculptor’s fusing of parts. Seen in relation to the importance of action in Abstract Expressionism, Smith’s autographic gesture took the form of the weld that held disparate elements in the air without relying on the conventional engineering of structures and bodies. His *Cubi* series, on which he was engaged during the time he knew Grossman, is made up of combinations of simple, regular geometric forms that seemed to have been juggled in the air. While the component forms look as if they are basic geometric building blocks, they are never stacked, nor do the masses of the lower forms serve as the structural foundations for the blocks above.¹⁶ The welds hold them up. For Smith, these techniques emphasized the independence of the sculptor from necessary structure and to explore the ways in which he could create previously unseen figures and compositions that varied from every point of view.

For David Smith exhibits Grossman’s careful (and irreverent) engagement with the terms of Smith’s practice as well as the beginnings of her making of new bodies from the parts of others. It was this assembling of new figures that would drive her work over the next two years.¹⁷ As Raven remarked, “Smith’s totemic sculptural *personages* also found an analogy in Grossman’s personas.”¹⁸ Grossman’s personas, at this stage, were categorically dissimilar to the clean, concise statement of the leather

10 Nancy Grossman interviewed by Kate Horsfield, “Art and Artists: Nancy Grossman 1975,” video produced by Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, 1975. Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

11 Raven, *Grossman*, 103.

12 This is mentioned in *ibid.*, 50. Grossman reiterated Gagarin’s importance in her visual vocabulary in a telephone conversation on 23 October 2011.

13 Telephone conversation with the author, 2 December 2011.

14 Nemser, *Art Talk*, 340.

15 For instance, in 1956 Clement Greenberg called Smith “the best sculptor of his generation,” explaining that “Smith was among the first in this country to practice the art of aerial drawing in metal.” Clement Greenberg, “David Smith [1956],” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3:277. This became a standard appreciation of Smith’s practice, which Greenberg called in 1964 “the cursiveness of Smith’s drawing-in-air.” Clement Greenberg, “David Smith’s New Sculpture

[1964],” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 4:190.

16 As Greenberg described it, “The regularity of contour and surface, the traced and faired planes and lines, are there in order to concentrate attention on the structural and general as against the material and specific, on the diagrammatic as against the substantial, but not because there is any virtue in regularity as such. [...] The relatively simple and forthright has been put together to form unities that are complex and polymorphous.” Greenberg, “David Smith’s New Sculpture [1964],” 4:191.

17 Grossman’s *Totem* sculptures from 1966 to 1967 should be considered a further reflection on Smith’s practice. “Totem” was a key concept for Smith and it provided a vehicle for a return to figuration in his *Tanktubum* series. See Rosalind Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 88–116, and Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 147–73.

18 Raven, *Grossman*, 102.

Installation view of
*Cubi XVIII, Cubi XVI, and Cubi
XIX*, Bolton Landing, 1964.
Photo by David Smith



heads she would come to make. Instead, the bodies floating in space in *For David Smith* are unexpected concatenations of disparate reused parts. They do not resemble the bodies of either horses or humans, but one can see vestiges of both in the “ghosts” of the leather objects that Grossman has broken apart to make them. A boot, straps, laces, and buckles all point back to bodies and muscles, as do the allusive tubes and openings. As hybrids of horse, human, and machine made from discernible found objects, these figures refuse to settle into mere abstraction. The bodily shapes of shoes and horse tack, belts, and leather keep all of those possible bodies in proximate suspension, playing the familiarity of their parts against the strangeness of new beings confronting the viewer. In this way, Grossman matched Smith on his own terms while also demonstrating the evocative bodily potential of the leather garments she used. Smith’s own use of found or repurposed materials rarely foregrounded so blatantly such a tension

between recognizable source objects and the abstract figures they comprise.

The dense constellations of disassembled harnesses, boots, jackets, rubber, and tubes against white canvas in *For David Smith* became the characteristic mode of Grossman’s reliefs in 1965. She pursued this idea of using found leather to draw new figures in space. *Hitchcock* (pp. 34–35), *Brown and Black* (pp. 28–29), *Car Horn* (p. 25), and *Ali of Nostrand* (p. 37) all take up this motif. Made in rapid succession, such works provided an escape for Grossman after Smith’s death. “I felt cut off in the middle of my dialogue with David Smith. I worked literally night and day as if trying to finish a sentence that had been cut off.”¹⁹ In the series of works

¹⁹ Grossman quoted in *ibid.* That Smith’s death was a catalyst for Grossman was reiterated in Corinne Robins, “Man is Anonymous: The Art of Nancy Grossman,” *Art Spectrum* 1, no. 2 (February 1975): 36. It should be noted that this early article confused the objects and chronology, erroneously claiming that *Potawatami* (1967) was the first relief sculpture made from the harnesses Smith gave her.

after the monumental *For David Smith*, Grossman extended her relief assemblages, creating a number of works that she called “machine-animal hybrids.” Slightly smaller than *For David Smith*, these works expanded on her source material of harnesses to create what Raven called “abstract recreations of the horses Grossman owned and rode years earlier.”²⁰ They were never just horses, however. These machine-animal hybrids were new bodies, made from the parts of others.

Grossman's second exhibition at Krasner Gallery, in 1965, included many of the white-background relief assemblages in this mode. Just as the show was going up, however, she was transitioning to a different kind of making. As she zoomed in on the body, the white backgrounds began to disappear, and the subsequent reliefs became claustrophobically packed with materials. Grossman squeezed space out of the reliefs as she went inside the bodies she had been making. Exemplary of this transitional mode is the tondo *Bride*.

In *Bride*, white is not background but layers of repurposed skin. That skin frames what appears, to many, to be an uncompromising representation of a vagina. (For instance, its legibility as such was evidenced in the work's recent inclusion in an exhibition titled *The Visible Vagina*.)²¹ At the center of a compacted circle of leather straps, de-constructed boots, and white paint, a partially laced slit runs up the middle of the work, opened to expose purple folds. “This collage is kind of obscene. It's called *The Bride*,” Grossman said to Nemser in 1975. Nemser continued, “I see it's a tondo and it has sewing on it. Did you see it as a woman's sexual organ, a vagina?” Grossman's response was contradictory: “I was unconscious of that. I have a couple others like that. The others are landscapes—women landscapes.”²² Those related works include the 1965 leather, cloth, and fur assemblage *Landscape*, which also showcases a vaginal form in its lower half.

In what has become a characteristic way of discussing her work more broadly, Grossman both acknowledged the presence of sexed or sexual imagery while at the same time disavowing full intentionality in showcasing it. I see this less as a contradiction and more as a tactical means of bracketing the all-encompassing sexualized interpretations that her graphic imagery incites. (This dynamic would become amplified in the many invested responses to the leather heads.)²³ Grossman's characterization of her own practice drew from the attitudes common to many Abstract Expressionists in which non-representational or semi-abstract forms were mobilized as a means of the staging the artist's act of creation, with the meanings of the work being rooted in the artist's struggle to achieve that act. From this perspective, discussions of artistic creation were often cast as being intuitive and partially unconscious, despite the deliberate and highly-structured practices developed by Abstract Expressionist artists. Grossman's explanations of her own artistic process often take this form. In a 1975 interview with Kate Horsfield, for instance, Grossman remarked “When it is happening, there's no consciousness.... I can't take the credit.”²⁴ In a discussion with me, she said about her work, “I make it from below the think, and I want you to receive it from below the think.”²⁵

Grossman's declaration that she was unconscious of the vaginal imagery in *Bride* is a manifestation of this mode of characterizing artistic intention as intuitive or unthought, allowing her both to expose and to detach at the same time. She was aware of the image's blatant visibility and readability, as is evidenced by her prefacing the work to Nemser as “obscene.” Grossman recently remarked that she thought she could make such a “female and sexual” work because “Nobody would dare ask about the vagina.”²⁶ However, in her discussion with Nemser, published in the context of a feminist book of interviews with women artists, Grossman's disavowal of conscious intentionality served to call into question the seemingly unambiguous legibility of the image.²⁷ In effect, her deflection offered

20 Raven, *Grossman*, 100.

21 Francis M. Naumann and David Nolan, *The Visible Vagina* (New York: Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, LLC, and David Nolan Gallery, Inc., 2010).

22 Nemser, *Art Talk*, 340.

23 The present essay is part of a longer assessment of Grossman's work and its relation to gender that forms a chapter of my book in progress on gender multiplicity in sculpture from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s. In that chapter, I discuss the tactical richness of Grossman's disavowals more extensively.

24 In “Nancy Grossman 1975: An Interview,” video produced by Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, 1975, Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

25 Interview with the author, 30 October 2009.

26 Telephone conversation with the author, 23 October 2011.

27 Nemser was the outspoken editor of *Feminist Art Journal* from 1972 to 1977 and conducted the interviews that made up *Art Talk* with a purposefully feminist aim. As perhaps the first book about contemporary women's art, it was pioneering in the development of feminist art history and remains a key document of the decade.



Bride, 1965, Leather, metal, fur, and fabric on canvas mounted on wood, 22 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches, Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld.
OPPOSITE: *Potawatami*, 1967, Leather, metal, and rubber on canvas mounted on wood, 63 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 37 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 10 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches, Collection of the artist

a different feminist stance on the sexed body—one skeptical of its meanings and determinations. This is not the same as the use of vaginal imagery that would become a major resource for feminist art a few years after Grossman's *Bride*.²⁸ As I discuss below, for all its frankness, *Bride* resists the essentialism that would often be signaled by such imagery in the art of the early 1970s. Indeed, Nemser and Grossman concluded their 1975 interview by decrying the work of Judy Chicago, whom they characterized as exemplary of this essentialism. Chicago had begun creating her infamous *Dinner Party* earlier in 1974 and had published with Miriam Schapiro in 1973 her theory of the importance of vaginal "central core" imagery for feminist art.²⁹ Nemser remarked, "That's why I resent people like Judy Chicago insisting women are asserting their identity by painting their vaginas. I'm not only a vagina. [...] I have a brain and I have worked hard to learn how to use it," to which Grossman replied, "And the head is where the power is."³⁰ Nemser advocated for a diversified aesthetic for feminist art, irreducible to a deterministic and single essential image.³¹ Clearly, she understood Grossman's earlier *Bride* (which Nemser illustrated in her 1975 book) to be categorically different from such later uses of vaginal imagery. Perhaps this was because, in its formal organization, *Bride* cultivates multiplicity rather than essentialism through the use of other elements that humorously bracket and question just what it is we think we have learned from recognizing that genital imagery.

The work, after all, contains a lot more than just the central form. It is densely packed with material. As a "bride," the assemblage's extensive use of white cannot be seen as neutral. A significant portion of the work is composed of leather that Grossman painted white (the painting is most visible on the laces). Given the connections between brides and white, the layered folds of the de-constructed

boots mock the ruffles of a wedding dress—one of the most gender-specific of garments. (In a humorous passage, Grossman constructed to the right of the lacing a zippered orifice in white that playfully reprises the purple folds that seem so explicit.) One hostile and apparently uninformed reviewer tried to explain away *Bride*'s use of leather, derisively saying that the work "features mostly white leather, perhaps from a Western bride's outfit. A vagina-like area is exposed by the open bodice laces."³² This overly literal and pedestrian reading, however, fails to fully accept that *Bride*, in its round format, is not just white, but bisected into white and brown halves by the other dominant element in the composition—a diagonal strap with buckle that gives the effect of a belt. The white bride is below the belt, and it is hard not to ask what is above. The belt and the browns above it cannot be simply disregarded but must be understood in dynamic relation to what's below. Given the blatant display of vulva-like forms and the title, the work incites a questioning about how consistently or stably gender can be located between these two halves. That is, the frank exposure of the genitals purports to reveal the "truth" of the body as sexed, but Grossman's *Bride* keeps the question of gender—as distinct from anatomical sex—circling.³³

If the lower register seems to address directly the gendered title with its wedding dress white folds, what is the "not-bride" of the upper register's dirty browns and blacks? Taken together, they pose at least two different gendered options for the garments that surround the sexed body, rendered frankly through the exposure of genitals. Keeping the upper and lower registers in tension, *Bride* could be read, for instance, as conflating groom and bride or, as one alternative, the bride within (or underneath)

28 For instance, see discussions in Barbara Rose, "Vaginal Iconology," *New York Magazine* 7 (11 February 1974): 59; Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists Since 1970," *Art History* 1, no. 2 (1978): 236–49; Margo Hobbs Thompson, "Agreeable Objects and Angry Paintings: 'Female Imagery' in Art by Hannah Wilke and Louise Fishman, 1970–1973," *Genders* 43 (2006); Anna C. Chave, "Is this good for Vulva?": Female Genitalia in Contemporary Art," in *The Visible Woman*, ed. Francis M. Naumann and David Nolan (New York: Francis M. Naumann Fine Art, LLC, and David Nolan Gallery, Inc., 2010), 7–27.

29 Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, "Female Imagery," *Womanspace Journal* 1 (Summer 1973): 11–14. For discussion of the *Dinner Party* and its contentious reception, see Amelia Jones, ed., *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

30 Nemser, *Art Talk*, 345–46. Nemser and other co-editors of the *Feminist Art Journal* often decried Chicago's work and its singular reliance on genital imagery. For

context, see Christine Rom, "One View: The Feminist Art Journal," *Woman's Art Journal* 2, no. 2 (Autumn–Winter 1981–82): 19–24.

31 See Cindy Nemser, "Towards a Feminist Sensibility: Contemporary Trends in Women's Art," *Feminist Art Journal* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 19–23.

32 Virginia Pitts Rember, "Review: Fiber and Form: The Woman's Legacy," *Woman's Art Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1997): 65.

33 The distinction, now long-standing, between gender and anatomical sex has been the topic of extensive analysis. The now-classic text that serves as one of the most commonly used foundational sources for this is Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210. Contemporary to Grossman's assemblages, however, such distinctions had previously been popularized in Robert Staller's formulation of the concept of "gender identity." See Robert Staller, *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (New York: Science House, 1968).

the groom. Whatever is above the brown belt, it is in excess of the direct correlation that might be made between the vaginal imagery and the stereotypically feminine garment of the wedding dress. The certainty that the genital display, at first, seems to offer in its agreement with the gendered title and garment increasingly turns to disagreement and ambivalence when the remaining elements of the packed composition are taken into consideration.

Grossman's works often complicate and even collide genders, as when she maintains that all her heads are self-portraits, or when she emphasizes further oscillating genders in these works (as in comments such as her explanation of the 1971 head sculpture *Mary* [p. 98]: "Mary was a sissy boy.")³⁴ *Bride's* overall organization is an early manifestation of this. Even though it seems so explicit in its revelation of anatomical sex, it nevertheless detaches that bodily part from a one-to-one correlation with genders implied by the different kinds of garments evoked by the work. The uncertain relationship between the upper and lower registers of *Bride* prompts multiple plausible accounts of how gender could be identified in and among its component parts. *Bride* relies on the initial shock of recognition, but then slowly offers complications and inversions of that identification, bracketing its own apparent frankness. That is, the question of gender in *Bride* is more mobile, multiple, and uncertain than we might at first expect when confronted with the blunt flash of the genital imagery. In this, Grossman's work presages later accounts of genders as temporal and successive, sexual difference as unfixed and potentially multiple, and bodies as transformable. As Gayle Salamon has recently argued,

[I]f ones thinks sexual difference in other than bodily terms, the category can become unyoked from determinative bodily materiality in a way that makes it easier to resist the temptation to posit genital morphology as essentially determinative not only of sexual difference but also of the self.³⁵

Grossman's reliefs, for all their initial reliance on the sexed body, nevertheless treat genital imagery not as self-explanatory or deterministic but as something to be made and remade.

The source material Grossman used to make *Bride* was itself tied up with remaking and, in particular, with sex and sexual difference. She made this matrimonial work from an old boyfriend's boots, which she de-constructed and painted white to become the wedding-dress-like layers. She explained, "The joke was that I had this boyfriend who gave me his work boots."³⁶ The "woman-landscape" of *Bride* was made from a man, just as that man's boots were made from an animal. The logic of taking apart and remaking is crucial to Grossman's process in her relief assemblages, and it is significant that the only imagery to come through explicitly are renderings of sexual organs. Genitals would seem to be the least ambiguous of any body part, but Grossman plays with their frank display

by making them from other objects that themselves have been made from other bodies. Perhaps this is why she reminds us that it is not, simply, a vagina in *Bride* nor does that vaginal form delimit the multiplications of meaning in the works. The exposure of the genitals starts rather than stops the question of how gender operates in this intense work of remaking.

Grossman's subsequent relief sculptures further pursue bodily metaphors, though not exclusively with such explicit and uncompromising imagery. *Walrus* (1966), for instance, was called by Raven "an emblem of the female."³⁷ *Chiron* (1966) (p. 65) recapitulates the vaginal imagery found in *Landscape* and *Bride* in the form of a zipper struggling to contain a round form that could be interpreted as the cresting skull of a baby.

34 In Raven, *Grossman*, 122

35 Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 138. See further Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004). In the book in progress from which the present essay is drawn, I examine the ways in which key questions from transgender theory have earlier parallels in abstract sculpture's vexed invocations of the figure in this period. It is worth noting that the late 1960s was a watershed time in the public awareness of transformational genders and sexes. This is evidenced by the 1966 publication of Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York:

Julian Press, Inc., 1966); the founding of such institutions as the Stanford University Gender Dysphoria Program in 1988; and popular books such as Christine Jorgensen, *A Personal Autobiography* (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1967) and Gore Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 1968). On this history, see Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, California: Seal Press, 2008) and Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

36 Telephone conversation with the author, 23 October 2011.

37 Raven, "True Grit," 5.



Chiron, 1966, Leather, suede, cloth, metal, and wood on cardboard mounted on wood, 48½ × 36 × 6½ inches, Collection of the artist

(This element was made from a man's toiletry bag.)³⁸ Such readings, however, are never definitive. In Grossman's dense and layered compositions, discernible images emerge and recede. The mythological centaur Chiron, half-man and half-horse teacher of Achilles, again poses an ambivalent and far-from-fixed question about how gender can be found in the work and further reiterates Grossman's interest in hybrid beings.

The intense production of the relief assemblages on white backgrounds in 1965 had depleted much of her store of horse harnesses and related objects. In 1966, after the Guggenheim fellowship had run out, Grossman decided to return to illustrating children's books as a means to "give myself a Guggenheim" to keep her production up that year.³⁹ She took on a number of illustration projects at once, which arrested her production:

*This was a terrible thing for me to do because if there is one concentration of ego in my whole self it is in my work. My work is my worth to myself. I loved it. It was my life. Without it I would have been stepped on, blotted out completely. The illustrations took me about three or four months longer than I had imagined they would. Doing them changed me totally. From being all action and little reflection I was stuck with my legs chained to the table night and day. It changed my metabolism.*⁴⁰

Her illustration work was her primary occupation for nine months from 1966 to 1967, followed by another burst of activity in 1967 with the works *Ali Stoker*, *Yuma*, *Potawatami* (p. 49), and her *Slaves* reliefs. Ultimately, the experience of restriction caused by the need to stop her sculptural practice in order to do the illustrations-for-hire generated the imagery of restraint of the leather head sculpture.⁴¹

The relief sculptures completed in 1967 reflect the turmoil Grossman attributed to this point in her career. They are even more densely built and claustrophobic, with tortured and twisted forms made in black leather. They were, she explained, the "microcosms of the macro-figures" from the 1965 reliefs on white backgrounds.⁴² The most significant of the reliefs completed in 1967 is *Ali Stoker*, an intestinal tangle of black leather, tubes, and zippers. The metal and rubber tubes predominate, and they emerge out or move into zippered orifices and holes. Nemser said of this piece, "The black tubular piece is even more threatening than the women landscapes. I see them as something torn, as if someone's insides were being pulled apart."⁴³ Nemser's response was perspicacious. Unlike the previous works

made mainly from harnesses, scraps, and boots, *Ali Stoker* is made from motorcycle jackets that evoke the torso more directly. Grossman remarked that the construction of the jackets was highly influential on her, and she had to take the seams apart meticulously in order to reuse the scraps of material.⁴⁴ In this way, the use of the extant jackets (themselves made from the skins of animals) raised the bodily stakes of her work. These works, like all the relief assemblages, were about tearing apart before they were about putting it together.

Around 1966, Grossman managed to buy the mass of black leather motorcycle jackets that gave rise to *Ali Stoker* and the *Slaves*, and she also incorporated this material into the first of the head sculptures the following year. She recounted going to a Bowery loft where she had heard she could buy some leather cheap. She found there bales of old leather jackets, and the seller broke open a large bale for her to pick out the ones she wanted. Some were in fine shape but others were in tatters, she recalled, and she returned home with a duffle bag stuffed with them.⁴⁵

In *Ali Stoker* in particular, Grossman made the most of the black leather jacket. The black leather jacket was one of the most iconic items of fashion in the 1950s and 1960s, becoming

38 This was also mentioned in Sims, "Loud Whispers," 10.

39 In "Nancy Grossman 1973: An Interview," video produced by Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, 1973, Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She relates in detail in this interview the challenges she faced with publishing companies and reiterates the story told to Nemser.

40 Nemser, *Art Talk*, 341.

41 This is discussed at length in Raven, *Grossman*, 106-10.

42 Telephone conversation with the author, 23 October 2011.

43 Nemser, *Art Talk*, 340.

44 Telephone conversation with the author, 23 October 2011.

45 Telephone conversation with the author, 23 October 2011.



Ali Stocker, 1966–1967, Dyed leather, metal, and plastic on canvas mounted on wood, 37½ x 49½ x 11 inches, Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld



Ali Stocker, 1966–1967, Dyed leather, metal, and plastic on canvas mounted on wood, 37½ x 49½ x 11 inches, Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld

in that time a symbol of rebellion, danger, alternative masculinities, and homosexuality. After World War II, it was first associated with bikers through movies such as *The Wild One* (1954). In his extensive and affectionate history of the black leather jacket, Mick Farren remarked, "What Marlon Brando didn't know at the time was that his costume from the film would prove to be a codification of a youthful rebel uniform. It would remain fixed, with only the slightest mutation, for the next thirty years."⁴⁶ As late as 1974, television network censors refused to allow the producers of the sitcom *Happy Days* to dress the character Fonzie in a leather jacket for the initial episodes of the series. The American Broadcasting Company said it would make him look like a "hoodlum," and he was compelled to wear a windbreaker until the network could be convinced that the appearance of the leather jacket on television would not be misread as criminal.⁴⁷

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the black leather jacket had become popularized as a symbol of independence and anti-establishment values (most notably, around the ambivalent figure of James Dean).⁴⁸ In the 1960s, it also became increasingly seen as an identifying garment within the ever growing and more visible gay communities in cities such as New York. Such connotations were fueled by its notable presence in underground films such as Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1964) and Andy Warhol's *Blow Job* (1964).⁴⁹ In 1964, *Life* magazine clued its readers in to what this uniform meant, saying "These brawny young men in their leather caps, shirts, jackets and pants are practicing homosexuals."⁵⁰ Black leather did have a predominant role within the material culture of S&M communities (both gay and straight) by the mid-1960s, but the black leather jacket was not exclusively associated with them. Rather, it had become a somewhat generic symbol of youthful rebellion, outlaw bikers, and gay urbanites by the mid 1960s. William Carney, in his remarkable cross-over gay novel about the practice of S&M, *The Real Thing*, published in 1968, decried the cheap and plentiful black leather jackets that could be found anywhere in the city.

The main character warned his pupil, "I do not think much of the shop where [the leather jacket] is being made, however. It is a new establishment that caters to phonies and to phony tastes."⁵¹ It was exactly such a popularized demand for the black leather jacket that had produced the surplus from which Grossman was able to buy. Based on the details of *Ali Stoker*, that bale of black leather jackets contained items similar to (or cheaper versions of) those distributed made by the New York-based Schott Brothers, one of the major producers at the time.⁵²

Just as with her earlier relief assemblages, such source materials influenced the works Grossman made from them. "Everything I used had a connotative relationship," she recently remarked.⁵³ *Ali Stoker*, in particular, plays off the various modifications of masculinity that the black leather jacket had come to stand for. By 1967, it could be read as rebel, as gay, as outlaw, as poser, and as butch. That is, the black leather jacket signified "macho"—whether hyperbolic, tragic, idealized, inauthentic, homoerotic, or performed. Grossman made sure the jacket was still recognizable in the surface of *Ali Stoker*, leaving elements such as the sleeve on the far right or the zippers and buckles that populate the work.

That the highly-charged yet contested masculinity of the black leather jacket is key for *Ali Stoker* is most evident in the tentacular tubes that emerge from zippers and pierce holes, which cumulatively read as

46 Mick Farren, *The Black Leather Jacket* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985).

For further histories of the black leather jacket, see the exhaustive taxonomy in Rin Tanaka, *Motorcycle Jackets: A Century of Leather Design*, 2nd ed. (Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing, 2006) and Lily Phillips, "Blue Jeans, Black Leather Jackets, and a Sneer: The Iconography of the 1950s Biker and its Translation Abroad," *International Journal of Motorcycle Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 2005), online at http://ijms.nova.edu/March2005/LIMS_ArtelPhillips0305.html.

47 Garry Marshall oral history interview conducted by Karen Herman, 28 August 2000, part 5 of 6, *The Archive of American Television*, Museum of Broadcast Communications. Online at http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/happy-days_Fonzie%27s_jacket was even dark brown, not black.

48 See discussions in Michael DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom: James Dean, Mel Gibson, and Keanu Reeves* (Durham, NC:

Duke University Press, 2001) and Roy Grundmann, *Warhol's Blow Job* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

49 See Juan A. Suárez, *Bike Boys, Drag Queen, & Superstars: Avant-Garde, Mass Culture, and Gay Identities in the 1960s Underground Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996); Matthew Tinkorn, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Jack Hunter, ed., *Monochild: The Films of Kenneth Anger* (London: Creation Books, 2002); Grundmann, *Warhol's Blow Job*.

50 Paul Welch, "Homosexuality in America," *Life* (26 June 1964): 66.

51 William Carney, *The Real Thing [1968]* (New York: Masquerade Books, 1995), 25.

52 See Tanaka, *Motorcycle Jackets*, 120-31 and the related jackets made by Schott and distributed by Beck Motorcycle Distributors (p. 152).

53 Telephone conversation with the author, 2 December 2011.



ludicrously penile. This is most evident in the top center of the assemblage in which a thick tube seems to be coming out of a zippered pants pocket. It is not, however, made from leather pants but rather from a jacket that has been turned upside down, as indicated by the direction of the zipper mechanism. The waistlines of the jackets Grossman used regularly incorporated belt loops, belts, and buckles, and Grossman has slyly upended the jacket to make it look like pants, splayed open and exposed by the tubes that emerge from it. In this regard, *Ali Stoker* is comparable to *Bride*. Both play off the genders associated with clothing (the wedding dress, the black leather jacket) and set them against genital imagery, but both mock the supposed brash display they at first glance seem to promise. In neither is the display of genital imagery as forthright, unambiguous, or explanatory as it first appears. For instance, Lowery Stokes Sims described *Ali Stoker* as a work that

ooze[s] a tense, turgid sexuality, reinforced in the allusive shapes and contorted arrangements that make us realize we're not in Kansas anymore. Pipes, vacuum hoses, zippers and studs swirl around one another, connect with one another, penetrate one another, emit one another. It is an orgy of intercourse: raised mounds suggest breasts, concavities vaginas, and the hoses and pipes, of course, penises.⁵⁴

Sims accurately describes the process of looking at *Ali Stoker*. The more one examines the work and follows its serpentine penetrations, the more the seeming obviousness of its imagery turns in on itself and metamorphoses.

Grossman further connected this work explicitly with masculinity through the obscure title, naming it after a large, unruly German Shepherd she purchased to protect her after she moved to Eldridge Street. Named “Petz Ali Baba,” the dog proved to be a headache. “That miserable dog,” Grossman recalled, “he was mopping the floors with me. He was black, and he had these muscular paws. He was practically bursting. Not cute at all.”⁵⁵ For her, the dog became a competing presence in her studio, full of muscular energy. “Everything that was black and macho I named after that dog,” she said.⁵⁶ An earlier relief assemblage on white canvas, *Ali of Nostrand* (1965) also referred to the beast (and humorously gave it noticeable breast-like forms in the upper left). Returning to this motif a year later, Grossman amplified the macho image with “stoker,” referring to “stoking coal in the bottom of the world. Black coal. Intestinal.”⁵⁷

Combined with the loaded imagery of the black leather jacket, the churning and tentacular *Ali Stoker* was an image of restless masculine energy. She explained, “It’s a coal stoker, it’s Ali the dog, it’s energy.”⁵⁸ Mark Daniel Cohen once called it “an assembly of black leather, metal and rubber that is a fury of teeming coils, serpentine and torturous, and tortured in its windings—the writhing intestinal mass of a painful revolt.”⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the very excess of such imagery and the endless penile looping of the tubes ultimately tempers the slaying and contortions of these skins with absurdity. Even more so than *Bride*, *Ali Stoker* flouts the exposure of genital imagery as a means of deflating its power and questioning its relationship to gendered behaviors (and garments). Just as the frank exposure of *Bride* fails to limit gender, so too does *Ali Stoker* caricature “macho” in a work that penetrates itself. In so doing, the work relies upon the gay male connotations of the black leather jacket to show how exaggerated masculinity is also the receptive object of sexual desires. Nevertheless,

the work does not settle on this reading, but keeps gender and sexuality transforming through its abstract bodily topographies. Remember, Sims saw this same work’s “orgy of intercourse” suggesting breast and vaginas as well as penises.⁶⁰ Both ways of looking at *Ali Stoker*—as many sexes or the same sex penetrating itself—complicate and caricature the

54 Sims, “Loud Whispers,” 9.

55 Interview with the author, 30 October 2009.

56 Telephone conversation with the author, 23 October 2011.

57 Telephone conversation with the author, 23 October 2011.

58 Interview with the author, 30 October 2009.

59 Mark Daniel Cohen, “Review: True Grit,” *Review: The Critical State of Visual Art in New York* (15 April 2000): 20.

60 Sims, “Loud Whispers,” 9.

idea that the masculinity one might attribute either to the black leather jacket or to the penis is inviolable. As Catherine Lord has remarked, "Grossman understood earlier than most feminist theorists the performative aspects of masculinity."⁶¹

In Grossman's relief assemblages, every revelation that the exposure of the sexed body or the gendered garment would seem to promise is undercut, and genitals and genders are made to appear insufficient, exaggerated, unrooted, or ludicrous. "There's always something funny about the assemblages. Something hilariously funny," Grossman asserted.⁶² The reliefs are still tortured, tangled, and dark, but their seriousness has been tempered by absurdity. Like black humor, they incite discomfort and laughter at the same time.

The practice Grossman used to engage with abstraction—that of assemblage—increasingly brought her back to bodily imagery. The items she used, from the horse harnesses to the boots to the clichéd leather jackets, all pointed to the bodies they once clothed and held. In turn, her material of leather, itself, allegorized this process of de-constructing one body to make another that would play out in her works. During this phase of her work, bodies became visible through their parts, but these parts were opportunities for play and humor amidst the grave imagery of sex and gender. She often referred to the works that came after *Ali Stoker*, the all-black leather *Slaves* (1967), as "torsos." When she made her figurative return and started making her head sculptures in 1968, she asserted that she was "reclaiming the body."⁶³ Not without a touch of humor, her reclaiming of the body left it behind to focus on the head. Moving from the genitals to the head was the next step in taking the body not as a biological given, but as something that could be remade and re-inhabited. She told Nemser,

*The figure, male or female, is an erect phallus since it is walking upright on the earth Its head, which is equivalent to the head of the phallus, is its most aggressive part. After all, your head which is the seat of your hang-ups is also your most powerful organ, not your penis or your vagina. I know male artists experience making art in a so-called very female way. It is not about getting a hard-on. The whole concept of inspiration is about being filled. Actually in this act of art-making we are really bisexual and it's too bad the word is so distorted and politicized at this point. People feel so fugitive about saying it and will insist everything is black and white while the world is greying all around them.*⁶⁴

In her subsequent work, Grossman would pursue these grey areas. Her consistent demand that we see the leather heads as self-portraits has just that unsettling effect. The same thing happens with the reliefs. The unabashed and gleeful toying with genitalia casts it as *just* parts that explain little. These detached genital forms float amongst tangles made from the skins of animals that were, themselves, remade as bodily containers (garments, harnesses, boots) before being de-constructed and re-constructed by Grossman. In this process, from cow to human garment to leather scraps to the assembled rendering of a vagina or a penis, Grossman does nothing less than ask us to see the body as raw material, to be remade. Hers is a preposterous account of the body that, in all its earnestness and struggle, ultimately questions sexual difference as determining who we are or can become.

61 Catherine Lord, "Their Memory is Playing Tricks on Her: Notes Toward a Calligraphy of Rage," in *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Cornelius Butler (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 446. Lord is here referring not just to Grossman's post-1968 leather heads but also to the "butch sculptures of industrial jetsam [made] during the 1960s."

62 Interview with the author, 30 October 2009.

63 Quoted in Corin Robins, "Nancy Grossman," *Arts Magazine* 51, no. 4 (1976): 12.

64 Nemser, *Art Talk*, 345.



Studio view, Eldridge Street, New York, 1968

Nancy Grossman

Tough Life Diary

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