

New York

Judy Moonelis

John Elder Gallery

The recent work of Judy Moonelis engages the meaning of portraiture in an era of electronic reproduction. Moonelis, intrigued by the microbiology of touch and its psychological implications, works with human models and the low-tech, tactile process of fingers pinching fine-grained clay. The results are miniature-scale, porcelain portrait heads—heads that are often open in the back where Moonelis attached lightweight, feathery copper wires representing sensory micro-receptors of touch. These wires move like wildly sketched lines, some making complex networks, others more unified into several strands. As if plugged into an imaginary skin, some of these spatial, line-like extensions end in bits of things such as glass, woven metal, or paper. The connotations of these “touch receptors” activate the quiet expressions of the faces to which they are attached, giving them an emotional depth by suggesting how elemental touch is in creating the perceptual matrix within which we live.

In her earlier series of *Memory Portraits* (1996–98), Moonelis became aware of the importance of the sense of touch to memory; in *Touch Portraits*, these invisible sense organs are emphasized, metaphors for biochemical energy and human interaction. When someone walks by the heads or comes close to them for a more intimate examination, the wire extensions of the portraits physically vibrate against the stillness of the porcelain faces. Moonelis’s attention to micro-anatomical detail, displayed also in the *Touch Wall*, demonstrates a nostalgia for anatomical diagrams. While her depictions are less graphically disturbing than medical illustrations, they offer the same disruptions of the intact body. They also complicate portraiture by fusing representations of the internal and external body into one image: more real in expressing how we experience our bodies, but less



Judy Moonelis, *Touch Portraits*, 2000. Mixed media, 5–7 ft. high. View of installation.

real in terms of how the body actually appears to the naked eye.

Moonelis suppresses the gross body in these portraits by concentrating on the face as a focal point of portraiture. The face offers us immediacy and intimacy. It is where we try to read the feelings of the

people around us. Yet mounted on five- to seven-foot-high copper poles, the faces emerged like those in an 18th-century “conversation piece” of informal groups in stage-like tableaux, popularized by Hogarth but made eccentrically grand by artists who combined a number of individual studies, disconnecting the heads from their bodies and their imagined environment but giving the faces an

intense, almost aura-like effect. With very different means, the *Touch Portraits* create a disquieting contemporary group portrait.

Moonelis’s portraits, made through hours and hours of touching, subliminally satisfy some of our tactile desires. When viewing the portraits as a group, it is almost impossible not to reach out our fingers. They hover like a magnetic field of desire, and the gallery/museum space, with its rules against touching, becomes analogous to the public space of our repressed bodily desires.

This repression of the body also suggests why Moonelis de-emphasizes the gross body through dislocation. The stand-in for the body, the copper pole, reads as a conduit for electrical current. Metaphorically this current represents the neural charges of the tactile body and the possibility of bodily contact through perception. But this substitution means that Moonelis has represented the body as a single, three-dimensional abstract line. Thus the gross body is conceptually minimized and we are left with the head, the site of the perception of touch and the publicly accepted part of the socialized body.

Because portraiture is no longer evaluated for its verism, it now relates the obscurity of the self, the obliqueness of the personality, moments of perception and contact, and the unfixed identity. Without bodies, without gesture or character, the elements of *Touch Portraits* become complex layers of meaning contrasted to the simplistic ciphers of portraiture offered by media genres such as reality TV, celebrity promotion, and broadcast news.

—John Kaufman