



Rona Pondick, installation view of "Rona Pondick," 2022. Photo: Courtesy Rona Pondick and MARC STRAUS, New York

Rona Pondick

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Rona Pondick's world is populated with inexplicable creatures that one might see only in a weird dream. For 35 years, she has produced uncanny hybrids, fusing the human and the animal. Her work is very personal and self-referential, repeatedly conveying emotional content that focuses on desire, fear, loneliness, and discomfort. In 1998, she began an eccentric series of large sculptures, primarily cast in bronze and/or stainless steel, that merged animal and plant parts with

fragments of her own body. In this peculiar menagerie, she flawlessly spliced matte stainless steel casts of her head and hands onto stylized, highly polished stainless steel animal bodies of disproportionate sizes. In the iconic *Dog* (1998–2001), for instance, she combined her head and hands with a dog's body to form a creature reminiscent of a sphinx.

Though some writers see a kinship with Surrealism, Pondick strongly rejects such associations. Instead, she cites Egyptian art, the dreamlike imagery of Goya, and the Symbolist paintings of Redon. The sculptures of Donatello and Bernini have also had a noteworthy influence, and she identifies with Philip Guston, as well as the work of Bruce Nauman.

Because of a spinal cord injury, Pondick can no longer make foundry work or large-scale sculpture. After two complex surgeries, she was advised never to lift more than five pounds, and in 2013, she began assembling smaller pieces rooted in her signature vocabulary. In 2018, for her first solo exhibition at Marc Straus Gallery, she not only altered the scale of her work, but also injected color via resin and acrylic. In several of these pieces, the heads are held in luminous, semi-transparent blocks that emit vivid color, seemingly floating in liquid like scientific specimens.

Pondick's most recent exhibition marked another evolution. The sculptures have been reduced even more in size to an intimate scale, and each one rests on a radiantly colored base. These works were created during the height of the pandemic, when Pondick was forced to leave her studio in Alphabet City and work in smaller quarters at home.

A suite of small drawings formed a key component of the show. Living through Covid-19 sparked an examination of closeness, truthfulness, and the self for Pondick. She usually draws when she "is in a searching mode," but this time, she felt otherwise—things became deliberate: "I felt fertile even though life was unbalanced." The drawings portray stylized heads with sharp, wicked noses reminiscent of Giacometti's *The Nose* (*Le nez*, 1947). It requires close inspection to see the elusive pageant of heads covering layered strata of transparent mulberry paper. An odd quietness pervades these works, along with a mysterious sensibility, as if the artist were the medium transporting invisible phantoms to the light of day. No message is intended—Pondick claims she was just experimenting with materials: "I think with my hands." Perhaps it was the uncertainty of the virus that sparked the making of such fragile human arrangements.

The drawings clearly swayed the production of the sculptures, which are pervaded by the same underlying sense of disquiet. Pulsating with subdued energy, each work features two or more figures and has its own presence and implied narrative. The surfaces differ, ranging from matte and chalky to immaculately gleaming and lustrous. In *Small Green Yellow Reds* (2019–21), for instance, seven twisting red heads are attached to a translucent squatting body with outstretched hands. The angles of the repeated heads make for an extremely active work, and their arrangement also recalls the molecular structure of the coronavirus. *Double Burnt Umber* (2019–21) features two bulbous, textured figures on top of four ice-like layers of resin. Though perhaps crude in terms of anatomy, this is a very emotive piece, conveying a strange sense of struggle and despair. In *Black Blues White* (2020–21), several enigmatic blue figures perform a type of ritual on top of coarse, stacked black and gray resin slabs. A larger, stoic white head next to the gesticulating figures adds to the enigma. *Grapefruit Platter (20)* (2019–22), with its orange resin

heads displayed on a plate, evokes death masks—perhaps Pondick was confronting the toll of the virus.

These works strike an intense chord, capturing the complex uncertainty of the human condition in an otherworldly drama with the enduring appeal of fantasy. Pondick provides no definitive answers; she only offers clues so viewers can forge their own meanings and narratives for her phantasmagorical forms.