Nancy GRAVES

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The Sum of Parts

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Nancy Graves's antic sculptures continue to mingle the natural and the man-made, art and non-art, the alien and the familiar. Below, an overview of two decades of her hybrid constructions.

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As her Brooklyn Museum retrospective this past winter revealed, Nancy Graves might have made a life's work out of any one of her ground-breaking, attention-getting early styles. A lesser artist could have happily stayed in the role of "camel sculptor," "fossil artist" or "totem-making neo-primitive." Instead of settling for one of these early rebellious identities, however, Graves has developed an oeuvre that combines the conceptual daring of her youth with a lush sensuality and an increasingly inventive formal range. Abetted by the publication of a catalogue raisonné,[1] an exhibition of new sculpture at M. Knoedler & Co. and a show of prints at Associated American Artists, she has staked her claim as one of the major sculptors of her generation. The Brooklyn Museum and Knoedler shows made it clear that her recent work is among her best, and that she is continuing to gain in skill and mastery.

Given the refinement and delectability of such recent works as *Tanz* (1984) and *Spanse* (1987), it is hard to imagine that the same artist, less than two decades ago, scattered bones and hung animal skins. The Brooklyn retrospective (which originated in Fort Worth) seemed to smooth over these disjunctions by underrepresenting the early "anthropological" works, many of which are in foreign collections or have been destroyed. While MOMA's 1984-85 "Primitivism" show resurrected the "fetishistic" *Totem* (1970) and *Variability and Repetition of Variable Forms* (1971)—with its witch's brew of butterflies, berries, bones and beetles—only *Mummy* (1969-70) represented this period in Brooklyn. Still, enough of Graves's untamed early objects were on view to remind us of her provocative beginnings.

The camels, fossils and fetishes (e.g., *Mongolian Bactrian*, 1969; *Fossils*, 1969-70; *Mummy*) appear today to belong very much to their period. They reflect Graves's self-professed rejection, at the time, of Western values. In a 1970 interview she spoke of her need

> to find another way of thinking, which doesn't allow for Western rationality. I really believe that that is the problem right now. One who keeps to that [Western] form is going to be trapped by it. So I would like to find another way.[2]

And this attitude, despite the genuine intellectual engagement

Nancy Graves:* Fossils, *1969–70, plaster, gauze, marble dust, acrylic and steel, 36 by 300 by 300 inches. Private collection.

With her passion for archeological and paleontological objects, Graves extends the American tradition of finding nature and science more authentic than the products of European culture.

behind it, lends these shaggy, exotic works an inescapably hippie-ish air. Her countercultural romance with the organic, the mystical and the primitive went so far as to make her question the primacy, within the natural order, of the human species. Graves opened her movie *Izy Boukir* (1971), the culmination of her filmic and sculptural studies of camels, with an anti-anthropocentric quote from the naturalist Henry Beston, who insisted that animals occupy an "older and more complete" world and are, in many ways, our superiors.[3] Graves's early sculptures embody these sentiments by distancing us not only geographically and biologically but temporally as well. We see not just bones, but the bones of camels, and not just the bones of camels, but prehistoric camels. (These were never actual bones or camels, but compounds of wax, marble dust, acrylic, goatskin, etc.)

Graves's decision to display facsimiles of bones and camels as art objects derives not just from Duchamp (and the literalism of his Pop heirs), but from a very American mistrust of art itself. With her passion for archeological, paleontological and anthropological objects, Graves extends a long American tradition of finding natural and scientific forms more authentic than the products of European culture. Her naturalist impulse, in particular, has a lengthy provenance which includes not just Audubon's birds but Catlin's careful records of Indians, Heade's faithful studies of orchids and Bierstadt's detailed reproductions of mountain ranges.

Like many of her naturalist predecessors, a robust appetite for nature has compelled Graves to undertake long and difficult expeditions. Just as Frederick Church's quest for scientific accuracy took him from South America to the Arctic Circle, so Graves has traveled, as Lucy Lippard noted in her excellent discussion of Graves's five films (see *A.i.A.*, Nov.–Dec. 1975), to Morocco to study camels, Kenya to observe flamingos (for her film *Aves*) and almost to Antarctica. And Church, in his tireless search for untouched landscape, would have shared Graves's curiosity about lunar topography, seen in her film *Reflections on the Moon* (1974) and her paintings based on NASA photographs.

Graves's early works are not, however, merely experiments on the way to maturity. They embody a set of polarities—between literalism and artifice, between structurelessness and structure—that persists throughout her oeuvre. The continuity of these concerns was underscored by the retrospective's exclusion of her paintings. Graves temporarily abandoned sculpture for painting, drawing and printmaking in 1972. She returned to sculpture in 1977, with her first bronze work, *Ceridwen, out of Fossils*, whose manifold camel bones were cast by the lost-wax process. The environmental scale and apparent randomness of this and earlier works progressively gave way to judicious arrangements of medium-sized found objects—camels and fields of dinosaur bones were supplanted by precisely cast brussel sprouts and philodendron leaves. Likewise, two-dimensional "scattering" yielded to the organic logic of her

Mummy, *1969–70, latex, steel, wax and gauze, 108 by 36 by 42 inches. Anselm and Marjorie Talalay Collection, Cleveland.*

florid, in-the-round constructions.

But if the early works seem structureless, they do have their own organizing principles. And Graves always arranged her chosen objects more purposely than one might think. In *Mongolian Bactrian*, the camel's head turns in the opposite direction of its sagging humps, and in *Variability of Similar Forms* (1970), a field of upright leg bones is carefully angled to avoid static, choreographed rows.

Almost all Graves's sculptures use repetition and variation as ordering devices. Her work, in fact, is often a meditation on where repetition ends and variation begins (a question dear to any biologist or taxonomist). Early pieces repeat nearly identical forms. But as her work developed Graves introduced an increasingly nuanced spectrum of related forms. The spectrum seen in *Accordia* and *Fanne Figura* (both 1982) stretches from leaves of the same species, to leaves of a related species, to fans fashioned from leaves, to man-made fans, to fan-shaped objects and finally to fanlike configurations within the overall composition.

Graves further complicates these chains of association (and cleverly sometimes introduces actual chains) through her painterly color sense. She transformed the sober tones of the bones and early bronzes (*Aurignac*, 1978) into soft pastel polychrome (from *Quipu*, 1978, to *Cantileve*, 1983), and then, by *Span-Spun* (1984), into a brilliant rainbow palette. This coloristic freedom allows her to vary duplicate forms and to unite the most disparate ones. And, of course, she plays not just with variations of color and form, but also with textures and patterns—nubs, spirals, interlacings, etc. The airy *Tablescape* (1987), for example, mingles perforated objects: pierced leaves, mesh and a latticelike milk-crate section.

The cumulative perceptual process by which we come to terms with these pieces also replicates Graves's working methods. Generally proceeding without sketches, she invents as she goes, building her sculptures from bottom to top. She welds together elements pulled from her inventory of about 1,500 directly cast objects (which began with a favorite houseplant and is still expanding). At times, her sculptures seem to float, belying the careful, Calderesque balancing and counterbalancing of the heavy bronze elements.

The relationship between bottom and top in her recent sculptures is generally organic. The works, as they ascend, undergo a process of unfolding. In *Five Fans, Lampshades and Lotus* (1982), the coiled tension of the furled, accordioned lampshades below explodes into a staccato burst of taut, flattened fans above. The effect recalls a time-lapse photo sequence of leaves uncurling or buds blooming. Perceptual issues—inside vs. outside, abstracted vs. fragmented, two-dimensional vs. three-dimensional—which had been drawn out over the course of two or more early works are now condensed into one blossoming sculpture. The base of *Aves* (1979) is a gridlike model of a temple, which sprouts another gridlike archeological model, now upturned and readable as a map, which in turn generates a building fragment—three-dimensional model yields to two-dimensional plan and finally to synecdochic fragment.

Plants and animals not only provide appropriately organic compositional structures for Graves, but also enable her to link multiple units anatomically and formally. *Cantileve*'s "spine" of leaves (Graves has always relished the skeletal) mixes metaphor and metonymy: individual fern leaves function both as vertebrae and rhyming shapes. Within her biomorphic repertoire the tree or bush configuration is the most basic format, permitting Graves to anchor

Pinocchio (Pendula Series), 1984, bronze with polychrome patina and baked enamel, 92½ by 28 by 41 inches. Private collection.

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scraggly excrescences to recognizably trunk- or rootlike supports (*Fayum, Trace,* "Karyata" series, all 1981). But her compositions are most challenging when they are botanical, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic all at once. In Graves's universe, a work can ascend the evolutionary scale but never disguise preceding evolutionary stages (ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny). *Cantileve* at first looks like a tropical flower improbably crossbred from its component ferns, lotuses and monsteras, then begins to resemble a recoiling, gaily spotted mantis, and finally suggests a dancer balancing unsteadily on leaf-stalk tiptoes. *Fungible* (1983), an amusing plant-duck mutant, stands on webbed feet of philodendron leaves.

The perpetually ambiguous identity of Graves's creations saves them from the deadening whimsy of so much anthropomorphic and biomorphic art. Instead of using mammalian forms as ennobling, romantic metaphors for human states—innocent lambs, wild horses, fierce lions—she mordantly equates people with plants and insects. The humor lies in the implicit reduction of man to the purely biological, a creature of simple tropisms, uncontrollable growths and involuntary excretions. And just as associations slide comically up and down the evolutionary ladder, so does sexual imagery elide. *Pinocchio* (1984) exhibits a characteristic hermaphroditism with its suspended white rod swinging through the center of a gaping hoop base. The perfect emblem, however, for Graves's contrapuntal gender-blending is the ubiquitous anthurium (*Tanz; Scylla,* 1982), with its phallic spadix forever projecting from a vaginal spathe.[4]

Many of her best sculptural maneuvers come together in *Bilanx* (1982), perhaps the most elegant of Graves's hothouse hybrids. It initially looks like a crazy salad of catalpa beans and Chinese cucumbers shooting out from a central, tangled nexus. Slowly, one perceives the disciplined sculptural language which justifies Graves's comparison of this work to a Degas dancer.[5] But we don't need the artist's word to interpret *Bilanx* as a long-stemmed (in every sense) ballerina in arabesque. The sense of buoyant equipoise begins at the monstera-leaf base, uptilted like the plane of a Degas stage. From this launching pad springs the supporting "right leg," a supple bean pod. A fiddlehead fern defines the stretching "left leg," its curled tip a fantastic elaboration on a daintily arched foot. This graceful tendril unwinds through chevron-patterned casts (readable as a frilly tutu) on to the uplifted Chinese cucumber "arm." The cucumber's fine ridges contrast neatly with the smooth fern extending behind it, and accelerate the linear movement upward. The arrowlike leaf "head" intensifies the diagonal momentum, and supplies a directional cue in dynamic opposition to the backward-pointing monstera base. The linear delicacy and gravity-defying antics of sculptures like *Cantileve, Nike* or *Bridged* (all 1983) also evoke dancers, but never to the extent of *Bilanx*. (Perhaps her friendship with dancer Trisha Brown, for whom she has made stage sets, has inspired her.) Yet for all its balletic allusions, *Bilanx* still inhabits the ambiguous margin between metaphorical possibilities and literal components.

Graves considers *Bilanx* a tour de force of engineering; the cantilevered cucumber alone weighs 20 pounds. Expectations of lightness blind us to the true weight of the sculpture, and Graves further misleads us by creating illusions of levitation through color.

Tanz, *1984*, baked enamel on bronze, 19 by 19½ by 10 inches. Collection Ann and Robert Freedman, New York.

(As she has stated, "I try to subvert what is logical, what the eye would expect.")[6] The whole sculpture seems to lift off the ground because the main support, the catalpa-bean "leg," is tinted lemon-yellow and cotton-candy pink, in contrast to the ponderous black monstera base. Since 1984, Graves's coloristic effects have become ever more elaborate. Bright, glossy, dribbling colors make a work like *Wheelabout* (1985) look like the happy victim of an explosion in an ice-cream parlor. Graves wittily comments on the oral appeal of these candy colors by spearing *Span-Spun* (1984) with a giant fork and topping it with chocolate shavinglike bronze spills. Her discovery of polyurethene paint (sometimes combined with baked enamel) made these rich confectionary effects possible.

These works from 1984–86 show Graves at her most baroque—a term not used casually here. Graves's work recalls Baroque art not just in its penchant for undulating forms and unstable compositions, but also in its feeling for texture and movement. Her direct casting technique, like Bernini's illusionistic marble carving, lovingly records all the grains, veins and nubs of objects. And Graves's eternally dry bones and perpetually succulent plants are, in a sense, the descendents of the Baroque period's countless *memento mori* still lifes. But her works are also baroque in their suspenseful arrest of movement. A sculpture like *Rebus* (1984) seems momentarily blown together by the winds and on the verge of imminent collapse, while *Span-Spun* seems ready to spin out of control. Some works, like *Pilot* (1982), with its propellorlike petals, actually contain moving parts. Color, of course, only heightens the visual instability and surface incident.

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The most recent work at Knoedler is less organically extravagant. Graves assembled these sculptures with more mechanical units—such as chains and gears, often uncast—than have ever been seen in her oeuvre. And the shapes the sculptures assume are becoming less organic as well—for example, tables ("Tablescape" series) or see-saws (*Level-Lever* and *Tensionary*, all 1987). Although *Level-Lever* still branches out in an arboreal fashion, its support seems more like a fulcrum than a trunk or stem. Graves now more openly invokes abstract sculptural conventions, drawing on the example of such artists as Miró, Calder and Picasso, but without submerging her personality. *Astron* (1987), with its rugged rusted-steel semicircles, mitigated by rhyming polychrome fruits, strays from biomorphism and edges toward constructivism. Though this sculpture grows from a rough industrial trunk, the crucial structural element, in true Gravesian fashion, is colored a sugary-sweet pink.

Spanse, too, is typical of Graves's flexible attitude toward the modernist tradition she once repudiated. Its incorporation of "drawing in space" and an old-fashioned ice cutter pays an unmistakable tribute to David Smith's "Agricola" series. But in the context of her composition, antiquated implements take on an entirely different meaning. While Smith's "Agricola" pieces hint at a stark puritanical existence, Graves neutralizes such connotations via her own gay polychrome and suggestive juxtapositions. The vision of labor she conjures up is more pastoral—*Spanse*'s mood is closer to Virgil's *Eclogues* than to *Ethan Frome*. The citrus-yellow Corinthian-like capital beneath the toothed wheel promotes associations to Italianate idylls. Splashed with warm, radiant color, the palmetto leaf inscribed in a circle of gating, together with the rude wheel, suggest solar discs, and in spite of the ice cutter (which anyway resembles a plow), evoke a summery climate. The rope fish trap—a form Graves calls her "cornucopia"—elaborates the idea of abundance and ease. The mature Graves is working now with more heterogeneous imagery, freely invoking 20th-century masters, yet assimilating them into her own world. □

1. *The Sculpture of Nancy Graves: A Catalogue Raisonné*, with essays by E.A. Carmean, Jr., Robert Hughes, Michael Edward Shapiro, Linda L. Cathcart, and catalogue by Ruth J. Hazel (New York, Hudson Hills Press, 1987), is a superb reference for anyone interested in the artist's sculptures.
2. Quoted in Emily Wasserman, "Conversation with Nancy Graves," *Artforum*, vol. 9 (Oct. 1970), pp. 42–47.
3. The quotation is taken from Beston's *Outermost House*, New York, 1971, p. 19. He wrote that "we need . . . a more mystical concept of animals. We patronize them . . . for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, living by voices we shall never hear."
4. Graves has, throughout her career, been attracted to what she terms "a positive/negative situation. . . . The 'pluses' support the 'minuses.'" Wasserman,"Conversation," p. 47.
5. "I realized, after finishing it, that I had made a Degas dancer." Quoted in Robert Hughes, "Nancy Graves: An Introduction," in *The Sculptures of Nancy Graves: A Catalogue Raisonné*, p. 19.
6. Quoted in Debra Bricker Balken, *Nancy Graves: Painting, Sculpture, Drawing, 1980–85*, introduction by Linda Nochlin, Poughkeepsie, N.Y., Vassar College Art Gallery, 1986, p. 13.

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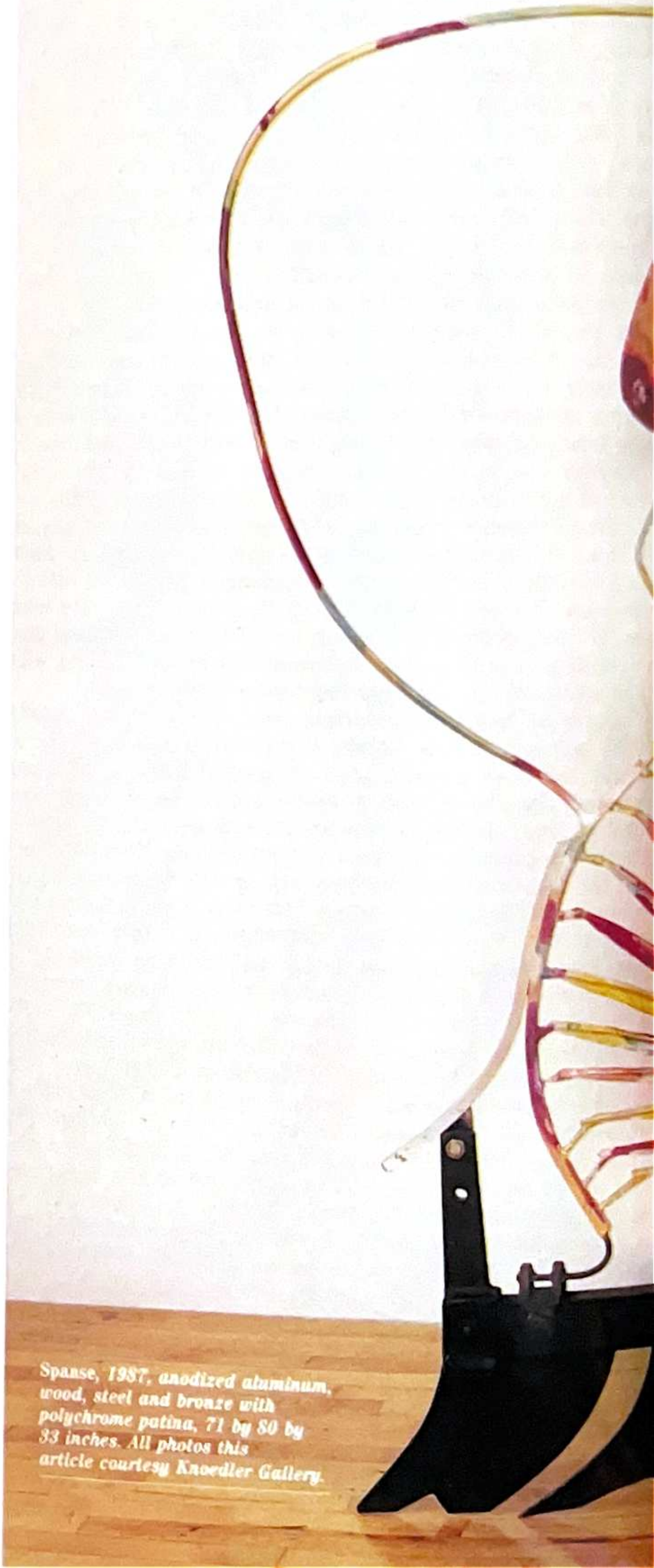

Spanse, 1987, anodized aluminum, wood, steel and bronze with polychrome patina, 71 by 80 by 33 inches. All photos this article courtesy Knoedler Gallery.