

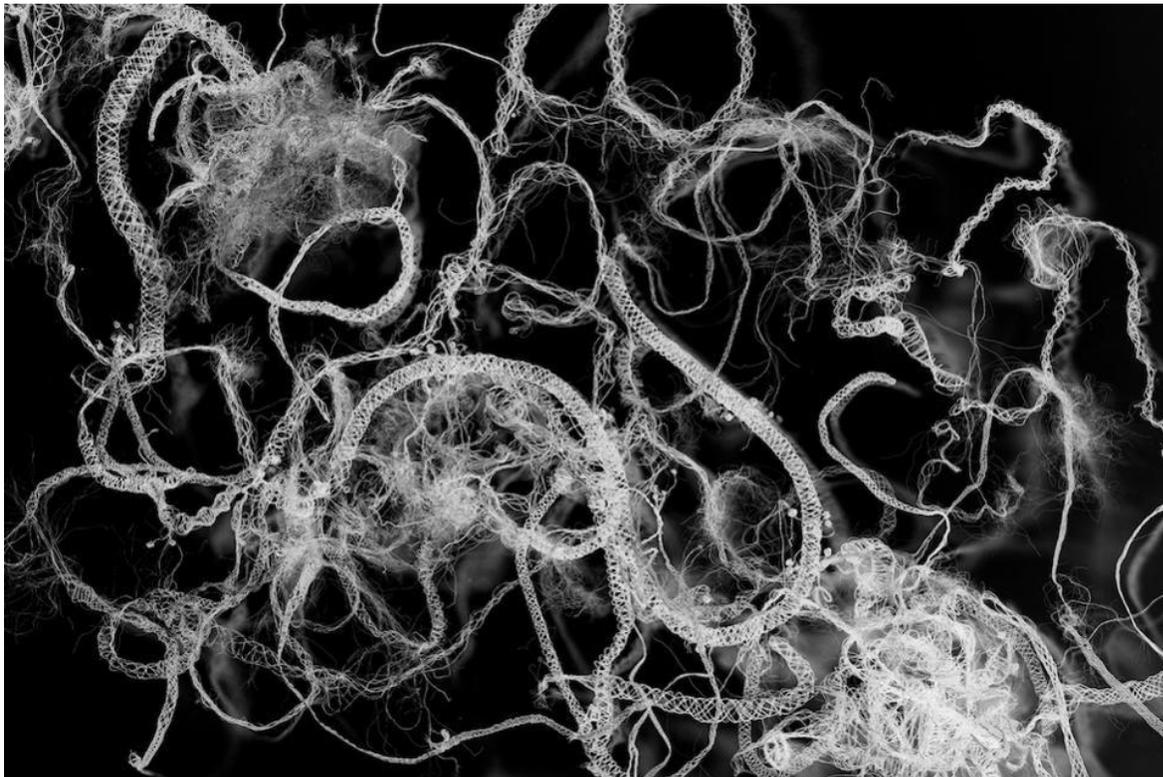
# Forbes

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## How The Artist Nene Humphrey Turned Objects Into Mourning

[Brienne Walsh](#), CONTRIBUTOR



Courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace and the artist.

*Detail of mourning braids by Nene Humphrey.*

How does one make an object that mourns? In Victorian England, people gathered together the hair of the deceased, and used it to make amulets that they could carry on their bodies. This practice was known as mourning braiding, and it involved a group of people sitting around a circular loom, where they wove a strand that could be turned into a bracelet, a pin, or even a likeness of the recently departed.

The artist Nene Humphrey came upon evidence of mourning braiding when she, herself, was mourning. It was 2006, and she had recently lost her husband. “The best way to explain it was that I was wandering psychologically in my studio trying to figure out some grounding things to continue working,” she told me. She Googled “patterns and mourning.” What popped up on her screen was startling.

Right before her husband had died, Humphrey had begun a residency at the Joseph LeDoux neuroscience lab at New York University. There, she was given free reign of the resources on offer. Along with asking questions of the scientists, and learning what she could from their research, she spent time drawing the tangled and intricate web of neurons that construct the amygdala, which is the part of the brain that processes emotions. She did so by looking at the amygdala through a high-powered microscope, and drawing the patterns she saw with the help of a camera lucida attached to the lens.

She hung the drawings on the walls of her studio. They looked just like the pictures of the Victorian mourning braids.

“It was a big jumping off point,” Humphrey said of seeing the two side by side. “Visually, they have affinities. But also, they’re both processors of emotions.”

The comparison birthed a series, “Circling the Center,” which revolves around the creation of mourning braids made from wire. The series has had multiple iterations consisting of performances, installations, videos and drawings at locations such as the Savannah College of Art and Design, Dixon Place, the 2014 BRIC Biennial, and the Sheridan Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania. The latest exhibition birthed from the series, entitled *Transmission*, is [currently open at Lesley Heller Workspace on the Lower East Side through February 18, 2018.](#)



Courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace and the artist.  
*An installation view of Transmission.*

Unlike past iterations, which included participation from dozens, and sometimes hundreds, of volunteers, *Transmission* is devoid of what Humphrey calls “live elements.” The front gallery is filled with a tangled web of the braids, which look like a strange, non-organic form of moss creeping along the walls. On a screen composed of ribbons hanging over a doorway, a black and white video shows the top of a loom, upon which a pair of hands weaves a braid. The stick that holds the evolving braid in the center of the loom looks enticingly phallic; it bobs back and forth across the projection, almost pornographic.



Courtesy Lesley Heller Workspace and the artist.

*A still from the video.*

The screen belies what lies beyond; it leads to a room in which another video is played in slightly delayed loops on facing walls. This video has nothing sexual about it. Instead, it shows a hazy glimpse of a globe consisting of tangled threads, followed by an animation of lines, leaving the viewer to wonder if they are looking at the brain, or something even more alien. In fact, the globe is a sphere of braids made by volunteers while Humphrey was in residency at the University of Pennsylvania, and the animation of lines is one of her drawings of the amygdala. Overlaid on top of it all is sound score by Roberto Carlos Lange that consists of screeching, creaking sounds. Again, one wants to make associations with the brain — could it be the sound of neurons firing across an expanse of gray matter? The outer space that exists in our skulls? Humphrey told me the sound is another collage, composed of snippets of people cutting wire and laying looms, as well as the serenading of mating white rats in the lab, among other sounds. Beneath the video projections lie abandoned work stations. In the back of the room are drawings of the braids clumped together.

The effect of the installation is unfulfilling. There is so much that is teased upon— the braids, the patterns we make that unwittingly imitate the natural forms in our body, the way that memory threads through our consciousness, the way that the only way to alleviate grief, if only temporarily, is to be distracted from it by the rhythms of our own bodies. But none of it is delved into. In the end, the installation feels like a mere preview of a much larger and more comprehensive project.

Was it cathartic, I asked Humphrey, to make “Circling The Center” while she mourned her husband?

“I don’t think you find something and do it, and whoosh, the mourning disappears,” Humphrey told me. “I think it’s a long process that just becomes part of you. It’s really profound. It has connected me to the world. Once you experience the death part of it, it brings you into a much more intimate place with your humanity.”

I wish I had seen the series with the live elements, where some of Humphrey's connections with her world would have been more apparent.