

## Judy Moonelis

John Elder Gallery  
New York, NY

As has often been noted, clay is a perfect metaphor for flesh. It is such a visceral medium, so human, so earthbound. Judy Moonelis has certainly capitalized on that fact in her most recent work, modeling feet, hands, ears, and heads. But her subject is not the figure or body art. Instead her work is far more abstract: the subject is memory.

Moonelis's "Memory Portraits" are taken from life, often with the words of the sitter crudely scratched on the sculpture. For example, incised on *Memory Portrait: Ear* (1996-98) is 45-year-old Terrence Brenner's comment: "I don't feel like I'm entirely contained within this body. There's memory out there, too." It is a sentiment that resonates with the viewer. What makes Moonelis's pieces so powerful is that although they are highly individual, the impact is universal and thus becomes personal again, but this time to the viewer.

Moonelis's handling of the medium supports this message. These pieces are naturalistic, but none of her modeling is precise to the point of hyperrealism. The expressionism is restrained—just as the lives most of us lead. The scale is smaller than life-size, encouraging an intimate relationship to it. Color is surprisingly important, since it is not realistic or flamboyant. The muted cream, blush, and earth tones eloquently convey the ordinariness of most lives.

With the exception of the portrait heads, where the tone is deliberately mundane, these sculptures have a strongly surreal quality. This is clearest in *Wheels* (1996-98). An underscaled hand rests on a tireless bicycle wheel, connected by taut and sensuously colored copper cable to a chandelier mounted on the wall. This reincarnated object, with two hands clasped at its center, is like a mandala or perhaps a many-armed dancing Shiva. The expressive quality always present in Moonelis's work, has reached a new plane, one that is well worth exploring.

Karen S. Chambers



*Sweet Element* (1998), 5" x 15" x 15", clay, copper, iron, rock sugar.