

# Art in America

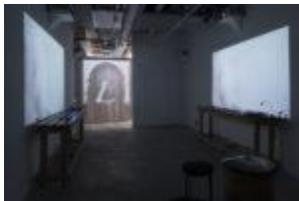
REVIEWS Mar 1, 2018

## Nene Humphrey

NEW YORK

at Lesley Heller Workspace

by [Sarah Rose Sharp](#)



Nene Humphrey: *Transmission Braid Wall 1*, 2018, braided wire, dimensions variable; at Lesley Heller Workspace.

Nene Humphrey became interested in the practice of Victorian mourning braiding—in which jewelry and keepsakes were made using the hair of departed loved ones—when coping with the death of her husband, artist Benny Andrews, in 2006. In the years since, she has developed a body of work based on the craft, processing the initial shock of her grief through many layers of abstraction in a project, “Circling the Center” (2008–), that bridges sculpture, drawing, sound, video, performance, and participatory process art. “Transmission” at Lesley Heller Workspace featured two of Humphrey’s sprawling wall-mounted sculptures made of braided wire, a set of charcoal drawings depicting light through wire forms, one of the custom braiding apparatuses and some of the cutting tables that Humphrey has used to make her braids, and a video installation whose four channels play footage in what she characterizes as a call-and-response pattern.

The heart of Humphrey’s project is the braiding apparatus. She jury-rigged her first such construction in 2006 and has since refined the design using instructions from a nineteenth-century manual. The device is a circular, barrel-like construction with a central hole on top, in which a wooden dowel is placed. To create the braids, Humphrey or her collaborators wrap jewelry wire of various gauges around the pole. The resulting works comprise voluminous masses of woven loops and curls in various states of unraveling, their ends balling into knots or frizzing into tangles. The frenetic whorls also seem to suggest neural networks, the resemblance perhaps enhanced by research on the amygdala—the region of the brain believed to produce emotional responses—that Humphrey has conducted as artist-in-residence at the LeDoux Lab, the neuroscience center at New York University.

The video piece in the exhibition assembles material Humphrey has gathered over the course of “Circling the Center” to date. It features MRI scans of her brain taken at the LeDoux Lab, as well as footage of her braiding performances, including an event she organized as part of her 2009 residency at the Savannah College of Art and Design, where volunteer weavers meditatively filled a giant, rotating sphere with braid work over the course of two weeks. There are also sequences, shot from above and relatively close up, showing a regular collaborator of Humphrey’s using one of the braiding apparatuses. The soundtrack to the video installation is a haunting audio piece made by Roberto Carlos Lange that incorporates the whispers of weavers reciting their pattern, the mating calls of laboratory rats, and the subtle clicking of wire spools.

Humphrey describes herself as a collage artist, and the show—with its bringing together of sculpture, video, sound, and drawings—did suggest an ambitious interdisciplinary collage. But Humphrey also proves herself to be a capable braider—not only in the literal sense, but also in her successful braiding of grief into a thing of beauty, just as the Victorians wished to do. Collage suggests a layering of distinct elements, whereas braiding is a synthesis, and Humphrey’s work has achieved a sense of that degree of interconnectivity—you cannot pick out just one strand without beginning to unravel the others. Over time and through various iterations, Humphrey has leveraged her loss into the creation of a matrix of meditative moments and compelling objects.