



RONA PONDICK

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Works From the 1990s

Art|Basel

Miami Beach, Booth #S12

Steven Zevitas Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts



Detail: Red Head and Loafer, 1991

FUNNY GAMES by Pac Pobric

Let me open with a joke. What’s more frightening than a woman with a sense of humor? Perhaps you know this one, but allow me a bit of fun, won’t you? Take a look at Rona Pondick’s *Red Bowl (37)* from 1993. Begin with a list of associations. What word comes to mind before this ill-tempered pack of mouths? I have hostile, but in the manner of Wile E. Coyote, slapstick and teeming, like unexploded ACME dynamite. The teeth are uneven, janky, misaligned, edgy. The caked palate this mouth comes from is wrinkled like a deflated wet tire. That palate, in fact, is modeled on Pondick’s own, but the impressions come only from the top of her mouth, which explains the perverse and utterly confounding meeting of top to bottom teeth. (Which begs the question—my goodness, which is the bottom row of teeth, exactly?) Cast and repeated 37 times in red epoxy and dumped into a simple wooden bowl, this rotten red fruit salad is the deepest corruption I can imagine of Paul Cézanne’s overflowing baskets of apples.

Red Bowl (37) is special. It was finished in 1993 to mark a sharp point in an especially productive era beginning in 1990, the year Pondick—presiding over her Cooper Square studio in Manhattan, where she continues to live with her partner, the painter Robert Feintuch—spotched together a pair of kids’ shoes with a darkened mass of wax, black plastic, and wire, and named it *Baby*. A lot happened from here on out, and not only inside the immediate confines of Pondick’s studio. In 1990, she agreed to representation with art dealer Thaddaeus Ropac in Salzburg, spinning off a series of successful East Village solo shows in New York at fiction/nonfiction (gallerist José Freier’s first venture) into international visibility. Critics and curators rushed to catch up. In 1990, John Yau included Pondick in “Diverse Representations 1990,” a subtle and important exhibition at the Morris Museum in Morristown, New Jersey that included Judy Pfaff, Mel Chin, Ursula von Rydingsvard, and eight other artists. (Pondick’s work, he wrote in the catalogue,

“suggests that society is something we must learn to accommodate.” He wasn’t kidding!) In the next three years, Pondick was included in the Whitney Biennial (1991), won a coveted Guggenheim Fellowship (1992), and showed in the Venice Biennale (1993).

And all the while Pondick was laughing her way along. In 1991, she finished *Red Head and Loafer (1991)*. Hanging at the bottom of this absolute scream of a sculpture is a pair of chattering toy teeth, encased in red epoxy modeling compound. Are these teeth... smiling? (Can teeth smile?) There is something strained about them, like a salesman’s swagger. It’s like a light kick in the mouth, the way the teeth are set so far below the shoe—and the shoe is a riot in itself. Look at those tassels! Everything about this worn-out loafer suggests a loiterer’s idea of refinement. How perfect that this...man (creature?) has no head to speak of, thus neither hopes nor dreams nor thoughts in any sense. When I look at *Red Head and Loafer* all I can hear is the nervous tap tap tap of a jumpy grifter just trying to make it to the next day.

What is it with Pondick and shoes, anyway? By 1991, when she made *Ballerina with Teeth*, they were kicking up dirt and stirring trouble everywhere, showing up as sinister props in important and related works like *Chairman* from 1990 and *Loveseat* from the next year. The latter sculpture’s joke is a bit too grim to mention, but *Chairman*, on the other hand, wears its comedy lightly, papered over, as it is entirely, in printed Spider-Man comic strips. (Spider-Man really is the goofiest of all superheroes, isn’t he?) The chair wears a pair of buckled white shoes, squarish and stout with a slight heel and black sole, good for a night at the disco, even if they are a little scuffed. That’s the difference, by the way, between Robert Gober’s shoes and Pondick’s, for all their important similarities: hers are worn, not studio-crafted, and carry with them the tarry residue of whoever wore them in whatever way. Meaning, they have a history. (She and

Gober both showed at the 1991 Whitney Biennial alongside Kiki Smith, another important reference point for Pondick’s work.)

But back to shoes. *Ballerina with Teeth*, which is included in this presentation, is another example and it is especially—even wildly—hallucinatory. Imagine: teeth—in your shoes! And not nice teeth (as if you could have nice teeth in your shoes). No, these are yellowed, blackened and overflowing out of thin pink ballet slippers, getting about as close to a comic nightmare as I can picture. Pondick makes “Freudian vaudeville acts,” the New York Times art critic Michael Brenson wrote, “designed to make you laugh until you feel something caught in your throat.” He was writing in 1991 reviewing “Foot and Mouth,” Pondick’s final solo show at fiction/nonfiction. Alongside *Loveseat*, the exhibition also included *Little Bathers*, Pondick’s take on a Minimalist scatter work, made of more than 500 mouths (all modeled on her own) littered about in a sickly and unsettling pile. “Foot and Mouth,” Brenson went on, was full of these “sometimes kinky, fetishistic hybrids that contain numerous references to Marcel Duchamp, Surrealism, and African art.”

Yet Surrealism, remember, was still too taboo—too spooky—for most critics in the 1990s. We’re only just now beginning to catch up with Surrealism’s great many artists, with serious museum exhibitions devoted not only to Rene Magritte (MoMA, 2013) but also to Leonara Carrington (Tate Liverpool, 2015), Meret Oppenheim (MoMA, 2022), Dorothea Tanning (Tate Modern 2019), and so many others. Thirty years ago, this kind of art struck the mainstream of the art world as gauche, overwrought, not a little bit embarrassing. It wasn’t serious enough, it was too goofy, too silly, too much. So it was generally passed over in silence, something to be seen but not heard. Even Roberta Smith, who wrote admiringly of Pondick on repeated occasions throughout the decade and

beyond, kept the artist's Surrealism at arm's length. It was simpler, tidier. The writer William Zimmer got a bit closer when he wrote that Pondick's work is "both real and fairy tale-like." But it was exactly Pondick's realness—her dedication to craft and materials, the matter-of-factness of her touch, the overwhelming presentness of her work, from which it's impossible to turn away—that made it harder to fully see the more unruly psychic implications of her work. Confronted by the unnerving presence of a soiled pillow in *First Bed* from 1991, it's easier to keep it at bay with throwaway bits of nervous chatter. Which is what most critics did.

Funny how things change. Curator Cecilia Alwmani's 2022 Venice Biennale, "The Milk of Dreams," is explicitly devoted to the many legacies of Surrealism, which courses through so much of the art of our day. Think of the ceramicist Genesis Belanger's twisted domestic fantasies, or painter Louise Bonnet's deformed grotesqueries, or Julie Curtiss's Pop-inflected nightmares. Like Pondick, these artists are full of spleen. They're freakishly funny, over the top, and deadly serious. Which brings me back to my punchline, at long last. So what is it that's more frightening than a woman with a sense of humor? Why, one with teeth, of course.

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