

RONA PONDICK

PATRICIA FAURE GALLERY, SANTA MONICA
APRIL 14 - MAY 29, 2001

A silver tree stands leafless and isolated on an island of living grass, like the denouement of a fable. Swollen silver apples are scattered at its roots. Uncannily emblematic, the tree is a cast spell, the apples a horticulture of monstrosity. Each fruit is split, as if overripe, and, like so much in folklore and fairy tales, at once sexualized and grotesque: the split is a gash lined with teeth, a vagina dentata, fecundity, rottenness, and threat rolled into one. If Sleeping Beauty is absent here, her presence is transferred to the apples themselves: they embody the diminished feminine, all mouth and castration, like the joke about a woman without arms. If *Apple Tree* (2001) is a fable, its moral is that desire is best left unfulfilled: beautiful in its reified state, the tree is also emphatically dead, its fallen fruits hideous despite or perhaps because of their gleaming form.

Pondick has employed such grinning orbs for about a decade. Each materialization, from crude papier-mâché to shining stainless steel, is differently inflected and richly associative. Her motifs, suggestive of ancient rituals and basest fears, are simultaneously deeply resonant and yet removed from any original contexts. In this, Pondick's oeuvre brings to mind Borges's observation that chronology will melt into an orb of symbols.

Installed in the back gallery is Pondick's 1997 work, *Dirthead*, seen for the first time in the U.S. after exhibitions in the Netherlands, Austria and France. *Dirthead* is at first glance reminiscent of Joseph Beuys's piles of dirt from the early '80s. Yet this hillock is home to some 400 forms, lumpen balls with gaping teeth, tumbling down its sloping sides. This time, the orbs are not apples but heads, made from wax, plastic, and earth. They invoke malformed humanoids, balls of shit with teeth, all waste and the insides of bodies, featureless bundles but for the ravished, anguished, hungry mouths. This coupling of that which feeds with that which is shat is highly ambiguous, each mouth differently gaping, transfixed, buried, and unearthed in the instant of its birth/evacuation/ecstasy.

Dirthead simultaneously suggests votive figures made of giant rounded turds from some great grass-eating creature; fetal deformities buried at birth; anal-oral compulsions; mass graves or raided burial sites; all this in a circulation of images from culture to death to birth to shit to orality to culture. Excremental, elemental, anguished and archaic, they tap into the familiar Freudian link between death and civilization. They are simultaneously cultivated and deadly, relics of mass slaughter or of the considered rituals of an unknown coprophiliac, recently disinterred. The real object under scrutiny, though, is the archeology of death and desire.

MARGARET MORGAN

RONA PONDICK, *Dirthead*, 1997, earth, microcrystalline wax & thermoplastic, 400 pts. Courtesy Patricia Faure Gallery, Santa Monica.

