Nancy GRAVES

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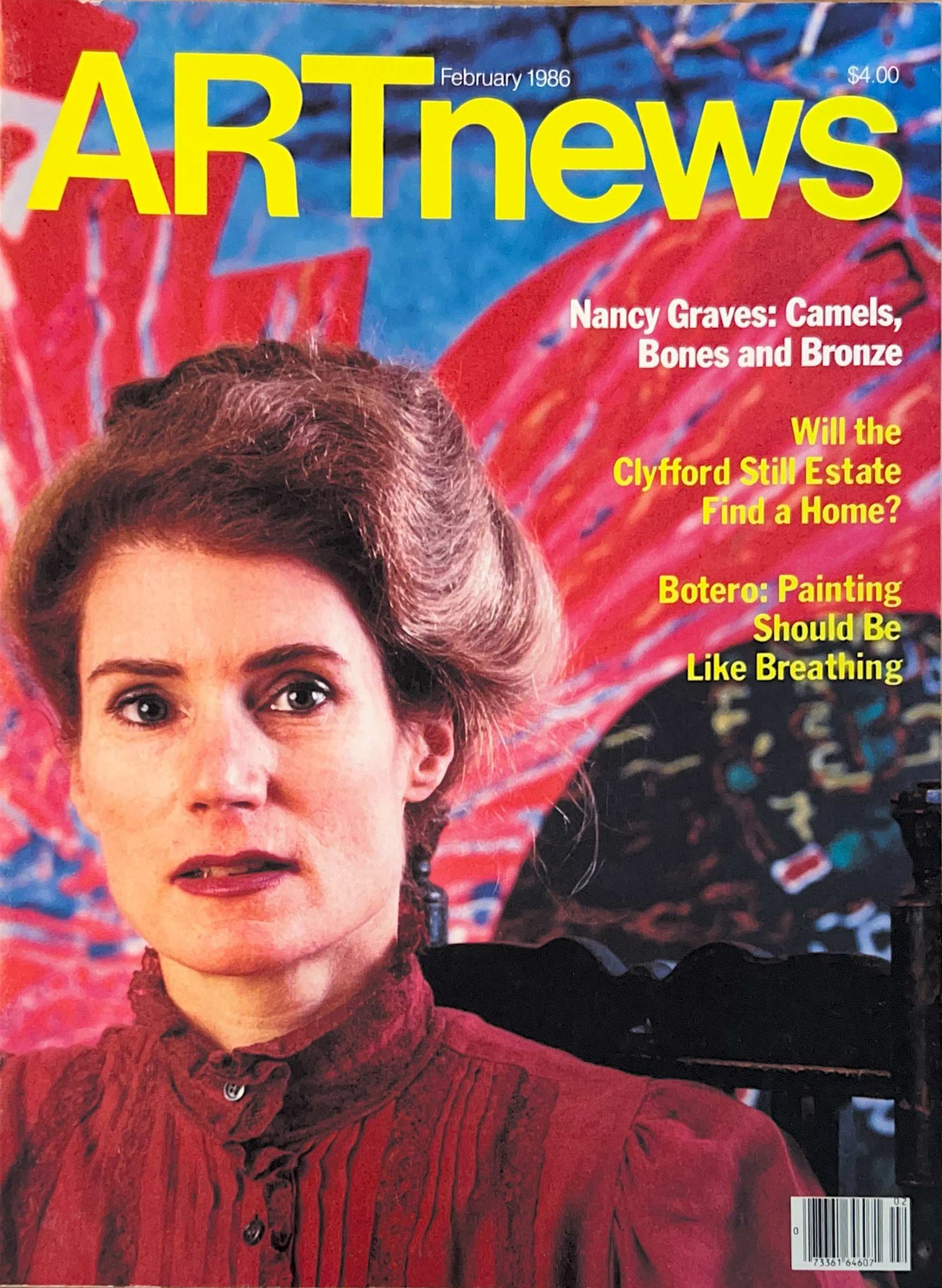

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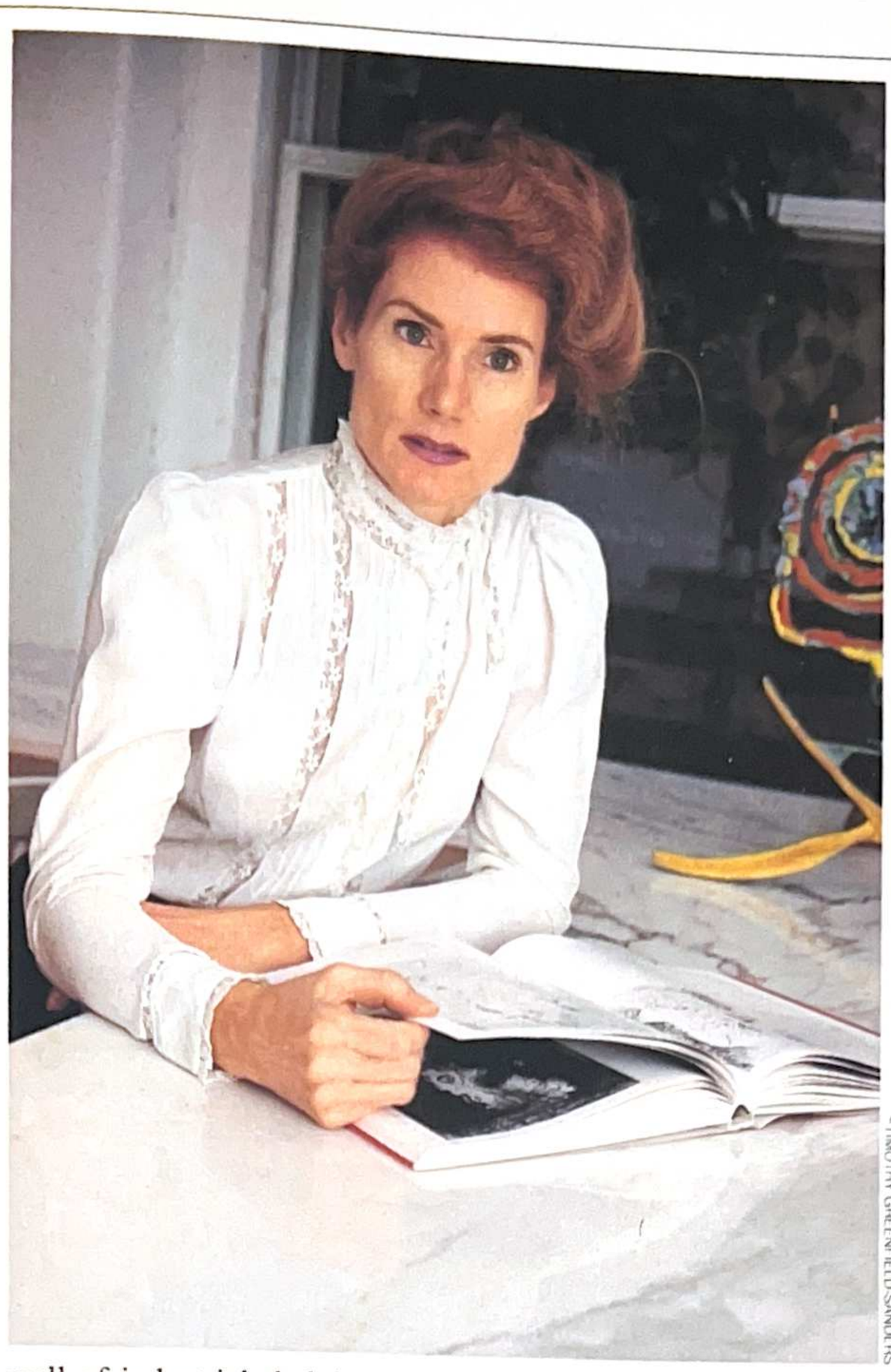
NANCY GRAVES' NEW AGE OF BRONZE

BY AVIS BERMAN

Graves' sculptures, such as ***Le Sourire****, 1985, tend to be asymmetrical and aerial, with filaments and tendrils creeping horizontally into the air.*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY M. KNOEDLER & CO.

Her brightly painted assemblages of found objects and specimens of plant and marine life cast directly into bronze occupy a unique place in contemporary sculpture



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ON THE FIRST floor of Tallix Foundry in Peekskill, New York, Dick Polich travels in and out of a thicket of sculpture. "This way to Nancy's room," he says, skirting a prone caryatid of allegorical import and a seated figure of Chief Justice John Marshall. Beyond some bronze casts by Isamu Noguchi and Reuben Nakian and a titanium relief by Frank Stella lies his destination. Reaching a wall of industrial shelving, he points out bronzed pretzels, crayfish, pig intestines, drain spouts, wrenches, pleated lampshades, warty gourds, lotus pods, ginger roots, scissors, jackfruit, bulbs of fennel and a Shaker rake. Each item is preserved in minute detail, and some have been covered with brightly colored enamel. From this stockpile come the building blocks of Nancy Graves' sculptures; she adds to the inventory on nearly every trip she makes to the foundry. "Most of the time Nancy arrives loaded down with two shopping bags full of stuff for us to cast," a worker says. "You never know what she's going to bring in next."

Polich is the president of Tallix, a busy inferno of sculptural activity located at a bend in the Hudson River, where many prominent American artists have their work cast in metal. The foundry is known for its innovative approach to materials and patinas, and this readiness to experiment not only attracted Graves but helped trigger a dazzling new phase in her art. For the past eight years she has cast found objects and specimens of plant and marine life directly into bronze, combined the diverse items on site by welding and then patinated, painted or enameled the surfaces with a rich variety of colors. The resulting works—floating and often whimsical assemblages plucked from an exotic Constructivist garden—occupy a unique place in contemporary sculpture. Picasso bronzed the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life and painted them in bold colors, and Julio González and David Smith pioneered in welded open-form sculpture. Their discoveries inform hers, as does the work of Alexander Calder and Alberto Giacometti. Yet she has extended as well as synthesized their ideas through her materials, techniques and elaborate organic conceits. Graves' spontaneous, one-of-a-kind fabrications prohibit preparatory models and multiple editions. Their style is slyly baroque: the sculptures fuse realism, spatial illusion and ornament and blur the boundaries between painting and sculpture to arrive at a totality.

Whereas most sculptors go to Tallix with a finished work of art that needs to be translated into a permanent form, Graves goes with nothing but her raw materials—discards from the streets and trophies from the flower district, Chinatown and the hardware store—and expects to use the foundry as an adjunct studio. Hence she needs her own work space and assistance from the various artisans. She is there about twice a week. Commuting from her loft in SoHo, she gets up at 6 A.M., takes an early train, works all day and leaves in the late afternoon.

Graves' enormous loft is a cavern of quietness where she paints and reconsiders sculptures in progress. She cultivates a long row of green plants in the entranceway, but most of the wall and floor space is given over to a sizable collection of her own work of the last ten years. By contrast the din at Tallix, with welders, polishers and mixers all pounding away at once, is ferocious, but Graves thrives in this environment, too. Sheathed in baggy pants and a sweatshirt and protected by safety glasses and earplugs, she is inseparable from the soldering and reinforcing that bring her art into being.

"There is a kind of organized chaos around here," Polich says, "and Nancy contributes to that chaos because when she's here everybody's working on her stuff. But it's a confident kind of chaos, too—you have to have confidence in yourself to work out in the open with everyone else. And since Nancy has no preconceptions about what she's going to do, everyone wants to see what will happen. Her drive really fires us up."

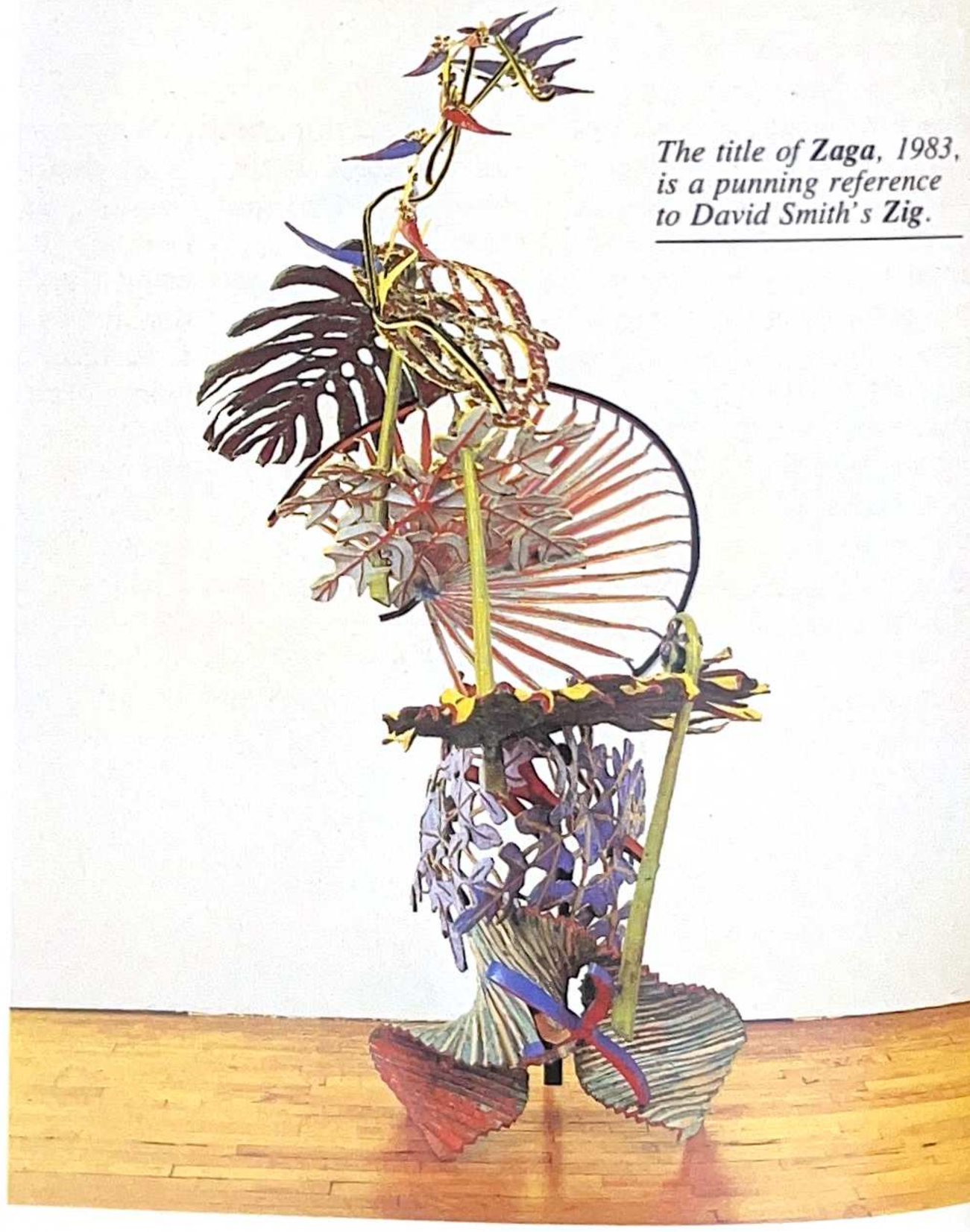
With the attachment of aluminum reliefs to the canvases, such as ***Footscray****, 1985, painting and sculpture seem to be merging.*

On a breezy afternoon in early September, Graves and a workman are trying out a new piece of equipment. While creating the sets and costumes for *Lateral Pass*, a dance choreographed by Trisha Brown and performed by her company in Minneapolis and New York in 1985, Graves was told by a scenic designer about a machine called the Hossfeld Bender. Instead of having to weld small pieces of aluminum together for the lavish curves she desires, Graves, with the help of the bender, can shape aluminum rods into loops and circles by hand. The machine eliminates a costly operation and introduces an extra measure of improvisation into the composing process. As she pulls the lever and wrenches the rod into several arcs, Graves says, "We're not just drawing in space, we're drawing in planes. You don't have to think in advance. You see and do."

This active and highly imaginative mode of seeing has characterized Graves' work since she first made her mark on the New York art scene in 1968. Protean and prolific, she has worked as a sculptor, painter, printmaker, film producer and stage designer. "Nancy Graves is a verb!" says Brown. "That's the first thing to say about her. She's as fast as a whip and she's got ten balls in the air at any given time." Not content with exploring art history for her sources, Graves has annexed unfamiliar images from the natural and social sciences and redefined them as esthetically significant. Her references to the physical world are never pedagogical; she incorporates findings from anatomy, botany, meteorology, anthropology and ethnology, often with an unimpeachable documentary accuracy, but the researcher does not lose sight of the artist. The writer Judith Goldman, a close friend, says, "All kinds of 'isms' come together in Nancy's work—modernism, classicism, expressionism, Fauvism, primitivism—but it's not a self-conscious amalgam of smartness. She has a broad range of interests and silently follows them to a logical conclusion."

Avis Berman is a free-lance writer and critic.

Graves came to prominence when Pop, Minimal and Conceptual art were preeminent. Her name was occasionally linked with those movements, but she fitted into none of them. E. A. Carmean, former curator of 20th-century art at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and now director of the Fort Worth Art Museum, is organizing a retrospective of Graves' sculpture that will open in the spring of 1987. He chose Graves, he says, "because she is one of the most creative people working today. Nancy keeps expanding, but it's always in a different direction. For ex-



The title of ***Zaga****, 1983, is a punning reference to David Smith's* ***Zig****.*

ample, the new sculpture moves, and each one has eight or nine configurations. Now she's on a real hot streak. The most recent pieces have shown an incredible power of invention.'' The museum is also compiling a comprehensive catalogue of the sculpture, a project destined for incompleteness because, as Carmean jestingly complains, ''every time she goes up to Tallix, we have to add four pages.'' (His first words, after being informed of the Hossfeld Bender and its potential for boosting Graves' productivity, were ''Lord help us!'') In April a selection of Graves' paintings, watercolors and sculpture will be shown at Vassar College Art Gallery in Poughkeepsie, New York; the school is her alma mater.

THE UNION OF SCIENCE, ART, INDUSTRIOUSness and intellectual rigor can be traced to Graves' childhood and intensely New England background. She is a direct descendant of Cotton Mather, and as she said in an interview for the Archives of American Art, ''There's a strong ministerial line in the Graves family, which I am very much a part of by my own personality.'' (Many of the details reported here about Graves' early life are drawn from the Archives interview.) She was born on December 23, 1940, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Her father was assistant to the director of the Berkshire Museum, an institution where exhibits dealing with art, history and science were presented side by side. As a girl, Graves was in and out of the museum. She observed the technicians making dioramas and models of animals and the curators classifying minerals, shells, furniture and paintings. A permanent appreciation of craft was born.

By the time she was 12, Graves wanted to be an artist. In what she described as ''almost van Eyckian detail,'' she drew and painted with an exactitude unusual in a child. She also developed a strong drive to excel in whatever she tried. She played the piano and read everything from biographies of George Washington Carver to the Nancy Drew mysteries. ''I was good at school,'' Graves recalls. ''I always had all A's.''

After high school Graves entered Vassar, where she majored in English, although she also studied painting and drawing. The art courses were not as stimulating as she had hoped, and she disagreed with what she calls the ''passive'' point of view that students were expected to adopt in their interpretation of art, fearing it would adulterate her own responses. The instructors nonetheless recognized her serious intentions and encouraged her.

Graves describes herself as ''very much on hold'' at Vassar, but on the recommendation of a teacher there, she won a scholarship to Yale Summer School of Music and Art in Norfolk, Connecticut. This was her first taste of what a sophisticated education in the fine arts could be, and she excelled. Graves' performance at Norfolk opened the door in 1962 to Yale's prestigious School of Art and Architecture, where she earned B.F.A. and M.F.A. degrees.

Under the direction of Josef Albers and then Jack Tworkov, the school had a legendary reputation as a hatchery for young talent. Those applicants who survived the exhaustive scrutiny of a faculty with a record for singling out promising students were, in art historian Irving Sandler's words, ''seriously convinced that Yale was a special place whose graduates, namely they, would be *the* artists of the next generation.'' Getting a jump on New York, as Graves told the Archives, ''was the object of going to Yale. You'd get a certain number of skills and then you'd run to New York and whip out those skills and then in six months you'd be in a gallery and then everything was set from there.''

Graves graduated in 1964, and her class as well as that of 1963 included students who were so good that their naive optimism was justified. Among her classmates were Brice Marden, Rackstraw Downes, Chuck Close, Janet Fish, Stephen Posen, Robert Mangold and Richard Serra. Graves was taught by Tworkov, Alex Katz, William Bailey and Neil Welliver. In this competitive milieu, the critiques of work were often brutal, but the students became a closely knit group, and Graves reveled in the give-and-take.

''There were eight men to every woman, which I thought was wonderful [after Vassar],'' Graves says. ''But teaching assistantships were reserved for men at that time. I was given a separate studio with a whole floor to myself in a building separate from the new art and architecture building. We were a strong group of students who demanded a lot of each other. What topped it off was the visiting artists who felt free to say whatever came into their heads. It was good exposure to the current techniques and ideas in art. Edwin Dickinson, Philip Guston, Esteban Vicente and Isabel Bishop visited. Rauschenberg came, and I remember Frank Stella coming and saying, 'There is no painting here. This is Matisse. . . .' Putting down everyone in the school, which was exactly what we needed.''

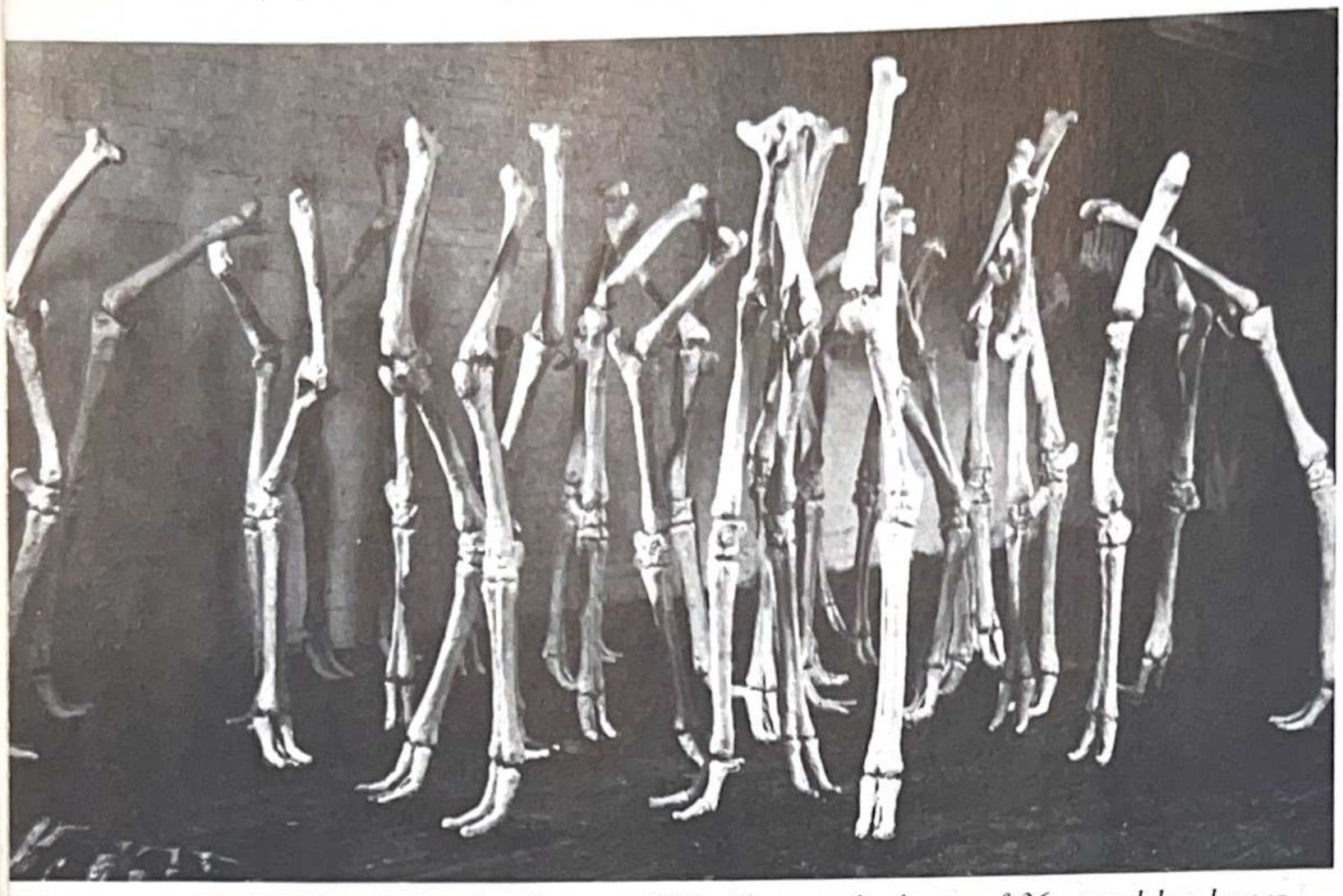
After graduation Graves received a Fulbright-Hayes grant and went to Paris. Richard Serra joined her there, and they were married in the summer of 1965. She became friendly with other expatriate Americans, including Philip Glass, Joanne Akalaitis and Joan Mitchell. At that point Graves was painting in a manner emulating Matisse and Derain and making drawings from Brancusi's sculpture. But she was uneasy about her work; its vocabulary seemed completely borrowed, with too little contributed of her own.

In 1966 Graves and Serra moved to Florence. She tried to paint again, but unsuccessfully. Amid the glories of the Italian Renaissance, she was desperate to shed the burden of indebtedness to art history. She started visiting the local zoo and the natural-history museum. In the museum Graves came upon the work of Clemente Susini, an 18th-century anatomist who made uncannily realistic life-size wax models of human bodies and human and animal organs and systems. Graves was fascinated by their surreal and romantic overtones. ''Bodies of women splayed at the breast, lying on pink satin, with pink bows on their natural hair,'' she recalls. The displays also stirred her memories of the Berkshire Museum, where art and science were not treated as polarities. Graves took pictures, started collecting animal skins and learned about carpentry. A host of new questions had to be asked: How to tackle volume, mass, three-dimensionality? How to deal with structural support, with the central fact of the armature? Graves, who was trained as a painter and believed she would remain one exclusively, had had no previous impulse to sculpt. At Vassar modeling and carving were taught, but they didn't interest her. ''I don't like labor and found those techniques boring,'' she says.

GRAVES' FIRST EFFORTS CONSISTED OF SMALL stuffed animals, which were later followed by assemblages of animals juxtaposed with found objects. Most of them were dumped into the Arno. But they were a necessary prologue to building nearly a dozen life-size replicas of Bactrian (two-humped) camels, which were successively

discarded until she got the structure she wanted. Graves recognized them as pivotal: "I knew after I had made them that this would be the first step of a long linear development."

The camels were chosen for formal and thematic reasons. "They had a scale and dimension that permitted what I call drawing," says Graves. "By 'drawing,' I mean the way an artist moves his hand, the way one defines space and form and articulates a structure. And I saw that the shape could be a vehicle for sculpture." The camel was also unsullied by associations with Western culture. "I was trying to open doors to areas not considered for art," she says.



***Variability of Similar Forms**, 1970, is a stately dance of 36 camel leg bones.*

For Graves, the camels were a personal symbol of her resolve to make art out of anything as well as a metaphor for the collision between the recalcitrant mysteries of ancient civilization and an up-to-the-minute society punch-drunk with information. Part of that resolve showed itself in Graves' meticulous rendering of surface detail, texture and proportion, although the camels were not based on actual models. They were fabricated of materials such as polyurethane, latex, wood, steel, plaster and painted skins that could produce a natural appearance. And although the expression and bearing of the camels remained inscrutable, their form bore constant evidence of the artist's hand. In the course of making her camels, Graves first began to solve the problem of bridging abstraction and representation by basing her art on nature. As she said in 1973, "One of the reasons I have chosen specific images is that it leaves me freer to investigate the boundaries of art making. By limiting my choice of content, it frees me to explore and invent."

Graves returned to New York in 1966. The camels were too cumbersome to make the trip, so she destroyed them. She built several more, which were displayed at the Graham Gallery in 1968. Marcia Tucker and James Monte, then curators at the Whitney Museum of American Art, saw them and offered Graves a solo exhibition for 1969. In Graves' judgment, the camels on view at the gallery were not of museum quality, so she destroyed them and made three new ones, this time in dynamic poses simulating motion.

Each new set of camels reflected a growing skill in fabricating an armature. The camels made in Italy were built on table legs and market baskets; by 1969 the structures were feats of engineering designed for portability: lightweight wood and steel beams that could be taken apart, reassembled and covered with layers of burlap and fur that could be removed and refastened with equal ease. Critical reaction to the animals was confused. Several writers assumed they were a joke and categorized Graves, who had acknowledged a debt to Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures, as an auxiliary of Pop. *Time* wondered if "she were kidding the highbrows who insist that great art must be abstract." Nevertheless, the camels were immediately acquired by the National Gallery of Canada, which also went on to buy Graves' breathtaking *Variability and Repetition of Variable Forms* (1971) soon after it was completed. As a result of her exposure, German collector Peter Ludwig commissioned two camels. During this time she and Serra separated; they were divorced in 1970.

Just as replicating cadavers had beckoned Susini into new and complex paths, the camels served as a point of departure for Graves' powers of synthesis and invention, leading her to paleontology, anthropology, archeology and osteology. "I'm not an expert in science," she says. "I use research to the point where I can depart from it. I need to learn what I can permute." However, that research is thorough. As critic Lucy Lippard wrote, "Unlike most artists, [Graves] does not skim the surface of another field to take the visual cream but demands of herself a fundamental understanding before she begins to interpret esthetically."

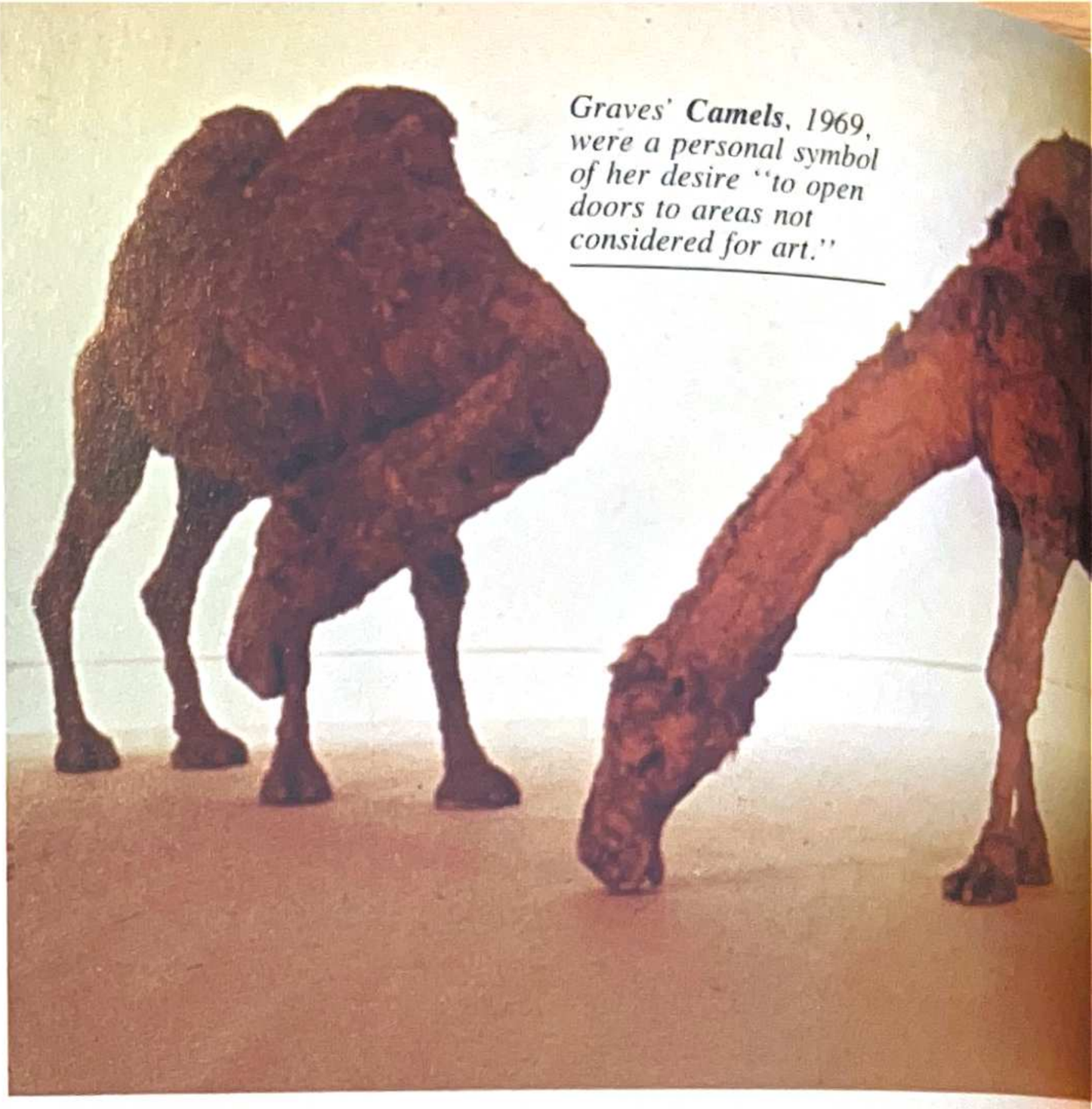
Studying the structure, habits and movements of camels spawned three short films on the subject, which took Graves to Morocco in 1970. A photograph of her on location in North Africa is so evocative that it could almost be mistaken for one taken in 1890. She is directing a horde of cameras, camels, guides and technicians. The scene seems torn from an album belonging to an intrepid late Victorian polymath, one of those inquisitive scholar-amateurs who tramped unhesitatingly to the ends of the earth, bearing any hardship, to collect evidence for their investigations.

Graves does have a touch of the old-fashioned about her. She is scrupulous about answering letters, returning telephone calls, remembering birthdays and acknowledging kindnesses. "Nancy is a lady" was the identical and unsolicited comment three people made when describing her. Standing a very straight 5 feet 8 inches, with clear blue eyes and burnished strawberry-blond hair that she pulls into a crown of intricate twists, in either a Gibson Girl style or a sideswept coiffure, Graves resembles a Henry James heroine. Perhaps the best physical analogy is to her own art: like her sculptures, Graves looks delicate, almost fragile; internally she is strong.

UNLIKE TAXIDERMISTS, WHO WORK FROM THE skin inward in their reproductions, Graves started from the internal supports and worked outward. As she progressed, she saw the sense of studying fossils, skeletons and bones and realized that it was no longer necessary to make entire animals. This launched the arresting group of works simulating skeletons, bone fragments and fossils, in which subject and form expressed each other in perfect

symmetry. By paring to the essentials of bones and joints, Graves could explore dichotomies of motion and stasis, serial repetition and variability, interiors and exteriors, parts and wholes and organic forms fashioned from inorganic materials.

One such resolution of formal concerns can be seen in *Variability of Similar Forms* (1970), a stately dance of 36 camel leg bones that seem identical at first glance but vary minutely in position and shape. They seem to move yet compel the viewer to move about in order to see them. But bones, with their connotations of artifact and remnant of what has gone before and what has been lost, are able to carry not only the load of the creature they once supported but an enormous symbolic weight as well. Bones are primal, prehistoric, elemental, disturbing—and mysterious. Graves capitalized on their potency by presenting them in terms of disinterment. *Obviation of Similar Forms* and *Fossils Incorrectly Located* (both 1970), in which bones are strewn prodigally on the floor as if it were an archeological field, elicit a colossal sense of intrusion and violation. How, one is prompted to ask, did these remains get here? How did these animals meet their end? Why are they heaped together in an arrangement approximating a burial ground?



*Graves' **Camels**, 1969, were a personal symbol of her desire "to open doors to areas not considered for art."*

While researching paleontology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Graves visited the Hall of the Northwest Coast Indians. She was moved by what she saw and also liked the idea of again using science as a tool for plumbing the irrational. Coincidentally in the summer of 1970 she was invited to work in the Neue Galerie in Aachen, West Germany. In a 45-day explosion of creativity, Graves made seven interrelated sculptures based on shamanism and connected rituals of Pacific Northwest tribes. The schedule she maintained and the rapidity of execution surprise her when she reflects on them. "Beginning that summer, I was making films in Morocco, I was showing in New York and Canada, I was teaching and making *Variability* in San Francisco, and I was working on an exhibition in Germany," Graves says. "*Shaman* was made in 90-degree heat during July, August and September in my loft on Mulberry Street. I was literally covered with gallons of latex while making the piece and developed a sore throat from breathing gallons and gallons of the ammonia in the liquid. I was traveling roughly every two weeks to meet installation deadlines in different places."

The floor pieces of bones constituted a revelatory advance for Graves. She had not merely assimilated but felt the magic of ritual, and in the grace and suppleness of the free-flowing forms she mated the anthropological and the esthetic. Meaning was as densely layered as the materials, textures and processes: each was a steel-rod totem on which Graves draped, wrapped and hung her simulations of fur, skin, shells, cloth, fetishes and talismans. She was tackling problems of joining, linearity, transparency, opacity, mass, dispersal and gravity, yet constantly keeping in mind the powerful subject of spirits irradiating matter. The shaman, the medicine-man/priest who heals the sick and overpowers demons through his ceremonies and magic charms, is akin to the artist whose vision shows others how to see freshly, although in Graves' work there is an implicit wistfulness for an epoch when art's purpose was to exorcise, purify and unite a community. Another parallel is that both shaman and artist communicate through a process that is always in some portion unknowable. Graves suggested that idea through multiplicity. Nearly every work contained more than one unit to which many other pieces were attached; the surfaces changed inch by inch, and it was impossible to comprehend an entire sculpture at once.

After these sculptures were exhibited, words like "authority" and "assurance" began to be invoked regularly in characterizing Graves' sculpture, and museums here and abroad started inviting her to participate in contemporary surveys. Since 1971 the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo and the Berkshire Museum have mounted solo exhibitions of her work. In the " 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art last year, Graves was represented by *Totem* (1970), *Fossils* (1970) and *Variability and Repetition of Variable Forms* (1971). Of all the contributions to the section encompassing "contemporary explorations" of the primitive, Graves' pieces were the only recent works able to jolt with a force comparable to that of the early modernist and original tribal objects. They did not just inhabit their space: they commanded it, establishing a primordial atmosphere.

IN 1971 GRAVES RETURNED TO PAINTing. Instead of eschewing Western rationalism as she did in her sculpture, she based her subject matter on logic and on scientific disciplines inseparable from modern technology. Her points of origin were maps of Mars, the moon (which, Graves was quick to note, is a fossil of the earth), the ocean floor, aerial photographs of Antarctica and the morphology of organisms that can be seen only with the assistance of a microscope. Once again Graves' outlook was

that of the explorer setting out on an expedition, but here the journeying took place in the laboratory. Often she used a pointillist stipple that simulated the pulsations of air and water currents. The dabbing style extended in two dimensions the hundreds of tessera-like small pieces she grafted onto each totem of her key work, *Variability and Repetition of Variable Forms*.

Graves was fascinated by the inherent duality of maps. The paintings examine maps as arenas in which reality and abstraction coexist. Maps represent a concrete location, but their shape, although determined by the mass being charted, can be read as an abstraction. Painted about the same time as the first maps were some Nabi-like gouaches of amphibians, reptiles, crustaceans and insects and their larvae. Directly and vividly rendered, and often depicted in Muybridgian serials, these creatures are so animated that they nearly squiggle off the sheet. There is none of the waxy deadness of a once living thing affixed to a mount. Most of the species Graves chose have natural markings that blend in with their environment, which presented her with a figure-ground knot similar to what she found in mapmaking. Hence in this group of works she tested her ability to see in depth and pattern at the same time.

By 1975 Graves' paintings were completely abstract, in title as well as composition. Previously her titles were matter-of-fact summaries of her subject—for example, *Interaction Between Bullhead Strangers*, *Montes Appenninus Region of the Moon* and *Geologic Survey of Scotland*. But as what she painted became less directly descriptive, the names of works became progressively arcane. Typically they consist of a one- or two-syllable prefix of Latin or Greek origin, usually having to do with animal or vegetal orders. Ever variable parts of a scientific lexicon, they become fossils or shards themselves, providing incomplete clues rather than full explanations of meaning. Sometimes the titles grow out of Graves' wry humor: there are numerous punning references to a sculpture's shape (*Kylix* and *Conjugate*, for example) or to another work of art (*Zaga* is related to David Smith's *Zig*). But Graves' titles don't always offer even these chips of content. Often they consist of a nonsense set of letters (like *Twon* or *Veef*) or abrupt units evidently chosen for their phonetic value: sounds like *Zil*, *Zim*, *Zon* and *Zop* mimic the sizzling optical zing of her recent paintings. Titles for Graves are a necessity of cataloguing; she prefers that attention be focused on the image.

In 1976 Peter Ludwig commissioned Graves to make a bronze version of one of her bones sculptures. The result was *Ceridwen, Out of Fossils* (1969-77), which was shown in New York at the Hammarskjold Plaza Sculpture Garden before it went to West Germany. Seeking a foundry with the expertise to develop new and unusual patinas, Graves went to Tallix. She enthusiastically returned to sculpture but with a technique unlike any she had ever attempted. Ann Freedman, director of contemporary art at M. Knoedler & Co., which represents Graves, says of her attitude toward process: "When Nancy's at work, she's totally consumed. It wouldn't be possible for her to make a maquette and have someone else enlarge it. She has to pay attention to the details and be there to watch the work come into being. Each work is a new birth, and she's not interested in repeating it. She hasn't extended her sculpture into editions, though it would be more profitable."

The collaboration between Tallix and Graves developed slowly. She had to size up the foundry artisans and learn to trust them; the artisans had to accept Graves' working methods. "When Nancy first arrived, she had sketches of what she wanted us to cast," Dick Polich remembers. "These were wax models of geometric forms. As we went along, the sketches got sketchier and sketchier as she saw what we could do together. We progressed into organic shapes, but we did not cast found objects for her until 1979. We were working on something and Nancy was unhappy with the plainness of the wood, so we started pressing designs into it to elaborate the surface. Nancy grabbed some bubble paper lying on top of a shelf and pressed it into the wax. Once she saw we were not limited to a uniform surface and realized what could be made into models, away we went. We were a little bit dubious at first, but we were willing to try. We've learned to be pretty ingenious. To be in the foundry business is to be aware of the impact that a change in materials can have on an artist."

Graves' strength lies in appreciating the world around her and realigning its elements. She delights in discovering what Tallix can turn into bronze. "Last summer I had dinner with Nancy," recalls Freedman. "The homemade potato chips at the restaurant caught her eye. 'Wouldn't it be great to cast these?' she said, as she carefully wrapped them up in a napkin. The next thing I knew, Nancy had bronze potato chips in her inventory at the foundry." Lately she has incorporated the spillages of molten metal and the broken clamps and other pieces of equipment the foundry is ready to throw out. Jerry Tobin, in charge of quality control at Tallix, says that the staff now has standing orders not to dispose of anything until after it's been cleared with Graves

If Graves had not landed at Tallix, her post-1977 sculpture

Set for ***Lateral Pass*** *(for Trisha Brown Company), 1985, gouache on paper, 30 by 40 inches.*

would not have erupted in the freewheeling way that it has. Her polychromed or enameled sculptures are open-form, freestanding constructions with configurations abstracted from but never mistakable for nature. Part of their visual pleasure resides in the fact that although they weigh thousands of pounds, the sculptures seem so delicate that a slight push would topple them to the ground. ''The weightless quality is enhanced by the retention in bronze of the original surface of the directly cast forms, many of which were fragile,'' Graves says. The works tend to be asymmetrical and aerial, with filaments and tendrils creeping horizontally into the air. Polich observes, ''Nancy wants to forget that things can fall down. She wants to build as far out as she can and have the pieces leap off each other. She wants moving parts. Nancy's stuff depends on the strength of a welded joint. Anything that moves adds another degree of complexity and more stress on that joint. We're here to tell her when something will break.''

Another reason why Graves' sculpture appears to be light and elusive rather than ponderous is its surface. Every bit of it has been coated with color that changes from inch to inch in hue and intensity and type of brushstroke. The surface flickers with movement; forms cast shadows, and the pigment or patina creates highlights and contrasts from thousands of color notes.

As the sculpture evolved, Graves' painting changed in response to it. Now the two seem to be merging. Many of the canvases quote the sculptures in their profusely overlapping shapes and tracks of lines wheeling through either images of flora and fauna or flat fields of background color. For some time she has attached aluminum or fiberglass reliefs to the paintings, adding a spatial dimension and an extra layer of shadow. In turn, the chromatic variety and combinations in the sculptures are the product of a painter's palette and a painter's understanding. ''The point is,'' says Graves, ''that the paintings and sculpture *are* interrelated. The drawing in the paintings is related to the drawing in the sculptures, and I'm dealing with the same elements of linearity, gravity, density, illusion, subject matter and permutations of traditional processes.''

Transforming a painting into a three-dimensional presence on a very large scale occupied Graves for 18 months when she designed the set and costumes for Trisha Brown's *Lateral Pass*. The two women met in the early '70s but did not work together until 1983, when Graves designed a gray silk costume that Brown says makes her feel ''grounded and powerful. It is a totally comfortable garment to wear. It settles down when I'm standing still and fills up when I move. In activity it takes on a shape.'' To fill a whole stage was more challenging because artistic concerns must be integrated with the practicalities of portability, mobility, cost and safety. And because of Graves' additive work methods, the set, recalls Brown, ''could not be fathomed before it existed. The pieces are made out of steel, which is not compatible with human bodies, especially when those bodies are in motion.'' Only after it had taken shape could Brown map the line of clearest passage for the dancers.

Graves divided the set into four sections, respectively composed of vertically hung styrofoam boulders of pink and green, bent silver rods, multicolored ultraviolet tubing embedded in Plexiglas sheets and yellow rods gently curved into apostrophes and quotation marks. At pivotal moments sections descended and ascended: when all four were layered over one another, the dancers swam through a prismatic and paradisaic waterfall, their white and pastel leotards glinting through the transparent and ceaselessly intertwined scrims.

Brown and Graves considered their collaboration ''a grand opportunity'' and enjoyed discovering congruences in their art. ''I am not an assembler,'' says Brown, ''but, like Nancy, my drama is with off-centeredness, with gravity and nongravity in the construction of movement.'' Graves responds, ''In her wish to incorporate something beyond the given in her work, Trisha's way of thinking is similar to mine. She gave me free rein to work, and the experience opened up a whole other world for me.'' Despite its diversity and expansiveness, Graves' repertoire is by no means set. The more her imagination wanders into new territory, the more she is at home. ■