

Common Touch | Nene Humphrey



Katonah Museum of Art July 18 – October 3, 1999



Common Touch | Nene Humphrey

Since the beginning of recorded history, we humans have been concerned with making and marking our presence in the world. Early cave dwellers left behind handprints and outlines of the contours of their hands that proved someone was there. These early signatures or signs of presence remind us that the hand is the primal machine, our first tool. Recent studies claim that the manual dexterity required for survival also helped refine the species through the development of cognition.

For many years, Nene Humphrey has been exploring how we experience the world physically and psychologically through the body. In the early 1990s, she began to focus her investigations on the human hand and the ways it is both functional and expressive. Through gesture or contact, the hand conveys emotional states from love and tenderness to rejection and pain. It is through touch that we first know the world and by touch that we frequently leave our mark on the world. Humphrey translates these ideas into sculptures that are formally elegant, subtle, and sensual. The visual and tactile power of her work resides in the quiet dignity of understatement and in her ability to give form to poetic thought and social vision.

Common Touch is a site-specific installation created by Nene Humphrey for the Katonah Museum of Art that records presence, enterprise, and progeny. In a compelling contrast of opposites, Humphrey pairs the engineered, impersonal minimal box with traces of anatomical irrationality, passion, and compassion. The installation is comprised of five fabricated copper square boxes that resemble the raised beds used by gardeners. On each raised bed she has arranged an assortment of terracotta clay forms resting on a layer of black stone dust. The clay forms are placed randomly but not



anonymously; for they are abstract portraits of the hands of people who have been involved with the Museum as volunteers, staff, and supporters. To make the hands, Humphrey placed a small clay blanket over the model's hand, cut away the skirt, and shaped the malleable clay around the skeletal armature of the hand. The clay hands were fired for different lengths of time to vary the color. Interspersed among the beds are grids with copper panels sandblasted with the names of all the models for the project.

Humphrey placed the beds strategically throughout the garden to take advantage of the contrast between the low flat boxes, the formal elegance of the adjacent museum designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes, and the sweeping verticality of the surrounding fir trees. The individuality of each hand is antithetical to the anticipated minimal content suggested by the formal implication of the containers, for each hand is integral to the meaning of *Common Touch*. Our desire for immortality inspires us to leave behind some tangible evidence of our presence, our contribution to the world. Moreover, we wonder how our lives will be measured — by the greatness of our technological accomplishments or by our ability to touch the lives of others.

Common Touch is a tribute to our founders who planted the seeds for the Katonah Museum of Art and to all who embrace the power of communal effort. The Museum gratefully acknowledges the participation of all the models. We are especially grateful to Dana Addressi, Assistant to the Director; Julie DeLano, Nene Humphrey's assistant; Adrian Lillis at Bantam Copper Works; and Robert Mueller, Artist-in-Residence, Clay Arts Center, Port Chester, New York. We thank Lisa Feldman for designing this publication and for being the wonderful colleague she is. This project would not have been possible without the tireless participation of the Project Director, Evelyn Fay, who provided extraordinary organization, careful attention to detail, and the type of dedication that characterizes the level of selfless volunteerism honored here. *Common Touch* and this publication were funded in part by a generous grant from the Jandon Foundation. We are grateful to Leslie Cecil for her encouragement and support. Our greatest debt is, of course, to Nene Humphrey.

Susan H. Edwards
Executive Director

