Lost and Found

The Sculpture of Judy Moonelis

Article by John Kaufman

Magnetic Touch. 1998.
Mixed media: 2.2 m x 22.5 x 22.5 cm.

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, SCULPTOR JUDY MOONELIS has been asking those who pose for her portraits how they remember. She was prompted to do this when the sitters themselves, most whom she did not know, began telling her of memories while she modelled their physical features. Since many of her subjects responded in this manner, Moonelis made it a part of her sculptural process. As this process has developed, it has changed the meaning and resonance of her work. This was evident in her 1998 exhibition at the John Elder Gallery in New York.

Moonelis believes that things hold the past within them. Any object, by the nature of its being physical, has the associative power of signifying meaning. Sculpture is one of these objects where such associative meanings are concentrated. As such, all objects are powerful evocators of memory. Moonelis has intensified the connotative meaning of her work by combining found objects with her clay sculpture. She has also been inscribing the clay with the words of her sitters. With these sculptures, Moonelis expresses one of the main themes of art at the end of the 20th century, that of memory as an imaginative recreation of individual and collective loss. Moonelis' working process makes these subsumed recollections surface in specific details by using the human body as a carrier of these meanings.

It is the works' specificity that brings up questions about these recollections and about the experience and perception of memory itself. The scratches, the colours, the sensual shaping marks of the surface pinched by the human hand, many made while the artist is listening to the sitters' retellings – the patinas of encaustic, stains, pigments, terra sigillata that variegate the light of the surface like odourless human skin that has been buried or just washed – fingers, hands, ears, and especially feet and heads, fragments of the body evoking the way one remembers touching a lover, the absent body recalled visually but physically impossible to retrieve – a closeness and intimacy of scale with body parts too small and next to another, out-of-scale, like a child next to an adult but neither young nor old – body parts resting or contained in installations of wire and wood, baskets, boxes, wheels, holders of memory, circles of the cosmos, what-goes-around-comes-around, creating the absurd humour of juxtaposition – feet that can't stand on the ground because they are on nails, smooth chunks of glass or rock sugar that are suspended in the pull of gravity – the measure of the human body returning again and again as a reminder of just how tall and frail and bound to the earth we are – heads that enclose space with words or colours or branch-like structures inside, heads that in real-life would hold memories – all of these constitute Moonelis' work as a network of recollections.

One part of this network of memories is physical sensation. When we touch something that we have touched before, we identify it again. We remember the sensations in our fingertips and hands and other organs of touch. Over time, accumulations of memories of such sensations get coded into the muscular system. These accumulations allow physical sensations to be associative. Such memories enable us to walk or ride a bike or dance. Marcel Proust, like many of the Symbolists at the end of the last century, thought that we can only remember what is absent and that we can only remember because we use our imagination. But isn't that how we experience our own bodies and the bodies of others – as fragments, either because of sensation or visual observation, embellished by memory.

As in Moonelis' work, we think of a hand, foot or face. We might touch a part of our body or someone else's body. Unless we are looking in a mirror, we can only look at a small portion of a body and we never see the front and back of it at one time. The bodies of others are perceived at a greater distance than our own. There is always something hidden. We cannot see or feel all of a body. We can only conceptualise its totality as an integrated whole. This dismembering of the body is accentuated in contemporary culture because we are taught by photography, film and the media to see in close-up and momentary montage. All of Moonelis' recent sculptures demonstrate this conceptualised sensitivity to the body.

Each time we touch the body, the physical sensation lessens the memory of previous touchings. We doubt our memory of touch more than we do conceptualised memories because language and thought tend to make conceptualisation seem more rational and easy to manage. This helps us live through our body in the present. It is a good survival technique. But it is the dissociation of the body through time, the experience of the body part, that lets us remember physical sensations and sensory perceptions. Only in this process of disunity does the imagination allow us to disconnect from the present and slip into the past by foregrounding a memory. This links fragmentation to memory and imagination. Thus when Moonelis fragments the body in her representations, she is connecting to associations of the past.

Theodor Adorno viewed fragmentation in montage as an avant-garde refusal of aestheticised unity, thereby negating the formal meaning of modernism and creating critical agency. In Moonelis' assemblage, the found objects still evoke real world associations but the shock value or aesthetic negation of the fragment has lost much of its impact due to its institutionalisation within the history of modernism. Thus, the fragment, while maintaining its additive power to connote meaning, has become a historical marker of

Dada and Surrealism and their successors. No longer novel or shocking, the fragment now becomes a trope of the past, imbued with the memory of the avant-garde's attempt to politicise formal innovation. Contemporary artists like Moonelis, conscious of this historicising and not as motivated as before to be original in formal innovation, use this association to connect art of the present to art of the past, inscribing art history into their work. In the late 1990s, Moonelis is one of several artists whose use of art historical references has become much more subtle than the gross, appropriative parodies of the 1980s. Appropriation is no longer the issue. Instead, the emphasis is on the combinative meaning of these multiple levels of meanings.

Moonelis makes objects reveal what she is learning. And what she learns evolves out of her process with her materials. This is especially prominent in ceramics and assemblage. Moonelis uses her materials to create a sense of ambiguity. Her surfaces and arrangements are filled with contradictions of materials. A piece may look smooth but is actually covered with small scratches: a representation of flesh may look soft but is actually fired clay. Moonelis employs formal contradictions, not to make her work difficult to understand, but to involve her viewer in the past. If the viewer is to remember, they too must use their imaginative powers to explore possible associative meanings. Contradiction and ambiguity cause the imagination of the viewer to connect to personal associations. Viewers are not 'told' what to think, but stimulated to remember. These personal associations in turn access a larger network of common cultural meanings. Much of the discussion of identity in contemporary art is contained within these recollective networks.

An example of how Moonelis uses these associative networks is her use of circular shapes such as wheels, gears and tabletops upon which to rest sculpted body fragments. Moonelis says that these circles relate to her looking at Buddhist representations of the law especially those early works where Buddha's body could not be represented because of respect for the dissolution of physicality in his Nirvana. In Buddist representations, a wheel often symbolises the law of reincarnation. Viewers with knowledge of Buddhist iconography might perceive this, but others who know their modern art history would be more likely to relate a bicycle wheel to Duchamp's readymade. Another person might remember what it feels like to ride a bicycle.

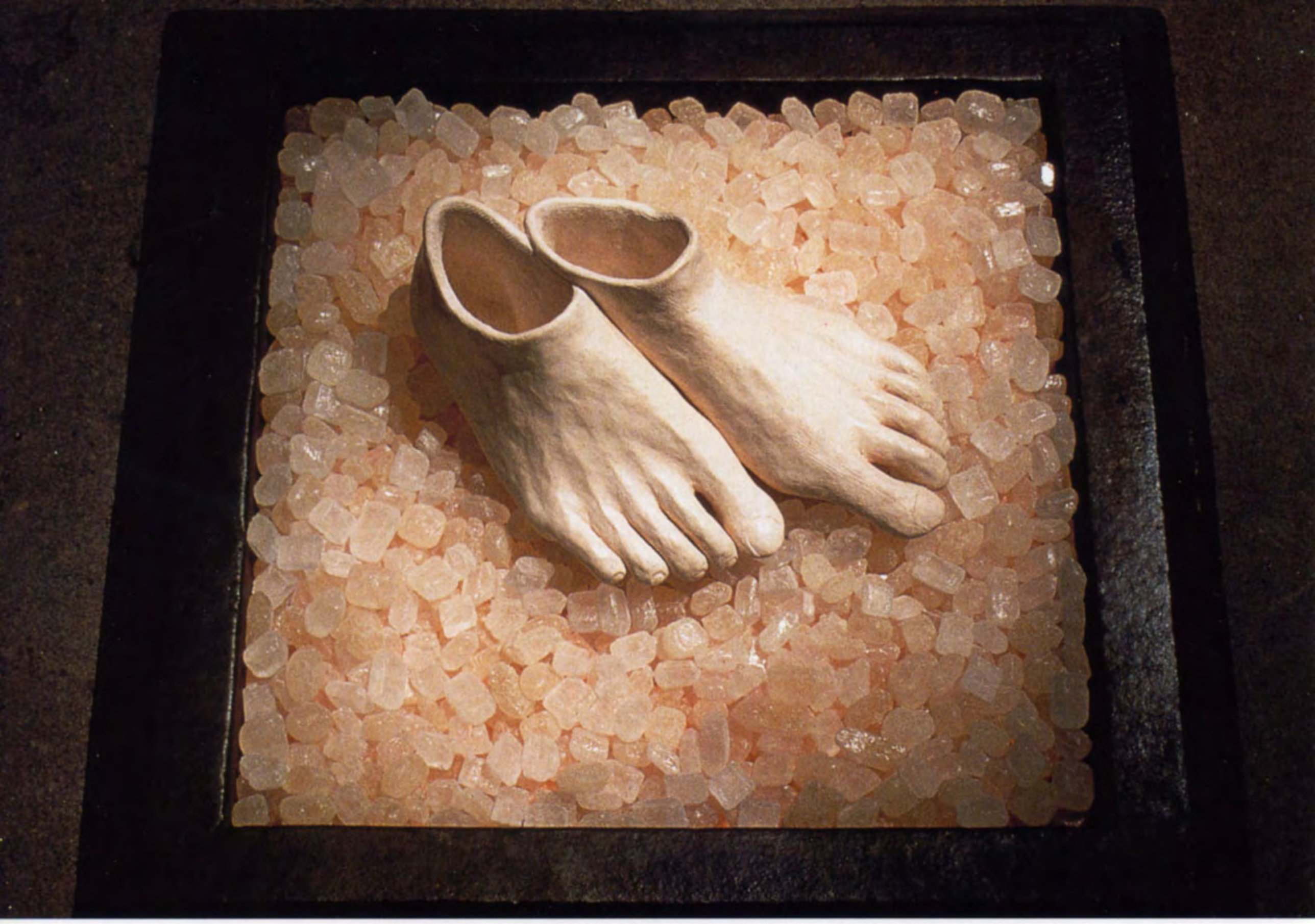
Some viewers might have all these associations and many more. This cursory examination reveals that not only is memory disjointed and cultural, but that its path is personal and idiosyncratic. This has much to do with the dissociative nature of our conscious state of perception and being.

The juxtapostioning of dissimilar objects, which Moonelis employs and which was made prominent in Modernism through the Surrealist object, also reveals memory. Yet Moonelis is not a Surrealist because her focus is not on the unconscious but on active memory. Though memory relates to the unconscious and this relationship gives memory its uncanny power, memory itself is conscious thought. The American memoirist, Patricia Hampl, defines psychotherapy as our capacity to heal brought forth into memory – or the making of the unconscious conscious. Many of Moonelis' pieces seem to be just that – concrete realisations of imaginative memory. In *Magnetic Touch*, the suspended delicately sculpted foot rests on magnetised steel pins in a manner to suggest the locus of memory. In *Sweet Element*, the foot resting on the almost iridescent rock sugar connotes a similar place of remembrance. In *Memory Portraits: Heads*, the faces seem entranced in evocations of the past and much of this feeling comes from the juxtapositioning of individualised facial characteristics with particularised facial expressions.

Hampl also suggests that we struggle against forgetting as an act of personal survival. In other words, our personal and cultural identities are based on memory. This may seem self-evident, but the relationship of memory to contemporary art has been overshadowed by a limited notion of identity, usually defined by race or gender. To appreciate much of the art being made today one needs to recognise the relationship of recollection to who we are. Identity comes from our past made present through memory. Identity and memory cannot be separated. These ideas are made visual in Moonelis' work.

The words that Moonelis scratches on to the body parts function more like signatures of authencity than narratives. They are often inconspicuously placed on the side or back of a piece. They look more like a visual effect than calligraphy. Only upon close inspection do they become legible. In addition to aphoristic remembrances and thoughts on memory itself, they include the name and age of the speaker and the date of their conversation. They prove the uniqueness of the piece by referring it back to a real person and add an historical value by implying that they capture that person as a particular representation of an individual at a specific point in time. It is telling that Moonelis emphasises these quotes rather than her own signature because it is this subtle subverting of the artist's presence that gives the work its documentary effect, making even the sculpted elements seem like found objects.

What are we to make of the fact that Moonelis' sitters want to express remembrances when they are being objectified as physical representations of the self? If we examine the portrait heads, they don't look like hyperrealistic portraits – it would be difficult to identify anyone from them – and yet they appear to be based on observations of an individual. They don't look generic or like replicas of each other. Instead they



Sweet Element. *1998. Clay, mixed media, 12.5 x 37.5 x 37.5 cm.*

look like people lost in thought about something specific. Their faces are where the imaginative mixing of memory and reality, of the artist's and the sitter's present and past, results in the loss of something. The recollection of the physical, even in the moment it takes to go from sight to hand to representation is never completely accurate. It goes beyond the mimetic and Moonelis often focuses on this disjunctive point in the representational process as expressive.

Roland Barthes wrote that photography is always a representation of pain because it is in the past and that the past represents the loss of the depicted. In this way, captured representation is never truthful to the present – it is already the past – and the image is always an embellishment against forgetting. The fragment and the hybrid always signify the loss of the whole, the violation of integrity that we usually presume, perhaps foolishly, to exist in the present. When Moonelis sculpted her subjects, when they were being 'frozen', they used their imagination to remember in order that they might protect themselves against the violation of being objectified.

As they were being made into memories, they perceived, if only unconsciously, their impending past. Even if self-preservation and a deep-seated fear are the motivations for seeking self-representations, many people enjoy this memorialisation of the self. For many of Moonelis' sitters, having their portrait made while they conjured memories brought them pleasure and a feeling of being honoured.

While there may not be a cosmic collective unconsciousness in the manner that Carl Jung suggested, there is a cultural unconsciousness made of forgotten, shared experiences connected through the network of memory that I have been discussing. Art is significantly linked to this network. And though some memories may be painful, there are others that continue to preserve and nourish our happiness. As we approach the millennium, Judy Moonelis and others make fragmented and hybrid body art to remember the past without sentimentality. Even as we resist romanticising the past, this art about memory reminds us what it is to be human and how that definition depends on remembrance.

John Kaufman, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Art History at Caldwell College and lives in New York City. Judy Moonelis is a New York City-based artist whose most recent solo exhibit was at John Elder Gallery in Chelsea, New York City. Caption title page: ***Wheels.*** *1996-98. Mixed media. 1.9 m x 53 cm x 2.4 m.*