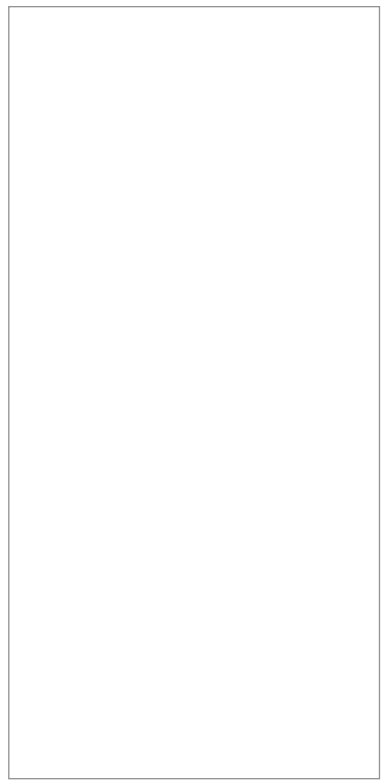
NANCY GRAVES

The Shining, Elusive Element

October 14–November 12, 2005

Essay by Judith E. Stein



Nancy Graves: *The Shining, Elusive Element*

Nancy Graves took art too seriously not to have fun with it. Art historian Joan Marter linked the sculptor's comedic sense to Alexander Calder's "humorous response to the forms of nature." Robert Hughes described her art as "fastidious, sweetly funny, and not too bothered with purity." Hers was a layered and delightfully impure sense of humor. Nancy Graves was that consummate tight rope walker who not only performed with great skill but could clown sixty feet up in the air. Today, a decade after her untimely death, her sassy balancing acts retain their power to impress, dazzle and delight with the freshness of her eye.

Looping (1985) is a case in point. What is funny about it? For starters there are the malleable objects made hard, the snaking lengths of rope at the base, the unfurled fan, the unruly xylophone of a string of sardines. Then there are the incongruities and the unexpectedness of part-to-part. The central object in *Looping* is a plastic platter covered by a paper doily. Inspired by a *New York Times* recipe photo, Graves arranged a sampling of Korean food market finds on a tray and cast them all directly in bronze. For Linda Cathcart, these table-top offerings "evoke every classical still life ever made and come to rest in modernism." Art history was the deck of cards Nancy Graves had hidden up her sleeve, and she dealt them into her hand as needed. In addition to referencing Cubism's tilted planes, *Looping*'s color-drizzled midsection brings to mind those wonderfully unappetizing displays that European artist Daniel Spoerri immortalized by gluing down dishware and food leavings he then mounted on walls beginning in the 1960s.

There are other reasons why this sculpture is amusing, even hilarious. Diverting figurative ghosts haunt many of Graves' assemblages. Once we discharge the duty of formal analysis, the statuesque *Looping* becomes a spot-on portrayal of a wobbly dame supinating in high heels. Part broad-shouldered contessa, part galumphy cigarette girl, this figural fantasy simultaneously flirts and proffers an array of expressionistically painted morsels. Look again and *Looping* is a chair not meant for sitting, like the impossibly tipped seats that Cezanne liked to paint.

Still life images are about things, things that we use or like to see. Caravaggio gave a vital boost to the venerable genre created by the ancients; the

Dutch expanded the repertoire of imagery, highlighting fancy tulips, rare fruit and sumptuous possessions. At the time, everyone understood the inherent meaning: "Life is fleeting," the costly things whispered; "worldly goods are vanities."

The double-edged message embedded in a still life—how beautiful things are, and how short the time we have to enjoy them—was metaphorically noted by Edna St. Vincent Millay. Admonished that she hastened her candle's demise by burning it at both ends, the poet fell back on an aesthetic response: "But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends, It gives a lovely light!" Nancy Graves' sculptures share common ground with Millay's raw material, something that was exquisite but short-lived; and with her succinct poem, an artful transformation of a fleeting experience into an enduring work of art.

The artist heroine of Willa Cather's great novel, *The Song of the Lark* expressed a related epiphany about art and life. As she stood in an Arizona canyon contemplating ceramic shards and the vanished Indian potters who had made them, she thought: "What was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself - life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?"

Nancy Graves made sculpture in the moment, without designing it in advance. She gathered around her things that locked in the "shining, elusive element" of life and either used them as themselves or made casts of them. To create some of these building blocks she assumed the prerogatives of the Hindu god Shiva who was both a destroyer and a creator. Graves was a past-master of the technique of direct casting in which a given object, be it animal, vegetable or mineral, burns away when molten metal moves in to take its shape.

She found her components in a variety of ways. She might negotiate with antique dealers for quantities of odd tools and goods, or go shopping. At different points in their careers, Graves and her Yale classmate, the painter Janet Fish, independently discovered the treasures to be had in New York's Chinatown. Expeditions yielded a host of unfamiliar objects and exotic fruits and vegetables. Fish used her gaudily colored findings as props for her still life paintings and watercolors. Graves transmuted her ephemeral eatables into bronze twins which she would assemble into graceful or giddy combinations and then dress in the luscious hues of the rainbow, and not necessarily in that harmonic order.

In many ways, Graves' 1980s sculptures were still lifes. Occasionally she would call attention to this aspect of their identity by her choice of title. In *Grande Nature Morte* she chose the French term meaning "large still life." This grandly-scaled work has the vivid presence and the horizontality of a table-top arrangement of things. She composed it in part by drawing in space with stainless steel

components. These linear shapes then joined up with a variety of incongruous casts, for example a Monstera or Split Leaf Philodendron leaf. (Graves loved the lobed and perforated shape of these colossally-sized tropical plants and populated the front of her studio with a jungle-like thicket of potted specimens.) But even in this sculpture named "still life," there is a phantom of a grazing, four-legged animal that lifts its head to sniff the air.

Mete-Point-Balance-Bound (1986) is similarly inhabited by the spirit of a creature, in this case a metamorphosed fish emerging from the primordial ooze. Or does the bronze snowshoe base press up on ball-footed legs like a yogi preparing for cobra position? To speak of these funny, figurative readings is not to cancel out the work's authority in formalist terms. *Mete-Point-Balance-Bound* is like a three-dimensional diagram with delicately balanced verticals, horizontals and curves. Graves was equally at ease using both abstract and recognizable shapes, for example pretzels.

Characteristic of this and other works of the decade are her clever puns with form. Here she has used casts of small ferns, partially unfurled, which cling to the bamboo rod like so many inch worms. These vegetable personages mimic the shape of the moveable pretzels which in turn resemble an assortment of brightly colored toys often found strung across the front of baby seats to amuse and educate.

Wassily Kandinsky wrote that "Cézanne made a living thing out of a teacup, or rather in a teacup he realized the existence of something alive. He raised still life to such a point that it ceased to be inanimate." Graves' configurations of cast and actual objects participate in this great modernist tradition. Unlike Cezanne, she was interested in the original textures of objects, which direct casting preserves. But she was indifferent to the intended uses and contexts of things. A woman with a hurricane force, visual intelligence, she mixed and matched to create her own order, her own meanings.

In reviewing her work for *Art in America* in 1991 I described Nancy Graves as "an artist with a promiscuous eye for both natural and man-made forms. Since 1978, her cast, fabricated and welded assemblies have been made of what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins would have recognized as "all things counter, original, spare, strange;/ Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)."

In *Antenal (*1986) she brought together an actual brass faucet and casts of an old fashioned boot jack, an elbow section of a fluted gutter, a perforated wooden cooking spoon, gourds, pods and a bunch of chubby bananas. Color in the delicately linear *Orthoarc (*1987) is more subdued because it incorporates more actual objects which retain their original coloration. These include a set of elegantly long tongs, a vintage wastepaper basket and a filigreed metal bracket. The ensemble, with

its spiny dispersion of heliconia or lobster claw plant, radiates that sweet humor to which Robert Hughes alluded. It even evokes the linear grace and gentle fun of Paul Klee's *Twittering Machine*.

*Trebuchet (*1984) has the natural poise of a bird on stilts, with a snaking spine of multi-colored, Styrofoam packing popcorn and a sardine tail. Graves pressed into service a spray of heliconia where a beak might be. The one-word title of *Trebuchet* means a medieval military engine for hurling missiles such as rocks. The way Graves designed and balanced *Trebuchet*'s various segments conveys the essence of an ingenious mechanical contraption based on counterweights.

Don Quixote's lance and Huck Finn's fishing pole were likely sources for the daintily attenuated proboscis in *Jato (Pendula Series)* 1985. What an eye Graves had for visual puns! She rhymed the coils of a thick, nautical rope with the natural spiraling on a stem of brussel sprouts; she created a 'foot' from a hand of bananas; and counter balanced the spiraled logic of the vegetables with the random, organic curves of a vine. This winsome sculpture even wears a hair ribbon in the form of a petrified squiggle of cord.

A clever visual punster, Graves was also a skilled wordsmith. She scouted out real if exotic terms such as *trebuchet*, and also cobbled together her own. If we pronounce the first syllable of *Jato* to rhyme with the French article *la*, then the word becomes a homonym for the great fresco painter Giotto; it also rhymes with *gato*, Spanish for cat. *Antenal* connotes the period before birth; spelled as *antennal* it describes an antenna shape as well as part of the anatomy of the brain. *Drabacus* folds into itself the abacus she actually included in the sculpture. As for the shapely invention *Orthoarc*, the prefix means "straight, upright, right," and arc of course is rounded.

Back when she was at Yale in the early sixties, she and her schoolmates made their way through a variety of influences, as students do when they search for their own authentic voice. Abstract expressionism was one such presence at Yale, as was Matisse. What appealed to Graves at that time were the relationship of one form to another in Matisse's compositions, as well as his circular shapes, simplified verticals and soft contours.

Her grad school paintings emulated Matisse, as did those she made in France after graduation, when she received a Fulbright to seek out his work in Paris. During the years she lived in Europe, her painting activity tapered off and she evolved into a sculptor. The influence of Matisse receded while she explored a variety of media in the late sixties and seventies. Like a genie in a lantern awaiting a summons, the sensuous colorist in her emerged in the eighties, when color became such an important characteristic of her art practice.

Prismatic exuberance and sensitivity to formal

relationships were two aspects of the French painter's legacy for Graves; a feeling for pattern and the joys of still life images were two more. Not bad for a New Englander who was a direct descendent of the puritan Cotton Mather. In a poem about a Matisse floral still life, Robert Creeley wrote:

Here -- look in to look out,
See what all that was about,
Find color's counterpoint,
Line holding the whole inside.

His poetic directions for looking seem equally valid for experiencing a sculpture by Nancy Graves.

To Peter Schjeldahl, "Humor is more than an element of Western modern sculpture. It is a condition." He had in mind the best modern sculpture: "arch like Brancusi, sardonic like Duchamp, black-humorous like Giacometti, antic like David Smith." These are the masters who nourished Graves' sensibility as a sculptor. She took their gifts and built on them, creating a body of work that is unique, girlie, and audacious. And funny.

—Judith E. Stein

Judith E. Stein is a Philadelphia-based independent curator and critic. A recipient of a Pew Fellowship for her writings on art, she is a former curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. She is the author of The Best of the Barnes, on the art in the Barnes Foundation, forthcoming from Running Press in Fall, 2006. Her current project is a biography of the late New York art dealer, Richard Bellamy.