

# Sculpture

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**On the Cover:** Giuseppe Penone, *Pelle di marmo e spine d'acacia*, 2001. Carrara marble, acacia needles, and silk, 399 x 358 x 15 cm. Photo: Marc Domage, 2003 © Adagp, 2004.

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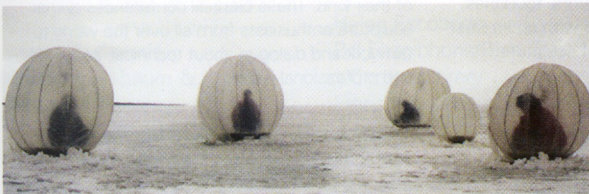
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## Nene Humphrey: Carnal Knowledge

by Patricia Rosoff

When you grow up outside the nexus of a big city, there's a certain kind of productive isolation—a freedom to explore the world unencumbered by self-consciousness. For Nene Humphrey, who was born in Portage, Wisconsin (population 7,000), it has translated to privacy of viewpoint. Her notion of creativity was not fashioned by an academic model but by the example of charismatic relatives—among them a grandmother who spun fabulous stories and a Pied Piper of a businessman/uncle who carried a menagerie of toys in his briefcase. “I grew up loving to draw and paint and make things, but I didn't have good teachers in high school,” she says. “I was very

much alone, although my parents encouraged me. It was my father who said, ‘Try college.’” There was a tug to get somewhere (“I always had that thing,” she says, “about going to New York”), which took her to St. Mary's College, in Notre Dame, Indiana; to Goddard College, in Boston, Massachusetts; and then to York University, in Toronto, Canada. A McDowell fellowship, after she earned her MFA at York, brought her, finally, to New York. A series of other grants—a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship, an Individual Artist Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and an award from the Anonymous Was a Woman Foundation—fueled her continued exploration.

Throughout this journey, as her work deepened and reached out, she remained attached to the tactile as a means of entry. The recurring motifs of her sculpture are resolutely connected to the human body—to the circumferences of human form, to its hollows and its surfaces, the mystery of its outward appearances and its inward universes. Her metaphors remain knowable and everyday, but they are haunted by the cosmic and full of corpuscular mysteries. Hospitalization for serious back injury and several months of subsequent confinement several years ago turned her focus inward and returned her to sewing, which is the primary vehicle for her current work, “Small Worlds,” which was included by curator/collector Agnes Gund in “Sight and Insight: An Assemblage of Artists” at P.S.1/MoMA in New York. “Labor intensive work has always awed me,” says Gund. “Humphrey's focus on red is really very interesting. I think of it in terms of hand, pin, needle, and blood—



how much women have to use their hands, and mar them. I thought that the architectural elements, as well as the handmade quality, relate to the other artists in the show.”

Today, after an artistic career that has evolved from two dimensions to three, from optical to tactile, from external to internal, from embroidery hoop to blacksmith's shop and back again, Humphrey has positioned herself at a fluid, if subtle, interchange between absolutes. She wrestles with a host of contradictory metaphorical polarities: crimson lichen and old ladies' hats; petri dish colonies and astral constellations; red silk corsages and blood-tainted bandages. Her works vault between metaphors of time and space, yet remain resolutely in our laps, bringing us at once intimately close and taking us unreachably far.

This work does not yield to a glance. It is hand work, detailed and intricate, and you must look closely to see what's involved. Its mysteries are best revealed at intimate distances and in quiet ways. Humphrey's forms result from obsessive small-motor processes and engage conceptual and formal elements in the same tangible stew. Her work suggests everyday verities: prom dresses and bedroom slippers, needlepoint and embroidery, pin-pricked fingertips and patient conversation over fairy tales. Material fact



**Left: *Around the Edge* (detail), 1993. Steel and wire, 31 units, 104 x 67 x 33 in. Above: *Floating Globe*, 1995. Copper, 39 x 40 x 42 in.**





Left: *Pierced Red*, 2003. Corsage pins, felt, and silk, 9 x 8 x 9 in. Below and detail: *Out of Bounds*, 2003. Corsage pins, silk, and embroidered cotton, 2 elements, 36 x 24 x 1 in. and 3 x 3.5 in.

is the resonant clue to meaning: red silk organza, felted wool, and satin ribbons. Everything is stitched together with glistening needles and silken threads. Yet all is imbedded in the vocabulary of hemoglobin: bright reds, flush with oxygen; deep reds, clotted and saturated. Circular formats bend the tale—a map, a womb, a biopsy slide, the surface of the moon.

Metaphors divide and multiply. In the age-old way of traditions that pass through cultures from mother to daughter, one must follow the evidence of Humphrey's touch. Suggestively, needles activate the analogy. In *Pierced Red*, they swarm like spermatozoa in a bowl of felted wool. In *Loculus #8*, a massive three-part wall hanging, silk threads follow like jet trails in the wake of organza disks the size of half dollars, each one skewered into position—right through the felt pad into the wall—by the nee-

dles. The resulting form resembles a strategic war map and, at the same time, the tracks of bloody fingerprints on a clean white quilt. Humphrey's visual language is based on osmosis: she tracks interchanges across membranous divisions. As much as it reflects her recent investigation into the dying needlecraft traditions of marginalized ethnic groups in southwestern China, this work is wholly internal—visualized from some carnal center rather than an exterior point of view. She renders the history of invisible labor; she honors that attentiveness and that touch.

This is women's work—something organic, something that refuses the notion of impenetrability. These objects bristle inward and outward with a thousand glistening pins. They bloom in roseate exuberance; echelons of tiny buds march across proffered surfaces. Or, in an echo of Humphrey's earlier

work, which plays shadows against the gallery wall, she orchestrates the flow of light through form. An embroidery hoop of silk organza, painted with curling tendrils like locks of hair, projects a silvered, ghostly image—the surface of the moon.

While the P.S.1 group venue may not have served the pensive intimacy of Humphrey's work—too much going on, too many metaphors gathered together—one can understand the curator's desire to include it all. What is so interesting about Humphrey's work is her vocabulary: history is held in a thread. Memory is a matter of skin, surface described in a woman's terms. In these hands, skin is not for armor, it is actualized as membrane—porous and cellular, a means of connection as well as the vehicle for separation. I can think of few artists, besides perhaps Eva Hesse, who stand this ground.

*Patricia Rosoff is a writer living in New Jersey.*

