





HEADS

HANDS **Rona Pondick**

FEET

SLEEPING

HOLDING

**Robert Feintuch** DREAMING

DYING

Published on the occasion of the exhibition:

***Rona Pondick and Robert Feintuch:***

***Heads, Hands, Feet; Sleeping, Holding, Dreaming, Dying***

**Utah Museum of Contemporary Art**

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**Bates Museum of Art**

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## Bodies Redoubled Terry R. Myers

The basic idea behind the possibles theory was simple, and didn't provoke much dispute. It went something like this. Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life.

—Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*<sup>1</sup>

Consider, for a moment, that this book is a body. It's likely you are holding it in your hands, or maybe it is on a table in front of you, but I doubt that someone else is holding it and showing it to you as if it were a children's picture book, page after page. This is, of course, a picture book, but it is anything but childish.

This book is also an inanimate object made of paper, but it does have a spine, an active structure that supports a bilateral symmetry that in the human body contributes to the doubling of key parts of our anatomy: arms, legs, hands, feet, ears and eyes. The ways in which these parts work independently yet also as one (due to that bilateral symmetry) is reinforced in all of the instances in this book when an image of an arm, leg, hand, foot, or an entire body from one artist's painting is mirrored by another one from another artist's sculpture, or vice versa. The body redoubled, indeed, as the imagery in this book reaches out to us from page to page and becomes even greater than the sum of its parts.

As someone who has had the good fortune to know Robert Feintuch and Rona Pondick and their work for nearly thirty years, the notion of this book as a body hit me the moment they showed me the mock-up. Because I have had so many in-depth and inspiring opportunities to be with them in their studios, for many years literally spending time with one of them after the other (or sometimes the visits would turn into wonderfully fluid back-and-forth conversations and viewings), to see, really for the first time, so many juxtapositions of images of their works (and details from them) put together like a (hybrid) body itself, made perfect sense and also generated new territory

for thinking about why I've found their work so singularly compelling for so long. This is what two bodies of work coming together looks like, but it is much more, and not only because it is a coming together that has been there all along, even though there are important aspects of their work that remain critically distinct.

I'm convinced that the main reason that this exhibition will be even more than just two powerful bodies of work coming together is because Feintuch and Pondick each make art works that are their own unique manifestation of two "bodies of work." The "doubled-body-ness" of each of their oeuvres is impossible to separate, as it is fused together in the material of their making to become one. What I mean by this is that both of these artists have developed ways of working that demand that the "body" of the work be established in production and materiality first so that any (outrageous, hilarious, complicated) representation of a (human or hybrid) body, in the end, is emphatically and inextricably embodied. In ways that are both intellectual and intuitive, powerful and agile, Feintuch and Pondick make it clear in their work that they understand how much the material and physical state of its being supports its psychological and even bodily impact upon the viewer.

Another advantage that has come from knowing their work for so long is that I have had ongoing and direct experience with the extremely broad range of materials that each of them have used to make their work, doing so in the most experimental of ways. In the late 1980s, Pondick was especially focused on what could be seen as the traditional materials of sculpture—for example, wax, wood, and lead—before moving into plastics and other synthetic materials, to then go all-in with bronze, stainless steel and rubber. The first exhibition of hers that I saw, a site-specific installation in 1988 at The Sculpture Center in New York entitled *Beds* was, among other pressing things I'll get to below, a deliberate journey from material to material, each used to what I would call their intrinsic impact.<sup>2</sup> That same year Feintuch had a solo exhibition at fiction/nonfiction (a gallery in New York) in which for the first time I experienced his deft combination of surfaces made of fresco on a new type of support aptly called "wonderboard." (I remember thinking at the time that these stunning small-to-mid-scale paintings were on something named after what they had become: literal pieces of wonder.) The convenience of 1988 as a year of convergence for me should not suggest, however, that the two of them were in lockstep in any way: many of Feintuch's paintings from then remained more "abstract" than Pondick's sculptural installation that not only incorporated the bed as a recognizable form (including actual bed pillows), but



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also presented wax forms that were unapologetically scatological (hence the pressure alluded to above). Moreover, several of the other fresco paintings in Feintuch's 1988 exhibition contained at least one image of a human ear (he made his first one in 1985), arguably one of the most abstract human body parts (especially when it's on its own in a painting), yet utterly capable of generating nuance and mystery. (What does it mean to make a painting that looks like it can hear you?)

Now, however, all these years later, I look back at Feintuch's paintings and realize that even the "abstract" ones weren't that abstract after all. Formal, maybe, as most were compositions based upon the meeting of rectangles of different colors and effects intersected at some point by a white circle or circles that reinforced the chalk-like tactility of fresco. Extrapolating from the history of religious paintings and the compelling manner in which fresco holds pigment not unlike skin (the color is in it) while often depicting highly symbolic human bodies (like Saints), it is now clear that Feintuch never really accepted the misleading opposition of abstraction versus representation. When it comes to art, what the ear and the circle share is more important than what they don't. Likewise, I've always been stunned by Pondick's ability to maintain the impact of Minimalist sculpture in her work while resisting its prohibition against depiction. In the case of *Beds* the resistance was overt, even confrontational: a reclamation of the material terms of sculpture from a narrowing context without sacrificing not only humor, but also (charged) space itself, in this case one that also provides a consequential place for sleeping, holding, dreaming and dying.

Evidence in their work from the early 1990s suggests that the seed of what has led to this exhibition, and its title of "Heads, Hands, Feet; Sleeping, Holding, Dreaming, Dying," was planted for good. Feintuch moved from using fresco to working in casein (on aluminum panels), and Pondick went all in with using plastic and rubber along with fabric, wax, and resin. Feintuch also introduced appropriated art historical imagery with his specific use of reproductions of paintings by Giovanni Bellini. In many ways, their work during this time was quite far apart, especially when it came to color: Pondick embracing an almost Pop sensibility with bubble gum pink and fire engine red, and Feintuch restricting his palette to black and the range of grays found in photomechanical processes of reproduction (although the imagery was transferred to the paintings by hand). The extent to which Pondick's sculptures and installations were outrageous and even ridiculous was matched by the somber darkness of Feintuch's panels. What was starting to come together, however, was their mutual interest in the

fragment, particularly that of the body, and the magic that can happen when a part is transformed into a whole, or, in their case, a whole that becomes a redoubled body—again, in material and depiction, neither extricable from the other. For Pondick it manifested in an incessant repetition of the fragment (teeth), that made full use of the capabilities of sculpture to hold literal space, while for Feintuch it involved the isolated presentation of Christ's arm (as a child), or a hand, or, still, that ear, as if each of them were emerging from the veiling layers of dark paint that establish the never-ending conundrum of a painting as an object and an illusion all at once.

Finally, then, the bodies of work brought together in this exhibition demonstrate that both artists have extended the reach of the fragment-as-whole into the territory of the hybrid. This is immediately apparent in Pondick's stunning move at the end of the 1990s to combine sculptural casts of her head and arms with the body of a dog, creating what remains one of her most arresting works. As I wrote in 2008, "it makes perfect sense that *Dog* (1998-2001) was the first sculpture of the series to be completed: it evokes the Sphinx, as well as its riddle without apology. ... Despite my understanding that the process of making a cast of her head would require that her eyes remain closed, I was far more caught up in the startling emotional connection that her utter stillness provoked."<sup>3</sup> As I was then, I remain mesmerized by the feeling of inevitability and completeness that her hybrid animal/human sculptures produce, an overwhelming calmness that draws us to them and is remarkably not disturbed by all of the ways in which many of these sculptures remain laugh-out-loud funny, due mainly to the incongruous yet flawlessly executed jumps in scale found in works like *Muskrat* and *Cat* (both 2002-05).

The paintings that Feintuch has made over the last decade are equally funny, starting with "full-figure" pictures like *Arm Up* (2007), one of several that insert a rather self-deprecating version of the artist's body into a situation that is somehow specific yet in a type of productive limbo. Even in the case of a painting like *Feet Up* (2013) that presents a pair of legs like a flat-footed joke (pun fully intended, unfortunately), it is its uncanny combination of upside-down ascension and stillness that makes it far more complicated and, indeed, deeply moving. (In my opinion, Feintuch paints clouds as well as just about anyone.) These paintings are a fusion of the depictions of bodies, parts of the body, and objects that engage the body (furniture, a newspaper, crutches, or a club) with the color (pink in particular) and form of the painting's own materially amalgamated body. As a painter, of



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Pl. 8



course, Feintuch has the advantage (or disadvantage, take your pick) of engaging the intricacies and/or ambiguities of creating the illusion of three-dimensions on a two-dimensional surface, as well as the extent to which any painting is capable of being seen as a particular moment in time, even if, in fact, it is a hybrid made from a multitude of moments, positions and spaces. With hindsight, I realize that the overwhelming characteristics that bring the work of these two artists together can be found in what I wrote about Pondick's work in 2008: "its ability to make material and even form appear as if they were psychologically self-aware in and of themselves rather than merely representative or illustrative of such states of mind; its comfort with brazenly straightforward, often ridiculous humor; and its anything but passive acceptance of that we can still call [...] the human condition.<sup>4</sup> This does not minimize the meaningful differences between their work, nor is it meant to be such an all-encompassing statement that it could be said about the work of other artists. (Although Louise Bourgeois, Philip Guston, John Wesley, and Bruce Nauman immediately come to mind as equal to the challenge, as well as important antecedents for these two artists.) In the spirit of the young protagonists of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*, clones who slowly discover the astonishing circumstances of their reason for being, Pondick and Feintuch's work makes the impossible possible by engendering the extraordinary and doing everything it takes to, in the end, withstand alienation and serve as an undeniable model for getting on with life.

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#### Notes

1. Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (New York: Knopf, 2005), p. 139.
2. My first published review was about this exhibition. See "Rona Pondick," *Arts Magazine* 63 (December 1988), p. 89.
3. See my essay "Rona Pondick's Animal Magnetism," in *Rona Pondick: Works/Werke 1986-2008* (Salzburg, Paris and New York: Internationale Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst, Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, and Sonnabend Gallery, 2008), p. 57.
4. *Ibid*, p. 53.