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A Performance Where Victorian Mourning Braiding Meets Neuroscience

Artist Nene Humphrey's 'Circling the Center' is a striking visual metaphor for grief.

Carey Dunne | October 14, 2016

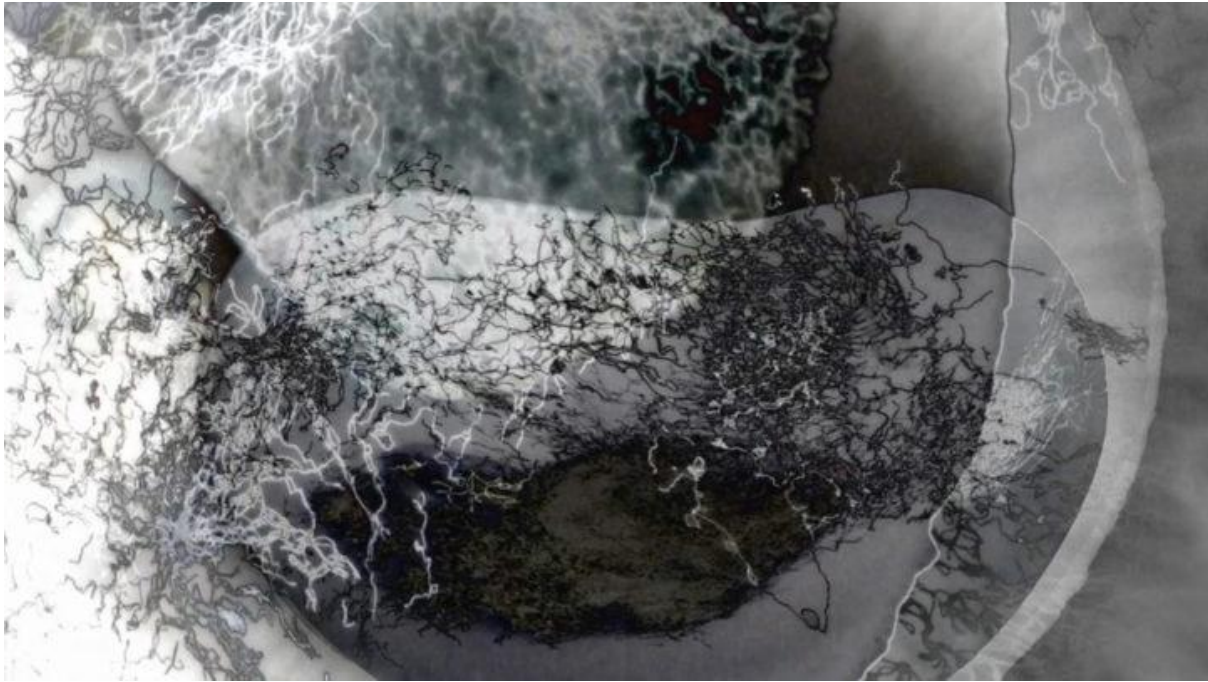


Nene Humphrey, from 'Circling the Center' (2016) (photo by Simon Hardy, all images courtesy 3-Legged Dog)

In Victorian England, those stricken by grief often took part in a tradition called mourning braiding, which involved weaving locks of a departed loved one's hair into intricate pieces of jewelry. Made at a cylindrical "braiding table," these bracelets, amulets, rings, and brooches were wearable mementos of the dead. The practice went all but extinct after World War I, though vintage pieces of mourning jewelry show up in [antique shops](#) now and again.

The lost art of mourning braiding is beautifully dramatized in *Circling the Center*, a meditative performance by [Nene Humphrey](#). As the artist-in-residence in the laboratory of neuroscientist [Joseph LeDoux](#), Humphrey drew artistic inspiration from a scientific source: new research on the neurological underpinnings of emotion.

The project began after Humphrey's husband died unexpectedly in 2007. "I was trying to regroup myself back in the studio, and I was sitting at my laptop googling words like 'mourning,' 'brain,' 'pattern,'" Humphrey told Hyperallergic. "Suddenly, up popped Victorian mourning braiding."



Nene Humphrey, from 'Circling the Center' (2016) (photo by Rudolf Costin)

Before her husband's death, Humphrey had made a series of drawings based on imagery of the amygdalae, a pair of almond-shaped sets of neurons that help process memories and emotions, including fear. Picturing abstracted dendrites, which resemble frayed strands of hair, the drawings hung on her Brooklyn studio walls. When she began her Google search, she realized they bore more than a passing resemblance to the plaited patterns of mourning braids.

"I thought, 'Oh my god, these braids and the amygdala have an incredible affinity, both visually and psychologically,'" Humphrey says. "They are both used to help process grief." After reading the 1875 book *Art of Hair Work: Hair Braiding and Jewelry of Sentiment*, Humphrey began to incorporate the Victorian craft into her art practice. "Braiding was a way of transforming grief into something very beautiful," she says. "And the repetitive action allows you to stay really present with your emotions, like a form of meditation."

In *Circling the Center*, which is staged in the round at [3LD Art & Technology Center](#), gauzy white swaths of scrim are tented over the stage, while years' worth of Humphrey's mourning braids hang on the walls like giant nests. The performance opens with a poem by Tom Sleight

that, harking back to the amygdalae, compares the mourning braid to the mysterious workings of the grieving brain: “If you were to peer into the mourner’s skull / where all this feeling is electrical signals / firing, what you’d see are nerve fibers, / long strands of tissue that look like dead people’s hair / braided into amulets, lockets / in barrows and old tombs,” chant two women in not-quite unison.

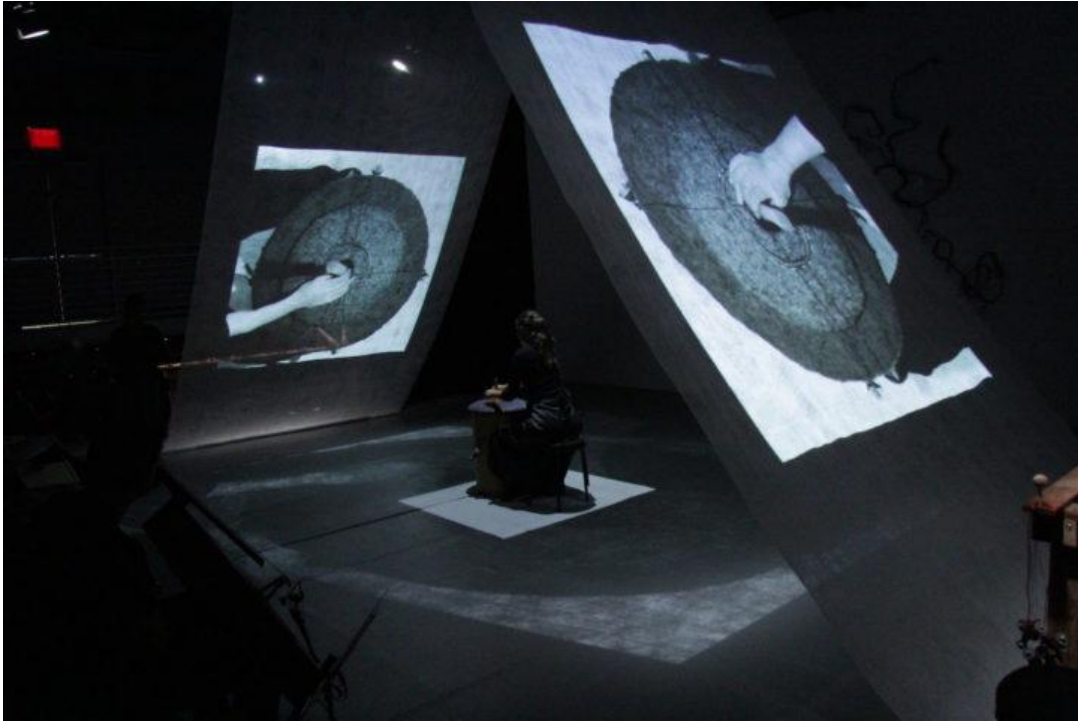


Nene Humphrey, from ‘Circling the Center’ (2016) (photo by Rudolf Costin)

Watching the performance feels like peering into a stranger’s dark, interminable dream. And, as with dreams, it’s hard to describe exactly what unfolds without sounding vague and rambling. It’s an abstract narrative — a montage of evocative images, sounds, and choreography that comes together to create a striking visual metaphor for grief.

A woman in mourning garb sits spotlighted at a braiding table, stitching strands of red copper wire on weighted bobbins. Four women in black aprons chant braiding instructions in haunting four-part harmonies, which punctuate a sonic score by Roberto Carlos Lange. A live cello plays achingly over ambient noise recordings, featuring sounds of human breathing, metronomes, bobbins knocking the sides of the braiding table, and rats serenading each other in the [LeDoux Lab](#) at New York University.

All the while, Humphrey’s drawings of brain circuitry flash on the tented scrim, along with footage of braiding tables and abstract patterns. At times, the looming projections seem to threaten to swallow up the lone braiding woman.



Nene Humphrey, from 'Circling the Center' (2016) (photo by Simon Hardy)

In the finale, the singing women surround the braider, helping her stitch the wires in a rhythmic, choreographed sequence. Circling the table and chanting, they resemble witches around a cauldron, performing a spell to exorcise the woman's grief. Soon, the cello crescendoes, and the lights go up.

What makes the performance so spellbinding is that, like grief itself, it doesn't quite feel over even when it's supposed to be. It sparks an eerie sense that, like something out of a fable, this woman's process is never-ending, and the 45-minute performance is just a random fragment. If you walked out of the theater and returned years later, the mourning woman would still be there, braiding her red copper wire.



Nene Humphrey, from 'Circling the Center' (2016) (photo by Simon Hardy)



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Nene Humphrey's Circling the Center continues at 3LD Art & Technology Center (80 Greenwich Street, Lower Manhattan) through October 15.

Dunne, Carey. "A Performance Where Victorian Mourning Braiding Meets Neuroscience." *Hyperallergic*, 14 October, 2016. [online]