

NENE HUMPHREY

MATRIX

WINTHROP UNIVERSITY GALLERIES
AUGUST 16 - SEPTEMBER 21, 1992

ESSAY BY SUSAN KRANE

In the South, the summer humidity rests heavily on your skin, a palpable barometric weight. It hovers strangely between elements, not quite air or water, and creates an omnipresent, atmospheric surface tension. You become strangely aware of the body's epidermal shell – that thin casing between self and the universe – and are reminded of your physical volume. The air is leaden; touch is acute, often irritating.

Nene Humphrey divides her time between New York, where her studio is a niche among many in a noisy high-rise building in the garment district, and the countryside outside Athens, Georgia. There she works in a house nestled in a pastoral overgrown hollow that is rich green much of the year, punctuated by flowers and a working vegetable garden. The tangled southern foliage branches down in around you: every clearing seems an infringement on the natural order. Humphrey's urban environment causes a sense of bodily compression, and drives one physically and mentally inward; in the lush southern woods, however, one's senses percolate, prodded to the surface by seductive, edenic environs. The body opens, and becomes more expansive in its rhythms.

Humphrey's sculpture addresses this interface between interior and exterior, between physical and psychological being. She explores the complex nature of our sensory location in the world and the body's deeply felt "muscular consciousness" – the emphatic part visceral, part emotional response to objects and to space of which Gaston Bachelard has written so eloquently.¹ The body, for Humphrey, is a primary vehicle of response and understanding, one freed from the cultural constraints, rigors and obsessions of the rational mind. It is, however, also just a precarious container, "energy held in a fragile sack of skin, trapped in there." She considers the body, inevitably, both an "imprisonment" and a sanctified boundary against the psychologically sharp "real edge" of existence in a world that constantly "comes at you, as something different from you."² She notes in her journals the appropriateness of metaphors like "thick-skinned" and "thin-skinned."³ Humphrey's art is about the linkages between body and soul – about knowing through perception, through echoes of memory stored in the body, through touch and the viscera.

Issues of identity and the self have motivated Humphrey's art since her graduate school days. In 1980, a back injury con-

finned her to bed for several months and prompted her heightened consciousness of – and ongoing fascination with – anatomy, biological functions, and mental imaging. The intensity of pain and the burden of incapacitation forced an awareness of the components of the body and of their facilities, which are so often (luckily) taken for granted. The buried intensity of a broken bone, a muscle in spasm, or a pinched nerve makes us keenly aware of the body's operating systems, its electrical and mechanical structures and its skeletal framework.

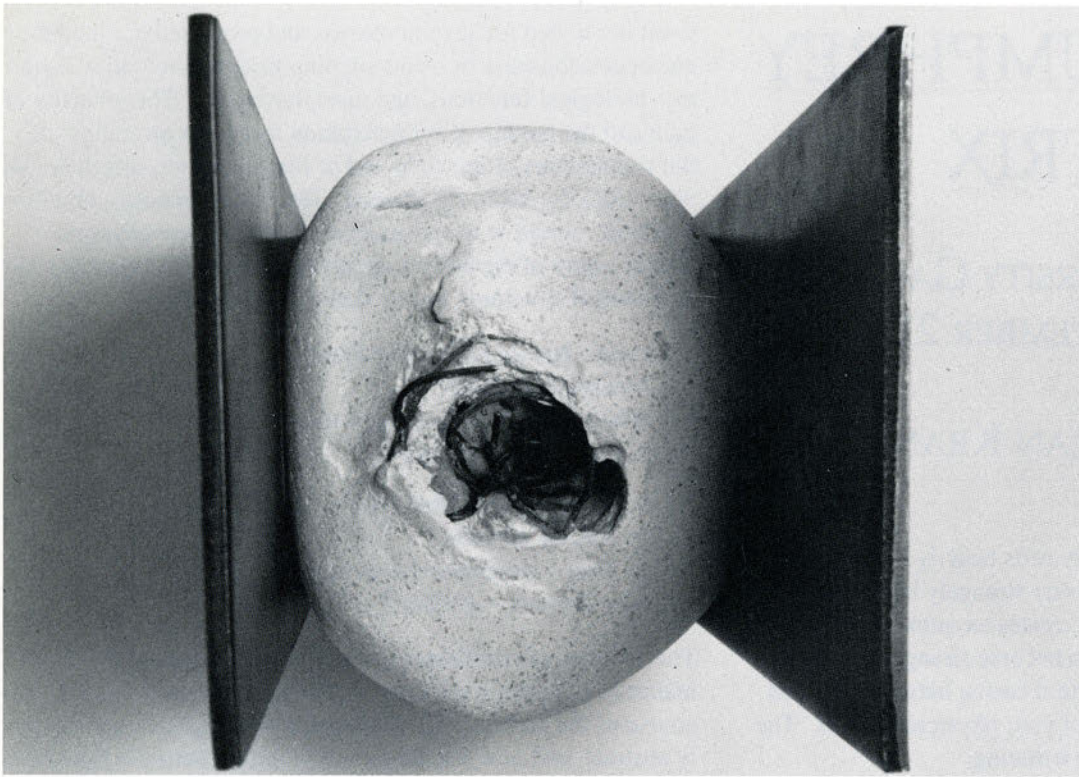
*Pain – has an Element of Blank –
It cannot recollect
When it began – or if there were
A time when it was not –*

*It has no Future – but itself –
Its Infinite contain
Its Past – enlightened to perceive
New Periods – of Pain.⁴*

These points of confluence and disjuncture between mind and matter have become the focus of Humphrey's work over the course of the past decade. Her sculpture has grown increasingly abstract, and now vacillates compellingly between figurative and organic reference points. Its scale is almost always modest and accessible: that of a torso, a garden's fruit, an ordinary domestic object, the intimate size of the hand-held.

In *Pressure Point*, 1989, irregular spheres are squeezed within thick metal wall brackets, as if caught in a vise of torture; their wrapped wire cores are exposed like an excruciated nerve center. Five of these isolated units hang along the wall at eye level, in a relentless minimalist series. The clamped objects, like horse blinders, evoke a sense of uncomfortable, forced confinement. For Humphrey, they relate to the action of pressing one's hands against one's temples in frantic desperation, as if an instinctive attempt to shut out the onslaught of the world. *Pressure Point*, like all of her works, is not based on a specific occurrence but rather germinates from the lingering effect of "a memory of something I can't see." The pale forms are, she acknowledges, reminiscent of a mouth, eye, head or breast: they are a generalized metaphor for "a core of the self, the soul." Repeated in a potentially infinite series, the dismembered, gouged image takes on a sense of inescapability. *Pressure Point* seems the abstract equivalent of Munch's ghostly *The Scream*, 1895. Here, however, emotional catharsis is uncomfortably held in check, imminent yet perpetually thwarted.

Wax models of body parts in various states of dissection fill the chambers of La Specola at the University of Florence in Italy (an instructional gallery opened in 1775). In every room are tiers of wall to wall, floor to ceiling display cases, all organized didactically by anatomical system and variously exposing bone, musculature, or nerves. These exquisite anatomical studies, many by the master Clemente Susini, have a fleshy translucence and strangely animated quality, as if hermetically sealed specimens. Each is posed eerily on a thick white drape within the vitrine. Like remnants in reliquaries, they assume a precious, fetishistic power; they are both studies of life and intimations of death.



Pressure Point, 1989
cast stone, steel, wire
4 1/2" x 4" x 8 1/2"
(Detail)

In spite of its scientific purpose, La Specola seemed to Humphrey to have a peculiar religious aura when she visited in 1986, an experience that for her underscored the simultaneous fragility and power of the human body. She spent hours photographing the displays and drawing objects, entranced by their mystery and strange beauty. Raised a Catholic, Humphrey was taught that the body was merely an earthly vehicle for the soul – an encumbrance "just to hold you together until you ascend." The body was not to be glorified, but tolerated and transcended. She was schooled in tales of martyrdom, in which the body's mortal pain became a means to a state of grace and beatification, and acts of mortification. All deemed the body incidental, an expendable parcel for the soul, our higher plane. The disembodied fragments at La Specola, like the glass eyes Humphrey collects or the northeastern Brazilian milagros she admires, assumed a poignant votive quality for her. These modest objects became talismanic – links to meditation, memory, and a spirituality based on vestiges of self.

Humphrey is one of a number of artists today who explore kinesthetic, sensory responses and use body imagery as a potent psychological metaphor. Along with her peers (such as Rona Pondick, Elisa D'Arrigo, Kiki Smith, Heide Fasnacht and other, often female, artists), Humphrey continues the lineage of sculptors like Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse. The emotional message of such recent work, however, is typically more rawly exposed and is not couched in terms of a theoretical or conceptual framework. It is overtly and often painfully personal art, oriented to the recesses of experience. For these contemporary women sculptors, the body (as known particularly from a female point of view) becomes a psychological and political playing field – a territory of conflict, vulnerability, anger, identification and strength. Process and materiality are often dominant concerns. Much of this sculpture is frequently quite terse, yet its minimalism seems barely a safeguard

against excessive emotionality. The message of their work often hovers compellingly in an undefined psychic zone, and echoes from the object like an ominous chant.

Humphrey's process of working is ritualistic and painstakingly repetitive, and requires a degree of concentration that becomes quite meditative. Although she previously used traditional armatures, in these pieces Humphrey built the shapes up over a core of compacted newspaper bound with coils of wire and covered with layers of plaster or modeling stone. She then works back into the surface of her objects, digging into them to reveal their inner workings and literally scarring or wounding the form as if an act of exorcism and obsessive catharsis. She works and reworks a piece for hours on end, often to the accompaniment of Gregorian chants, using a palette knife, subtle hues of oil stick and layers of encaustic, which gives the exterior a skin-like texture and appearance. Humphrey's dry, white sculpting media seem, to her, like bone; the plaster (simultaneously strong and fragile) becomes hot as it is mixed, as if alive. The powdered dust she is left with after carving recalls the remains of cremation: a body, a lifetime, reduced to a small pile of fine white chalk.

At times, Humphrey will think through a piece by drawing while in the midst of its making, a process that is equally tactile and physical: "When I think of making a drawing, I think of getting down on the floor on my hands and knees – hovering over a sheet of paper and digging in. Most of the time I use charcoal and oil sticks, and always my hand more than any implement. Making the marks involves my whole body – scratching, swirling, crushing up the charcoal..."⁵ As she describes it, her activity has strong parallels to gardening (an integral aspect of her Georgia sojourns), which perhaps in part elucidates the concurrent body and landscape references embedded in her work.

*I never hear the word "escape"
Without a quicker blood,
A sudden expectation,
A flying attitude!*

*I never hear of prisons broad
By soldiers battered down,
But I tug childish at my bars
Only to fail again!⁶*

The three hemispherical forms of *Escape*, 1989, rest edgily on the floor, split open and exposed. They read variously as eyes, ears, bisected skulls, perhaps prehistoric eggs whose usually protected interiors have been betrayed. Somewhat surprisingly, *Escape* points to Humphrey's recent interest in Emily Dickinson, the reclusive poet whose obsessively introverted works were written in the midst of the turmoil of the Civil War years and Reconstruction. The image of "circumference" (sometimes alternately referred to as "circuit") recurs in Dickinson's poetry, as well as in her thinking on religion and on art. For her, circumference indicated a universal encompassing and suggested "an extension outward to include something larger than can be found at a particular static point."⁷ With its tangled interior circuitry and off-kilter engagement of ambient space, *Escape* refers to a similar orbital interdependence of center and surroundings. Here, the wary edges and precarious balance of Humphrey's forms speak of boundaries and orientation with a hesitancy akin to Dickinson's, and with a similar brittle vision of the world and passionate feel for nature. Humphrey wrote:

This idea of 'circumference': the surrounding/enclosing of physical as well as mental space in different ways, is both challenging and powerful for me. As a metaphor it allows for absence and space without being destroyed... Dickinson's poems are very much geared to taking in and surrounding an idea with images, rather than finding a 'center.' Even her poems dealing with the desire for the infinite were expressed through this figurative system of container and contained.⁸

The skull-like forms of *Pending*, 1990, are sutured together and oddly skewered, as if roasting on a spit. This primal, head-like/egglike shell was cast from a rock that Humphrey has had for years, left by a summer subletter and later used as a doorstep. She eventually began to take the rock with her to and from Georgia, like a kind of visual anchor. The fissure between the two hollow halves of each mold seems a metaphor for personal vulnerability and the fragilities of partnership. Humphrey associates the piece with "hearing": the components hang literally pending in midair, locked in proximity yet without true communication or union.

Perhaps more so than other of Humphrey's works, *Pending* reveals her admiration for the work of Brancusi⁹ and recalls his dual naturalistic/figurative images, such as *The Sleeping Muse*, 1909-11, or various versions of *Prometheus*, 1911. His images, with their cursory human features, seem both bound to the geography of the earth and a reflection of mankind: they appear simultaneously as rock and as head, impacted with mass and energy yet magically ethereal. Humphrey's melancholic *Pending* also recalls Guston's late still-life paintings; his

monumental, bodiless heads with their ingrained anxiety count as an important point of reference for the artist.

Many of the abstract elements in Humphrey's work read anecdotally, as surrogates for human interaction. "My work has dealt with different kinds of physical and psychological boundaries,"¹⁰ she explains. Virtually all of her images refer synecdochically to the body – e.g. suggestions of a skull, a form that is the circumference of a wrist or a torso, elements that are always human in scale and confronted at eye level. In *Whisper*, 1988, palm-sized orbs rest on a row of stark metal shelves, a sharp slice through the space that seems to have momentarily arrested these amoebic forms. A single strand of thin wire escapes from the interior of each object, as if unravelled from a tightly wound, armored interior. These forms seem to germinate and to reach, perched only unstably on their horizon lines. Each, so carefully placed, emits a particular sense of personality, "like people – like their vulnerability." Indeed, Humphrey thought of the protruding line of wire as a metaphor for speech or thought – a searching probe that illicitly ventures "something not to be spoken." Bared and partially flayed, these calcified pods speak of the primal, nocturnal tremors of the mind.

*That sacred Closet when you sweep –
Entitled "Memory" –
Select a reverential Broom
And do it silently.*

*'Twill be a Labor of surprise –
Besides Identity
Of other Interlocutors
A probability –*

*August the Dust of that Domain –
Unchallenged – let it lie –
You cannot supersede itself
But it can silence you –¹¹*

Humphrey has become fascinated with the biological and psychological process of memory. She has read extensively on subjects ranging from the machinations of the brain in memory formation and retrieval, to archaic imaging systems to aid and sharpen the act of remembering. Her interest is scientific and empirical, an extension of her fascination with the mysteries and phenomena of the body. Indeed, memory *is* rooted equally in the body and brain. Psychologists, for example, at times warn patients in therapy that a simple body massage may unleash repressed images and memories – some welcome, some feared. Current scientific theory holds that memory begins with our sensory perceptions, which are gathered and processed by the brain's hippocampus but actually stored in disparate lobes. Remembering is in fact an intricate process of retrieval and reconstruction, "using a single moment or sensation to trip off the recall of others. It is like pulling a single strand of a net from the sea and drawing up behind it all the other strands until the full net is exposed."¹² The physical circuitry of our memory system is particularly compelling to Humphrey; so is the fact that a single memory rests in various mental spaces, linked by electrical connections as, too, the separate but nervously interlocked components of her sculpture exist in like unison.

Ironically, emotion functions independently of our conscious thought and is stored in another region of the brain. The complex of memories that in fact become our identity is thus ultimately highly subjective – and unverifiable. As Mary McCarthy wrote, in preface:

These memories of mine have been collected slowly, over a period of years. Some readers, finding them in a magazine, have taken them for stories.... Many a time, in the course of doing these memoirs, I have wished that I were writing fiction.... Then there are cases where I am not sure myself whether I am making something up. I think I remember but I am not positive.¹³

Matteo Ricci, a sixteenth-century Jesuit priest working in Ming China, conceived of a "memory palace," an imaginary architectural structure in which to store and locate one's memories. "To everything we wish to remember...we should give an image; and to every one of these images we should assign a position where it can repose peacefully until we are ready to reclaim it by an act of memory,"¹⁴ he wrote. Each of Humphrey's forms is similarly forged from a dormant memory, imploded psychologically and suspended in animation. Like the contents of Ricci's fictive memory chambers, her images are held in safe stasis and given peace of mind by their once-removed confinement. Humphrey seeks to corral both emotion and memory in her objects, burying them deeply into a cushioned marrow from which they emerge nonetheless, like the innards exposed at the heart of her objects.

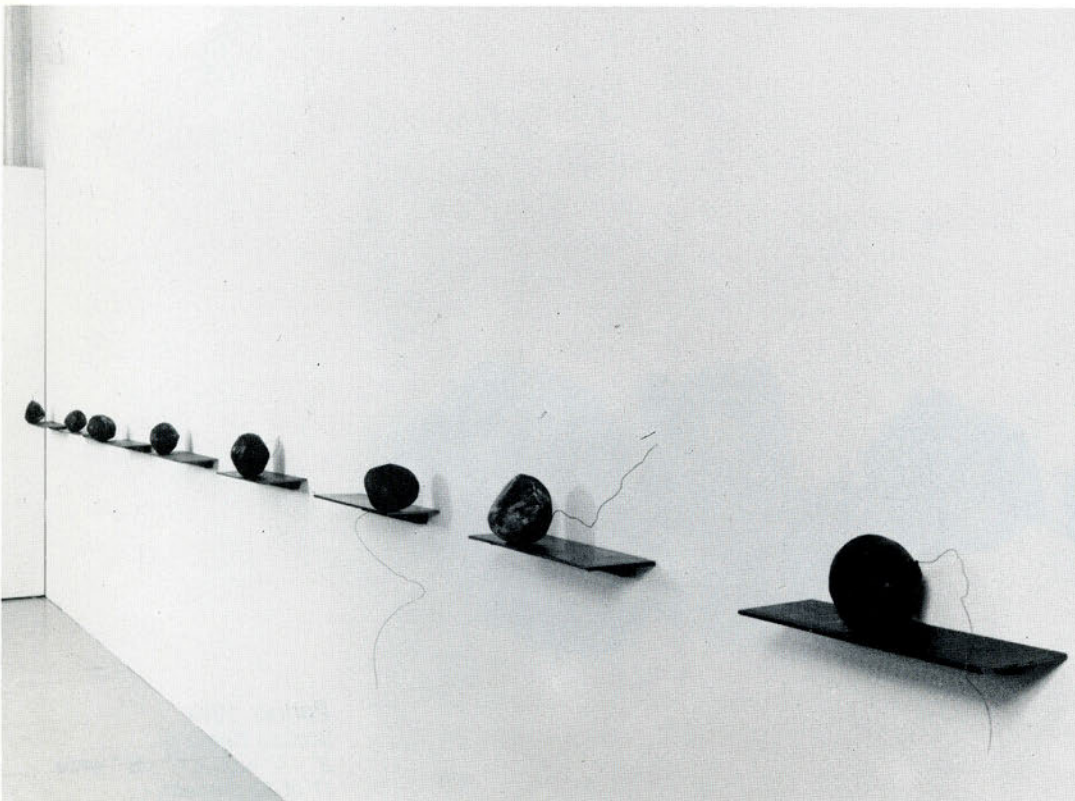
The intimacy of touch pervades Humphrey's work: her hand is ever present. A journal notation reads, "Making objects and marks with our hands is also about making possibilities, making choices/ One of the real freedoms we have." *Portraits*, 1990, is a series of abstracted hands, indeed cast from molds of her hands. These Rodin-like bronzes are barely legible globs

of matter that recall the primal act of grasping, and an almost baptismal immersion into the earth. There is a predominant sense of struggle in *Portraits*, as if the anguished digits were emerging from a cocoon or battling the centripetal pull of the planet's molten core. It is a testament to creation as much as creativity. Yet these weighty hands are also a bit like death masks; each is a fossilized premonition. Awkward, malformed, and excremental at times, they exist at a prescient midpoint between ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Humphrey alerts us that the body – as it ages and transforms, as it moves between strength and frailty – apprehends the rumblings of the universe in our image.

*The Poets light but Lamps –
Themselves – go out –
The Wicks they stimulate –
If vital Light*

*Inhere as do the Suns –
Each Age a Lens
Disseminating their
Circumference –¹⁵*

Susan Krane is Curator of 20th Century Art at the High Museum of Art and Adjunct Professor of Art History at Emory University in Atlanta. She is a distinguished lecturer and author of numerous exhibition catalogues and essays.



Whisper, 1988
plaster, paint, steel
20" x 4 1/2" x 3 1/2" each
8 units, 25' length