

June Ahrens

Elisa D'Arrigo

Carol Hepper

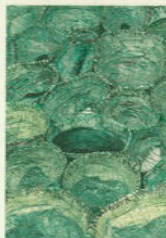
Nene Humphrey

Rebecca Smith

Some Assembly Required

Cumulative Visions

Trinkett Clark





Nene Humphrey Nene Humphrey Nene Humphrey

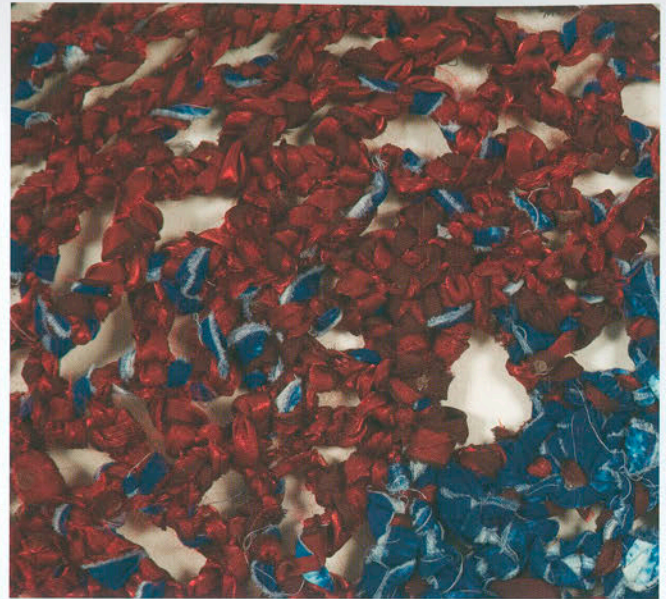
The genesis of *Every Force Evolves a Form* began with images that are highly—magnified parts of the human brain. Most of them are derived from light or electron microscopes—these instruments don't look just at the surface of the brain, but rather delve inside the brain.



I am interested in all these things about the body that you can't see without some kind of aid. These are very new—the brain is the most complex form that there is in us—on the surface it's so simple looking, and yet so amazing. The drawings are human scale. From the exterior, the brain doesn't look like a terribly complex form, but it's the most complex form in our body. I'm interested in what it can reveal when you open it up. And I'm intrigued with all of the current research about how the brain makes us who we are. I am reading a book by Joseph LeDoux called *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are*. It is all about how the brain, and in particular its synapses, creates and maintains personality. With the aid of new technology, scientists can go much deeper and learn much more. The electron microscope provides a much more detailed, much fuller look at the brain. The forms are incredibly beautiful. This fall I will work directly with a neuroscience lab that is studying very specific parts of the brain associated with fear, anxiety, etc.

I start with an image underneath—the images are slices of the brain. My images come from different places—right now I am using found imagery from various scientific sources. I scan them and then alter them slightly in color and format. The image generates the rest of the drawing—so I start very simply by laying this paper over the image and I paint on that—over the image. My work starts this way—the back image generates the drawing that's on top—at some point I take that away from the original underlay and move it around on the paper. It is moved and transposed in different ways, but the drawings are all generated from the initial scans and then the wall pieces are generated from the drawings. The painted part—my hand-made translation of the underlay—is what generates the wall piece. Not all of these drawings will become wall pieces.

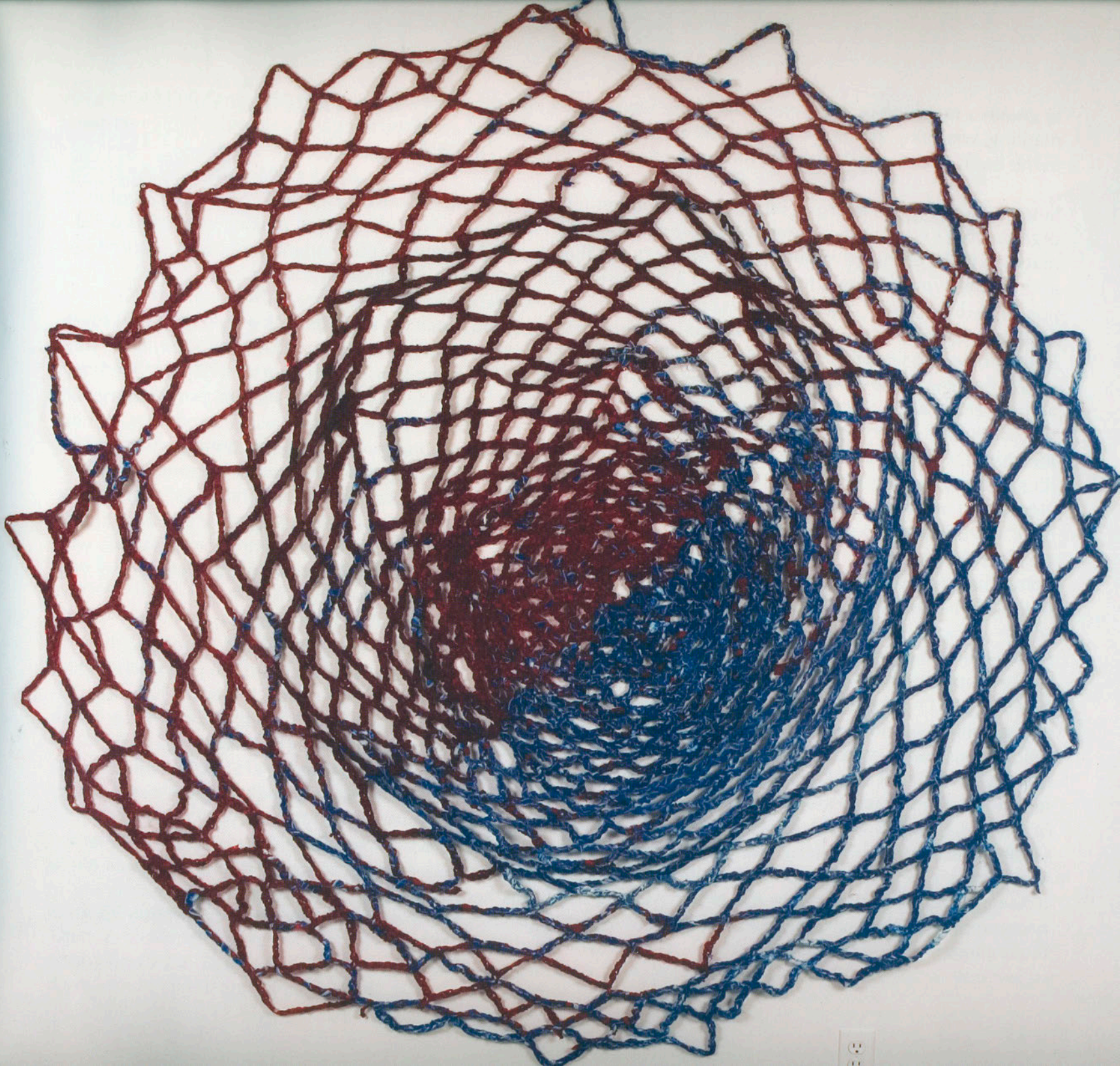
In terms of the evolution of my work, as an undergraduate, I was trained as a painter and my first work was painterly. Looking back, it was about mapping, and these recent works in a sense are about mapping. When I got to graduate school, I was using a lot of personal family history as collage elements in my paintings and then just in my drawings. And then I had a simple need for something that I could walk around. For the very first sculpture, I used a sewing chest that I found. I took it apart and embedded all of this family history into it. I think it was simply the need for me to be more physical in my work and to actually want to walk around the thing and have it present in the world. I also have this idea of knowing the world through your body—you can know it in a way through touch for instance—or by just walking up to a sculpture and around it—in a way that you can't do with something two-dimensional, with a painting. I like that the body is a conveyor of a certain kind of knowledge and intimacy.



I've used so many different kinds of materials through the years, but from the point when I arrived in New York in 1978, the focus has always been on the body and it's sometimes gone to the exterior. I've done a long series with hands. Initially, it was the interior—at one point I had a back injury where I couldn't walk and I did a lot of things about the spine, and looked at anatomical scholars like Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564), a Flemish scientist who produced beautiful layered studies of the human body. I also looked at a lot of pre-twentieth-century scientists. There were always little mistakes because dissection was forbidden by the Catholic Church (for instance, in studies of the female body), but these drawings were more interesting to me than the later, more precise anatomical renditions because in the earlier works the imagination was much more involved. And the materials always reflected what I was thinking about—the concept—so in that case it was hard against soft (using plaster and wax), and thinking about the body being so very strong and yet so fragile.

And so my work progressed in and out of the body over the years. In my work I see the body as the vehicle that enables us to understand more clearly its physical and psychological properties. That's been the crux of my work—and it's been a process of wandering around that idea from the inside to the outside to the inside again, though in different ways. Now my work has gone deep inside the body to the point where it is about things you can't really see or know unless it's aided with an electron microscope or something like that. In a sense my intention is

Right and above (detail): *Weaving Geographies*, 2004, Nene Humphrey, Photos by John Groo



to create a mapping of these elements of the brain—the cells, the synapses—and then re-introduce the hand by marking, wrapping, pinning—and to look at how various emotional and psychological states are visibly registered in the brain. That is how my work has evolved to this point with these microscopic images.

Since I started these microscopic pieces, I've been dying the fabric because I can't get the range of colors of organza that I want at the fabric store. So I dye them by hand. I grew up sewing and making clothes as a kid. I made all kinds of things—paintings, drawings, and other things. My grandmother taught me how to sew and knit and crochet—even though my father had a "ready-to-wear" store, I sewed all of my clothes.

So I grew up with that and since I was trained as a painter, when I actually started turning to sculpture, I found I didn't have the technical training. One of the first things I did was a piece at **ARTPARK** in Lewiston, New York, where people do site-specific installations. I put together a series of triangular pieces on a knoll. There was a gate at the bottom, and you could walk up a path and sit inside the sculpture and you could see out, but no one could see in—it was called *Enclosed Garden Landscape*. I sewed the whole thing together using window screening and copper wire and it made a very strong structure, but I did it based upon what I knew about sewing clothes. It's similar to making a sleeve on a dress—it is both flat and three-dimensional—so this was the same principal. I went on to use steel and copper and all of those traditional sculptural materials. But then fairly recently, I came back to fabric again because it really fits the concept that I was working with—I wanted something really sensual and fluid and tactile, something where I could use a lot of color. And it's also associated with women's work, with domestic work. That's an interesting concept for me because I never thought about that aspect until I was well into using it—that it went back to my early childhood.

All the fabric is dyed and then I make an inventory of the wrapped pins—they are organic looking but also markers—like mapping markers—in all of the different colors. The fabric is wrapped around corsage pins and stitched together and I have everything color-coded. That way later, when I install a piece for an exhibition, I have a color-coded template and can be organized about it all. When I start working on a wall piece, I start seeing which colors need to go where. I've always worked like this, making a big inventory before I start working. Then I work directly on the wall and I can be totally intuitive. Otherwise I'd feel really constrained. Here I have a whole table full of these forms and I can spend hours and hours working and I don't have to keep making them as needed.

During the time I am making them, that's my meditative time and that's when I'm thinking about the piece. I don't make specific drawings for the piece—I don't stick these drawings up on the wall and copy them—these drawings just help to generate the piece. Making the forms helps me think about what the piece is going to become or what the possibilities are. That is an important process and the time element of the process allows me the contemplation I need to formulate the next step.

14 July 2005