



RONA PONDICK

WORKS 2013-2018

MARC STRAUS

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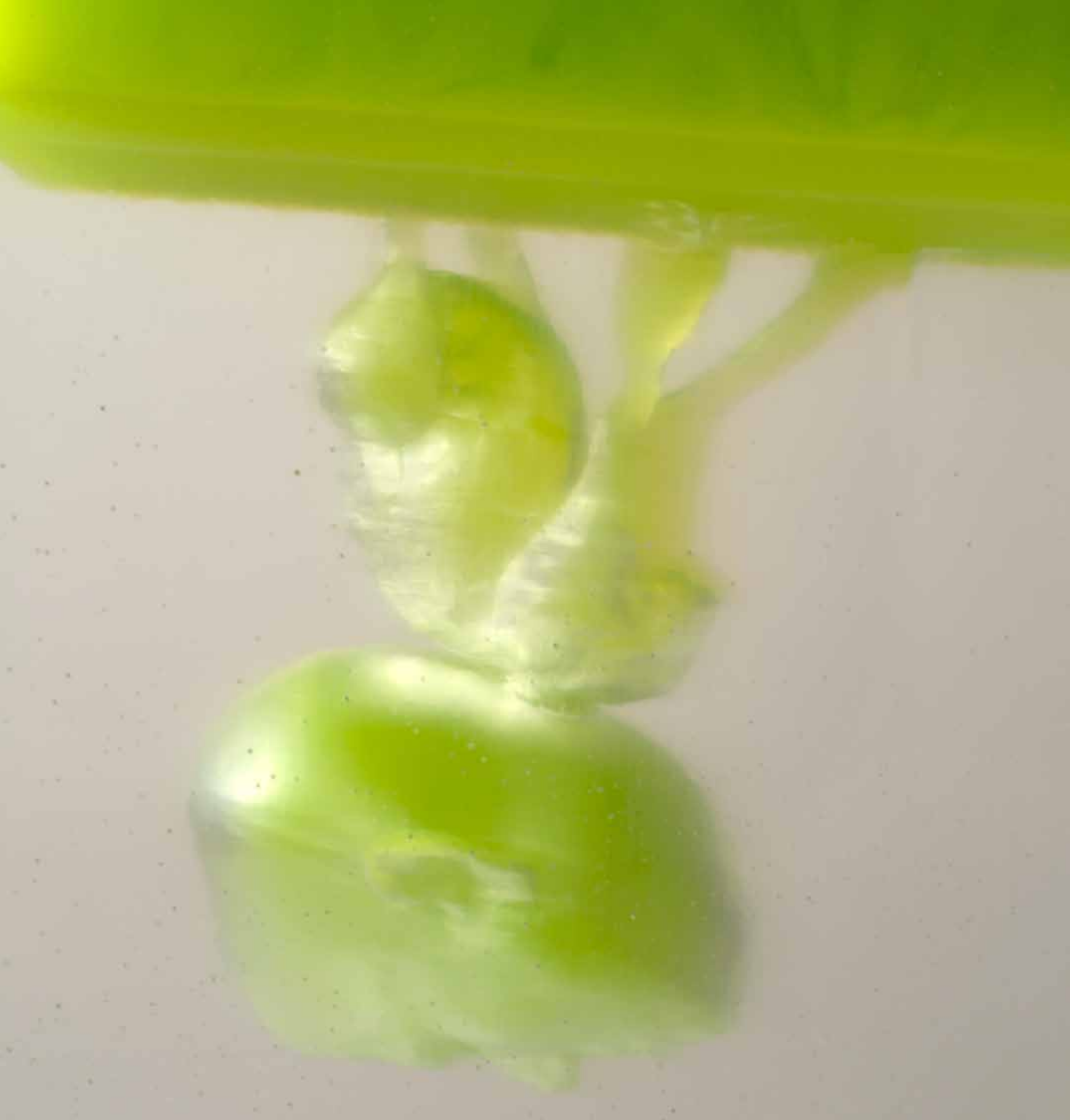
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RONA PONDICK:

WITHOUT EVASION OR COMPROMISE

BY LYNN ZELEVANSKY



Rona Pondick is a searcher. Her appetite for knowledge and understanding, and a willingness to follow her instincts wherever they take her, are complemented by a love of materials, a fascination with and impressive capacity for technical problem solving, and a rare determination to overcome difficulties. A proclivity for experimentation ensures that her art is always in a state of flux, which is where she is most comfortable.

It is no surprise, then, that over the past five years Pondick has created a body of work that significantly departs from the cast stainless steel sculptures she had been making for a decade and a half. The new works have familiar elements—human heads and hands melded with bodies of other species—yet they are also very different. Made from resin, acrylic, and an epoxy modeling compound, they more overtly bear the traces of Pondick’s hand. They are each partly translucent and in places almost evanescent, changing as the light changes and as viewers move around them. Also, instead of monochrome steel they are magenta, aqua, dark blue, green, and yellow. The addition of color and the new materials significantly alter the visual impact and emotional tenor of Pondick’s art.

Pondick has previously made major changes to her work. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, she emerged as an artist with semiabstract sculptures that often incorporated found or store-bought objects. The writer Franz Kafka has been a major influence on her, and these works share his dark, almost surreal humor. *Milk* (1989), for example, comprises two mounds of sagging white breasts, made of wax, plastic, and paper towels, with baby-bottle nipples on the ends. It is both funny and devastating in its suggestion of the condition of postpartum maternity and the depression that can accompany it. In *Loveseat* (1991), the cushions of a small seat are swollen, recalling a pair of buttocks that seem to belong to the sofa’s front two legs, which sport men’s oxfords. A third, central leg, thinner than the others, wears a little girl’s shoe. The piece is wryly humorous with its suggestive forms topped off by lacy upholstery; but on second thought, that central leg could be

a penis with a little girl's shoe on the end. The title thus becomes ironic rather than merely descriptive, *Loveseat* referring to the nastiest of secrets, the sexual abuse of a child.

During this early period, Pondick made beds, chairs, and scatological forms like the pile of excrement (actually wax) titled *Mine* (1987), employing pillows and old shoes, often children's (as in *Loveseat*). Around 1991, after seeing an exhibition of late-Renoir paintings in which the preponderance of pink "put her teeth on edge,"¹ she used modeling plastic and rubber teeth from a novelty store to create apple-sized spheres with teeth. (Later, when the rubber teeth were no longer available, she substituted casts made from molds of her own mouth). Though these alien creatures have a humorous side, they also evoke the sexual threat of the *vagina dentata* motif, with its suggestions of pain and revenge. Variations are prevalent in Pondick's work through 1997, when she created *Dirt Head*, a pile of earth with dirt-encrusted balls with teeth scattered on and around it. The humor in this work is less obvious than in *Milk*, *Loveseat*, or the earlier teeth pieces; these spheres recall skulls, and the work as a whole seems like the vestige of a holocaust, as if the disembodied teeth had been dug up from a mass grave filled with alien creatures who met a violent end. *Dirt Head* was exhibited around the world, and Pondick traveled with it to supervise its installation. Afterward, she felt she had exhausted that imagery and needed a change. In 1998, she made a major one.

She recalls wanting to move away from pieces composed of scattered elements toward discrete sculptures that were self-contained, that would hold together as a single unit no matter where they were installed. She made rules for herself: no found objects, no repetition, proliferation, or scattering of forms within a work.² It took three years for her to develop *Dog* (1998–2001), a sphinxlike stainless steel sculpture joining a human head and arms to the body of a seated canine. Though the human parts she employed in her work were cast from her own body, they were not intended to be self-portraits but were "stand-ins for an ungendered every person."³

Pondick continued working in this vein for fifteen years, making objects like *Fox* (1998–99), with its elegant and familiar animal gesture and human head, and *Monkey with Hair* (2002–3), which has tufts of acrylic fiber covering its entire body; the creature is at rest, but its wild, flyaway hair gives it a remarkable sense of forward motion. By the time she created *Monkey with Hair*, she had scanned the casts of her head and hands, and was working with the new technology of 3-D printing. This captured a level of detail never before achievable in sculpture and allowed her to render her body parts at any size.⁴ She combined this contemporary technique with the ancient ones of carving, modeling, and metal casting. In her stainless steel works the human forms, with a matte finish, show all their pores and wrinkles, while the animal bodies, with their polished surfaces, are hand modeled and stylized to the point where the species is difficult to identify. Having worked all this out, Pondick made another major change in 2013, one that has taken five years to bring to fruition.

In 2006, while on a plane returning to New York from Europe, Pondick discovered that she couldn't move her right arm or her head. The diagnosis was cervical spondylotic myelopathy—compression of the spine—which required two long and treacherous surgeries. The prognosis for a full recovery was bleak. In 2007, as yet unable to use her hands with the required control, she attempted to produce work by directing an assistant, which was a frustrating enterprise for someone

who “thinks with her hands,” as Pondick does.⁵ A year later, through hard work and strength of will, she regained use of her hands, and her health has continued to improve, often surprising the doctors. Slowly but remarkably, she has been able to return to a semblance of normalcy.

Still, the illness and surgeries changed Pondick’s life and work in significant ways. Having to learn to use her hands again redefined her relationship to art making, and today, as she moves around the studio, every move is choreographed to ensure that she doesn’t hurt herself. Also, pain is a constant, which has transformed her connection to her body. It is no longer an abstract idea. She says, “The body has been a subject in my work since the ‘80s, but now it’s my body.”⁶

Early in her recovery, Pondick realized that she needed to find a way to make sculpture without the commutes to the foundry and long and taxing days there that casting steel requires. For an artist who “thinks with her hands,” the processes involved in making art—the handwork—are a route to its form, and so to its meaning. In 2013 she stopped casting in metal and began to discover the techniques that would lead to her current work, the work that she needed to create.⁷

Pondick greatly enjoys a technical challenge and is always willing to experiment, even at the risk of damaging a piece beyond repair. She has developed innovative techniques for the new work that allow her to alter the sculptures endlessly. Apoxie, a modeling compound that she generally uses for the bodies of her figures, can be shaped like clay and dries like stone. Once it has dried, she can add to or carve it. The resin she uses for heads and hands is baked in a studio oven; using it requires careful calculations (even the outside temperature and humidity can affect it). When a form comes out of the oven, Pondick chases, sands, and refines it until she achieves the result that she wants.⁸ Acrylic is for bases and enclosures (a number of the new works are encased in that transparent material). She has also figured out how to join these materials seamlessly. A conservator researches the properties of her materials and advises her on their use.

Pondick once made molds from Apoxie for her stainless steel sculptures. Essentially, it played the role that wax and plaster have traditionally played in relation to bronze and marble sculpture. A work in bronze or marble, though prized as the finished product, shows the viewer less of the artist’s hand than the wax or plaster versions, because bronze has a slick surface that hides the signs of handwork, and marble is often carved by specialists from plaster models. Wax and plaster objects have an immediacy and an intimacy that bronze and marble lack. Apoxie provides a similar kind of accessibility.

Color also enhances the informality and approachability of Pondick’s new work. Each object is named for the colors it contains. Her palette begins with the primary hues for photographic printing—magenta, cyan, and yellow—to which she adds green, blue, black, and white. Using these “impure” colors, as opposed to the more familiar primaries (red, yellow, blue), immediately shifts expectations. Magenta, for example, is very different from red in its emotional effects. With a few exceptions, each work is a single color; that, and the use of recognizable primaries, can lead to the assumption that the color has come from a tube or jar. In fact, Pondick’s studio has bins of color tests. These testify to her experimental approach: finding the perfect colors for particular elements and learning how the colors change when rendered in resin versus acrylic. At the root of this experimentation is her knowledge that every variant of each color has its own emotive character and communicates in different ways.

Though Pondick uses both carving and modeling, she was trained in neither technique. Rather, as an avid student

of art history, passionately interested in many cultures and periods, she looks to sculptors across the ages to understand how they handled these processes.⁹ Having spent days at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, she is moved by pre-Columbian artists' "wild and inventive" imagery and their hybrid animal-human figures. She has traveled throughout Germany to see works by Gothic sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider because she greatly admires his exaggeration of human anatomy—an attribute of the Gothic—and his remarkable skill as a carver. His "focus on inner emotion through form" is a quality she feels that her work shares.¹⁰ Studying Donatello has helped her make the transition from matte to polished surfaces in her steel sculptures. From Bernini she has learned to understand Baroque movement and gesture. And among the modernists, Brancusi as carver and Giacometti as modeler are major sources of inspiration. She also admires Bruce Nauman for the bleakness of his imagery, his courage in facing dark truths, and his experimental approach to art making.¹¹

And then there is Kafka. "The meaning of life is that it stops"—this quotation, which novelist Philip Roth attributed to Kafka, is a major touchpoint for Pondick.¹² She sent the quotation to me as I was beginning work on this essay, saying, "I am drawn to those artists or cultures, Egyptian, pre-Columbian, African, Oceanic . . . where this is dealt with head on (no pun intended)."¹³ Early in her career she said, in a statement both true and humorous, that her underlying influences were "Kafka and my mother."¹⁴ Kafka's particular mix of horror and absurd humor are emblematic for her. The notions of metamorphosis in Pondick's work recall in particular the plight of Gregor Samsa, the protagonist in Kafka's famous story of that title, who wakes up one morning to find that he has become a giant insect.

Among Pondick's many progenitors in the visual arts, her new works seem closest in their emotional content to those of the existentialist, Giacometti. She wants her art to create its own sense of place, something she feels Giacometti achieved with the barest of means, as he reduced his figures to a minimum, and often placed them on small bases. I take the notion of a sense of place to mean that a work creates its own particular world, apart from the room in which it is shown, a world that we can enter if we choose, just as we feel we can meet Giacometti's elongated *Walking Man* (1960) halfway. Pondick's *Sitting Yellow* (2013–18) is planted on a beautifully proportioned base, which is integral to the piece and becomes its territory. Each element is a version of yellow, sometimes tending toward green. As you walk around the sculpture, the strange and oddly proportioned creature, who looks trapped and agonized from some angles, when seen from the back becomes a toddler poignantly looking up from the floor. That recognition evokes a sympathy that overcomes the shock of the creature's mutant form.

None of Pondick's new sculptures depict identifiable animals. There are human heads, tiny froglike figures, and, in *Yellow Blue Black White* (2013–18) and *Curly Grey* (2016–18), bodies that resemble trussed chickens. *Sitting Yellow's* body is so abstracted that it is hard to tell whether it is animal or human. The emotional qualities elicited by the new objects are darker in tone than in Pondick's earlier work, no doubt due to the physical difficulties she has faced in recent years. Humor, even by her unorthodox standards, is now harder to find. *Curly Grey* and *Yellow Blue Black White* are perhaps the wryest of the new works, with large human heads crowning their chickenlike bodies. *Curly Grey*, which is rich in tone, seems to have a permanent wave in place of feathers and wings, while *Yellow, Blue, Black, White*, with its yellow head and blue-black



body, sits comfortably on a white and yellow base looking up, its surface bearing clear signs of Pondick's handwork.

The sculptures that encase strange figures in transparent acrylic cubes are set on pedestals. With their shimmering silvery tone, the cubes provide a discrete environment into which viewers can peer, one that shifts as the spectator walks around them. In *Upside Down Yellow Green* (2018), a human head with a golden sheen about the face and an ominous plug in place of its neck, hangs upside down from an aqua rectangle in what appears to be liquid. It could be a specimen in formaldehyde, but it seems likely that death came through more nefarious means. In *Floating Green* (2015–17) the head is partially encased and has an emotional resonance similar to *Upside Down Yellow Green*. It depicts what appears to be a head from a drowned body surfacing in algae-laden water, its atmosphere that of a moody crime drama that keeps us guessing. Clearly, Pondick makes theatrical works.

The impact of *Encased Magenta* (2015–18), *Encased Green* (2018), and *Encased Yellow* (2015–17), is different. The heads, all in blocks of acrylic, are positioned sideways, rather than vertically and upside down, and they lack the ominous plug where the neck would be. Suspended in their acrylic cubes, they appear to be floating in a silvery gel, eyes closed like unborn children. In mood, they recall Brancusi's elegant, restful, yet decidedly strange *Sleeping Muse* (1910), which is also a disembodied head.

The small creatures in *Upside Down Blue* (2014–17) and *Upside Down Green* (2018) have bodies like little amphibians, and smaller human heads. They hang upside down from rectangular blocks of their own color, seeming alive but ensnared. There are also sculptures in which human-size heads are joined to tiny amphibian bodies. In *Orange Pink Green Grey* (2015–18), a life-size pink head sits directly in front of an orange head on a watery aqua base; behind the orange head is its tiny froglike body. These figures, mutant but too close to human for comfort, are the stuff of nightmares.

In *Magenta Swimming in Yellow* (2015–17), a largely translucent magenta head is up to its mouth in yellow liquid, and under the yellow water, just discernible, is a tiny amphibian body. This is not one of Pondick's most beautiful sculptures—the juxtaposition of colors is jarring—but it is among her most intriguing. It's another highly theatrical work, one in which the sense of place is especially striking. This is a science fiction world, a Technicolor depiction of life on another planet where beings are magenta and water is yellow. Disturbing questions arise: Is the magenta head bloody? Is the liquid urine? Is the creature imprisoned? Are all of those life-size heads with minuscule bodies in Pondick's sculptures trapped in an alien world? The body can't hold its head up. It can't move. This is a shattering situation.

The overarching answer, and the message of Pondick's remarkable new body of work, is that *Orange Pink Green Grey* represents our world. All of us are trapped in our bodies, limited by physical constraints that could become disabling at any moment. This is a hard fact that most of us are fortunate enough not to have to face. Pondick has confronted it directly, and she has done so without evasion or compromise. She may soften the confrontation with strange beauty, as in *Sitting Yellow*, or a touch of eerie humor, in *Curly Grey*, but the stark truth is that *Orange Pink Green Grey* reveals the human condition, and it is a difficult truth to acknowledge.

Lynn Zelevansky is an art historian, curator, and writer living in New York. She served as Henry J. Heinz II Director of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (2009–2017), where she co-curated *Hélio Oiticica: To Organize Delirium* and *Paul Thek: Diver*, and instituted a series of successful participatory and experimental programs. Prior to that she was Associate Curator, Curator, and Terri and Michael Smooke Curator and Department Head, Contemporary Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1995–2009), where her many exhibitions included *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–68* and *Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940s–70s*. As Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1986–95), she assisted on major exhibitions and organized *Projects* shows and *Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the Nineties*.

NOTES

1. Octavio Zaya, "I Can Express It Any Way I Want: An Interview With Rona Pondick," in *AtlAntica* (February 1994) 17–23, 124–128. Excerpted in *Rona Pondick: Works 1986–2001* (New York: Sonnabend Press, 2002), 58.
2. Pondick, email to the author, June 12, 2018.
3. Susan L. Stoops, "Visceral Meaning: How Sculptors See," in *Rona Pondick: The Metamorphosis of an Object* (Worcester, Mass.: Worcester Art Museum, 2009), 16.
4. The first work for which Pondick used 3-D printing was *Monkeys* (1998–2001).
5. "Rona Pondick Interviewed by Barbara Wally," in *Rona Pondick: Works 1986–2008* (Salzburg: Internationale Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst, et al., 2008), 29.
6. Pondick, email to the author, June 20, 2018.
7. Unless otherwise noted, ideas and concerns attributed to Pondick, information on her illness and recovery, and the process of creating the sculptures presented here are from conversations with the author in her New York studio on May 22 and June 8, 2018.
8. Chasing is a refined method of grinding that Pondick likens to drawing in three dimensions. Telephone conversation with the author, June 26, 2018.
9. At the Wooster Art Museum in 2009, Pondick curated a show that placed her works in relation to figurative sculptures from the museum's departments of Asian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, European, pre-Columbian, and Oceanic art. See Stoops, "Visceral Meaning: How Sculptors See," in *Rona Pondick: The Metamorphosis of an Object*, 11.
10. Pondick, email to the author, June 10, 2018.
11. Pondick, email to the author, June 11, 2018.
12. Quoted by David Remnick in "Philip Roth's Propulsive Force," in *The New Yorker*, June 4 & 11, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/06/04/philip-roths-propulsive-force>
13. Pondick, email to the author, June 12, 2018.
14. Pondick originally said that her influences were Kafka and her mother in the 1994 interview with Octavio Zaya in *AtlAntica* (see note 1). In 2002, she amended that statement to include the artists Bernini and Donatello. See *Pondick: Works 1986–2001*, 138.

