

Sculpture

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Judy Moonelis

John Elder Gallery

The whole is greater than the sum of the parts, so the old saying goes. But sometimes the parts can convey the whole. The *Nike of Samothrace* does not need another appendage to convey her power. Portraits are supposed to record the sitter, but the artist also adds his/her own personality. We learn as much about Picasso

as we do Dora Maar in his paintings of his lover. Both of these thoughts hit me as I walked through Judy Moonelis's solo exhibition. This body of work, called "Memory Portraits," began with a series of heads that the artist did at Washington State University in Pullman in 1995. Installed on the wall, they comprise the *Pullman Necklace*. The heads hark back to Moonelis's earlier highly expressive and more abstract figural work, but this new work actually depicts the individuals who sat for Moonelis. Their masklike, staring visages are all smaller than life-size, some quite shrunken. Their scale forces a close-up encounter just as intimate as the posing sessions must have been. Even though the handling is realistic, Moonelis still adds her own touch, both figuratively and literally, as she works with the malleable material. She has roughly modeled the clay to build up the likeness, adding encaustic to impart color—a pale green to tint a pupil or a touch of pink on the one irreverent, outstretched tongue, the only active gesture of any of these faces.

Clay has often been used metaphorically to stand for flesh, and its appeal to figural sculptors is obvious. Although it can be glazed to realistically render flesh tones, Moonelis has opted for more subtlety and a more persuasive allusion to life. Each of the heads is saggar-fired, adding an element of chance and reasserting the character of Moonelis's chosen medium, offering a material reference to the vagaries of life.

The sitters were not known to Moonelis for the most part, though they began to share parts of their lives, some of their memories as they posed. As the series progressed, instead of full faces, a portion of the anatomy began to suffice for the sitter: an ear,

a hand, a foot. Oddly the feet are the most evocative. *Magnetic Touch* (1998) is a tiny foot, rather like an ankle-high boot yet carefully and delicately modeled, each toe individually rendered, each tendon carefully expressed, the whole gingerly placed on a disc covered with steel pins. Suspended with copper wire, its penny color contrasting with the silvery pins

and the ivory of the foot, it all appears unstable, uncomfortable, tenuous—not a bad metaphor for treading through life.

In *Pair* (1998) two feet, rather like *sabots*, are sitting on two concentric wire circles on top of an almond-eyed metal mesh circle. The two feet are a pair but they do not belong to the same person for one is large and the

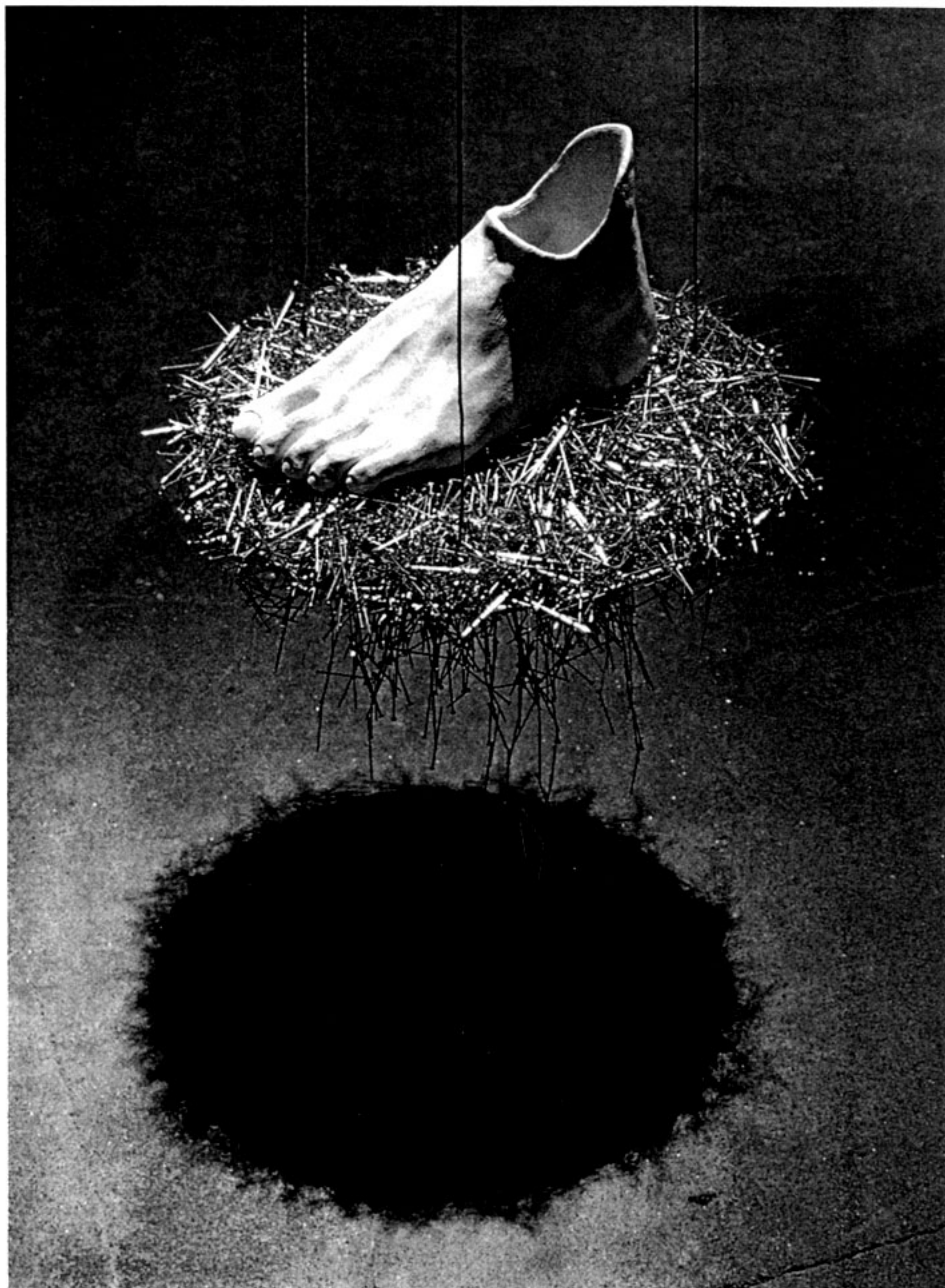
other small, an adult and a child, or perhaps one person represented at different ages, the past and the present or the past present as memory.

All of the work on view is haunting and poetic. Like the idea of memory that intrigues Moonelis, the sculptures occupy a different plane, a Surrealist one that is often reinforced by Moonelis's

combining of clay, bearing her signature touch of hand or hand-guided tool, with found objects. *Hand Stack* (1996-98) consists of wire baskets, mostly rectangular but for the top one, which is circular and divided into quarters. The baskets contain hands: a pair clasping; one beseeching because it is empty or perhaps it is a gesture of offering; and two almost cartoon-like fingers, outscaled in comparison with the rest and jarring, a bit too blunt for the poetry of the piece.

Each piece tells a story or many stories, some in the sitter's own words, which Moonelis has inscribed on the sculptures. There is also the story of the experience of making seen in the marks of Moonelis's hand and the fire, as well as the stories viewers bring to this evocative work.

—Karen S. Chambers



Judy Moonelis, *Magnetic Touch* (detail), 1998. Mixed media, 84 x 9 x 9 in. overall.