



NENE HUMPHREY
THE TREE BEYOND ITS LEAVES

OCTOBER 18 – NOVEMBER 30, 1996

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Nene Humphrey's vocabulary is misleadingly simple. Her materials consist mainly of copper and steel, unraveled wire rope, and homemade felt, and her forms center around a few basic elements, including spoons, hands and rings. Lately, she has begun taking photographs, in a typically hand-crafted fashion that involves pin-hole cameras of various focal lengths, all made from scratch. But each subject and medium is the distillation of long consideration. And carefully winnowed as they are, they can be reduced further to a set of interrelated, underlying concerns: sustenance, memory, touch.

Touch first, because everything in Humphrey's work centers around tactility, beginning in handwork and resulting in a poetized breed of manual objects. "Hands are almost living beings,"¹ says Henri Focillon in an essay Humphrey finds fruitful. "Sight slips over the surface of the universe," Focillon continues. "Knowledge of the world demands a kind of tactile flair."² Painstakingly untwisting strands of metal rope and tying the seemingly frail, rippled wires that result onto gridded metal armatures; cutting and hammering spoons from sheets of copper; felting raw wool by soaking, kneading, and "fulling" it; and, most directly of all, casting cupped or lightly clenched hands in a modeling material called celluclay, Humphrey demonstrates tactile flair of a high order, and creates the instruments of its development in others.

Touch is, then, primary, but it is not conclusive. The felt and metal spoons, sometimes hung amid silvery halos of frizzled wire, or suspended like enormous keys from metal rings, or strung on lengths of chain like beads on a

rosary, refer explicitly to domesticity. From within that traditionally female realm, they invoke the meditative knowledge that comes from methodical (but never precisely repetitive) labor. It is a sensual knowledge, resident in the fingertips as much as the eye. But it engages narrative on several levels as well. In talking about the spoons, which she has been making for more than three years, Humphrey refers to their symbolic life as an instrument of pain and protest in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, for instance, or, in Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, as a death camp inmate's last utensil, an irreducible implement of survival. More generally speaking, spoons are of course associated with feeding, especially of the young and otherwise helpless; they are tools of innocence and humility.

If there is nurturing in Humphrey's imagery, there is also, as suggested by her reference to Levi's Holocaust testimony, a quiet but unmistakable undercurrent of violence. Elias Canetti, in his essay on the human hand, writes that its "violent activities...are thought of as the oldest."³ Even more fundamental than the first tool use (stabbing and thrusting with sticks) is, he writes, the primal act of manual capture. In an indelible phrase, Canetti observes that the "space within the grasping hand is the anteroom of the mouth."⁴ But, he continues, the earliest progress in tool use was away from predatory behavior. The hand's "true greatness," Canetti writes, "lies in its *patience*. It is the quiet, prolonged activities of the hand which have created the only world in which we care to live."⁵ The development Canetti traces has odd parallels to the one figured in Humphrey's

work, as she submits personal and cultural memories of anger or pain to a redemptive process of manual labor, and a poeticized language of visual form.

At first glance, Humphrey's involvement with photography might seem a departure from the tactility of her other work. But the dark, blurry, richly tonal images she has made all include as subject her own hand, even if it is sometimes barely discernible. Fixed chemically — that is, physically — in the photographic process just as indelibly as by their traces on handmade objects, her hands are for the first time visibly present as well. Indeed, the photographs become self-portraits of the most tail-swallowing reflexiveness, hand-made mechanical reproductions of the artist picturing herself at work.


Still, the photographs don't engage the viewer's sense of touch in the way the sculpture does. They can be said to start at the hand's furthest reach, and proceed to a place of greater abstraction. "Father I've climbed the tree beyond its leaves,"⁶ Alice James (sister of Henry and William) says in a play by Susan Sontag. Raising herself up, hand over hand, Alice exceeded the stock of information available to her (as an educated, middle-class woman of 19th-century America), until she found herself suspended in the ether of her imagination. Similarly, Humphrey's work leads us from traditional patterns of work, with its handholds in organic growth, to an unguarded place of exceptionally clear vision.

Nancy Princenthal



Haft #1, 1994.
22" x 15" x 13"
celuclay, steel rod.

1. Henri Focillon, "In Praise of Hands," *The Life of Forms in Art*, Zone Books, New York, 1989, page 157.
2. *Ibid*, page 162.
3. Elias Canetti, "The Entrails of Power," *Crowds and Power*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1984, page 213.
4. *Ibid*, page 204.
5. *Ibid*, page 213.
6. Susan Sontag, *Alice in Bed*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, page 18.



Hunger, 1996.
44" x 28" x 13"
felt, wire, steel rod.



Eleanor's Glove, 10" x 4" diameter. felt, wire, 1996

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SANDLER HUDSON GALLERY

OPENING RECEPTION
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18, 1996
6:30 — 8:30 P.M.

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