

The background is a complex collage. At the top, there are small, colorful abstract fragments. Below them, a large, dark, textured shape, possibly a hand or a shadow, is visible. In the center, a large, stylized, black and white figure with a rounded head and a rectangular body is prominent. The figure has a grid-like pattern on its head and a dark, textured body. The collage is overlaid with a grid of blue lines and various geometric shapes in blue, yellow, white, and purple. There are also small, colorful abstract fragments scattered throughout the composition.

# Reviews 1988-2020

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## Rona Pondick (Sculpture Center, New York)

Not much art being made today makes one think about toilet training—once learned, it's usually forgotten. Rona Pondick, however, brings the subject back to mind. You cannot hide from it—the things that grab attention in her work look very much like turds. In *Beds*, her site-specific installation at the Sculpture Center, Pondick hits us below the belt with her signature forms. If the simple ability to shock had been her only achievement, then her work could be easily dismissed as crass and one could run out of the gallery with averted eyes (which probably happened more often than the one incident I witnessed on a Saturday afternoon). As with most of Pondick's work, a quick glance will provoke this type of reaction and prevent you from learning its full significance. Overall, Pondick presents a didactic environment that shocks on many levels but addresses issues much larger than the scatological.

Immediately inside the gallery door, Pondick has placed a white bed of three progressively larger pillows that overwhelm a bare wood base and flare out toward the door. The bed, which looks clean and comfortable, seems to be literally inviting the viewer to enter and perhaps test its softness; but the yard-long, gauze-wrapped, somewhat-browned cylinder laying in the bed has staked its claim to the comfort, which has suddenly disappeared for the viewer.

The three beds in the middle section of the installation have very little to do with comfort. Made of stacked sandbags, each stretches over fifteen feet. Pondick makes her beds with lead sheets that are rolled up at the foot (echoing Richard Serra, one of her teachers at Yale). The lead has been hammered around the sandbags up where someone might try to sleep, creating back-breaking bumps that could be read in many ways, from figure to landscape. Each bed is capped with a dingy pillow; on the first Pondick has presented three brown-black wax turds as hors

d'oeuvres. Despite the humor in that scenario, there is also something frightening about this part of the installation. Unlike the first bed, or even the later one, these are beds of disaster and death—sleeping on sandbags and under poisonous lead can lead to lying in state. The formality of the beds' spacing and the subdued light add to this effect, while the dimness allows the bright light from beyond the next wall to invade this preceding room and tie the installation together.

In the small space in the back of the gallery Pondick has piled dark purple satin pillows which are, like the first white bed, comfortable (even voluptuous) but threatening. Here the turd is hairy, gray and wedged high between two pillows. The thin passageway between the two sets of pillows is inviting, but what if there are more turds in the dark? Once safely inside, the temptation is to tentatively slide your hands in the cracks while noticing how lumpy the pillows are here as opposed to their sleekness outside. The urge to experience the work by touch is overwhelming.

There is an obsessiveness here that approaches the mystical and the ritual. The installation as a whole has the makings of some type of ceremony waiting to happen, especially when you think of Pondick's work in terms of tribal sculpture—the material references of her work and the manner in which it is made hint at the ceremonial use of bodily waste and other natural substances to create a charged object.

Overall, Pondick offers us a new look at the once-again current emphasis on objects in art. She is making permanent objects from things we would never think of keeping in any other context—if you find excrement on your pillow, you get rid of it. She acts as a good foil to the likes of Haim Steinbach and Jeff Koons. In their cases, most of the objects they present would be desired in several contexts—lava lamps and alarm clocks, vacuum cleaners

or basketballs. But their objects are not necessary, while Pondick's definitely are. Of course, she also has much in common with them, particularly with Steinbach in her similar use of a minimal base upon which her arrangements rest. But it is ironic (and important: consider all of our recent problems with handling our own waste) that the possessions that Pondick represents are truly our possessions—they come from us, but we don't have any desire to keep them. In fact we have been trained to ignore them, but Pondick rubs our noses in it. [*Arts Magazine*, December 1988, p. 89.]

### **Nancy Barton (American Fine Arts, New York)**

It has been acknowledged repeatedly that the psychology of the mother/daughter relationship has not been adequately investigated. Recently such investigation has been seen as a means for effective critique of male-dominated society (e.g., art society). In her installation, *Swan Song*, at American Fine Arts, Nancy Barton has much the same goal as Carolyn Kay Steedman, who, in her book *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (Rutgers University Press, 1987), writes: "This book ... is about interpretations, about the places where we rework what has already happened to give current events meaning." Steedman and Barton both want to transform difficult memories of their relationships with their mothers into coherent narratives, so that the stories they tell may mean something to the present-day reader/viewer. Barton uses several sources in tragic opera and recent critical theory, along with both her and her mother's memories of their family relationships, to form a complex narrative that is disturbing on several levels. The artist's mother surrendered her goal of becoming an opera singer in favor of family life, and the installation's goal (with a recital that accompanied the exhibition) was to re-install that dream. Unlike Steedman, Barton moves beyond re-

theoretically grounded self-consciousness. [*Tema Celeste*, Autumn 1991), pp. 116–17.]

### **1991 Biennial (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York)**

Without question, the best artwork in the 1991 Whitney Biennial is Jennie Livingston's 1990 film *Paris Is Burning*. While most of the visual art world only murmurs (or panics) about the reactionary acts of exclusion which typically stifle creative expressions of sexual difference and multiculturalism, Livingston has gone out and actually done something about the problem, making a film that looks hard at the transvestite subculture-within-a-subculture that is alive and well in Harlem. Usually such outside scrutiny leads to manipulation not unlike that found in strategies for corporate raiding—the artist reinvigorates his or her own practice by stealing energy from other cultural practitioners who have no power to speak for themselves and take the credit. Livingston, however, has created a true masterpiece that empowers her subjects as much as it empowers the filmmaker, all of which now find themselves to be at the center of a significant and well-deserved amount of attention. The remainder of the Biennial finds itself in the long shadow of this fantastic piece of work.

What else of value is in this Biennial? Is it a “provocative and useful overview of American art today,” as Director David Ross puts it in his foreword to the catalogue? Probably, although the exhibition still suffers from its all-too-obvious panderings to particular New York galleries, despite the fact that there was a concerted effort to extend the exhibition beyond New York (by way of a national advisory committee whose purpose was to bring unknown work to the attention of curators Richard Armstrong, John G. Hanhardt, Richard Marshall, and Lisa Phillips). There is a substantial amount of good work in all sections of the Biennial, which has been divided by genera-

tion for the Painting, Sculpture, and Photography category. Second Floor: artists who gained recognition in the 1950s and 1960s, Third Floor: the 1970s and 1980s, and Fourth Floor: artists who had their first shows in the late '80s and have never before been in a Whitney Biennial exhibition. The idea to show work from artists at different stages in their careers is a good one; however, the exhibition would have made better use of such diversity by mixing all of the artists together instead of separating them according to the dates of their births. For example, imagine a room containing Jasper Johns's recent paintings of disembodied facial features in juxtaposition with Robert Gober's cast wax hybrid body fragments and Lorna Simpson's photographs of African-American identity restrained by societal pressures, and you immediately sense that the exhibition has missed its opportunity to be substantially more interesting. What we are left with instead is a Biennial that seems to willingly expose the arbitrary nature of its selections, making the situation worse by being so didactic about them.

The second floor of the Biennial attempts to present the old favorites of American art as "masters": Chuck Close, John Coplans, Joseph Glasco, Jasper Johns, Alex Katz, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Joan Mitchell, Ed Moses, Bruce Nauman, Philip Pearlstein, Robert Rauschenberg, Pat Steir, Frank Stella, and Cy Twombly. You have no problem believing that you're in a museum on this floor—most everything is big, and if not it is given a lot of space to make it look important. Roy Lichtenstein's large canvases of home interiors are the best paintings in the Biennial—fresh, clear and smart—but such a claim does not say much because most of the painting in the exhibition is dismal, almost as if the curators truly believe that if they ignore good painting (especially abstract painting), it will disappear (they seem to have been particularly misrepresentational with their choices for the young artist category). Bruce Nauman's video installation *Raw Material "MMMM"*

(1990), which depicts the artist's head spinning as he hums to himself, eyes closed to the eyesores around him, symbolizes the entire show. Robert Rauschenberg is represented by unusually poor assemblages, and Pat Steir by typically poor paintings. Finally, along with Nauman's video, John Coplan's fractured photographs of his body literally prefigure what's to come in the remainder of the exhibition, as issues of the body in an increasingly threatened culture become more self-evident as the artists get younger.

Those artists who could be considered "mid-career" are on the third floor: Vito Acconci, Jennifer Bartlett, Carroll Dunham, Eric Fischl, Bill Fontana, Robert Gober, Peter Halley, Keith Haring, Roni Horn, Luis Jiménez, Mike Kelley, Louise Lawler, Donald Lipski, David McDermott & Peter McGough, Richard Misrach, Elizabeth Murray, Ellen Phelan, Allen Ruppersberg, David Salle, Joseph Santore, Thomas Lanigan Schmidt, Julian Schnabel, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Philip Taaffe, and Mark Tansey. This floor reads like part museum, part gallery: conservative installations of frequently provocative works, much of it very good. This floor also sports the best room and the worst room. The best: Carroll Dunham's candy-colored paintings of bulbous, wonderfully stupid forms; Mike Kelley's series *Empathy Displacement: Humanoid Morphology (2nd and 3rd Remove)*, 1990, of dolls in little black caskets with paintings of their perverse bodies leaning against the wall, and his *Untitled* (1990) drawing using black yarn on a white blanket; and Cindy Sherman's wicked and art historically aware photographs. The worst, by far, contains two of Keith Haring's weakest paintings (once again, this seems deliberate considering this Biennial's fear of the medium), Luis Jiménez's tacky, outsized, politically suspect fiberglass sculptures, and Thomas Schmidt's disco lounge glittering collages—one really wonders if the curators were trying to be funny and cruel. Peter Halley's paintings are the best ones on the floor, and Robert Gober's body sculptures (along with Mike Kel-



ley) extend the discussion of the body begun by Coplans and Nauman, a dialogue that turns cacophonous on the top floor.

The “kids” take over the fourth floor: Carlos Alfonso, Nayland Blake, Jessica Diamond, Jeanne Dunning, Dawn Fryling, Adam Fuss, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Gary Hill, Wendy Jacob, Larry Johnson, Mary Kelly, Glenn Ligon, Sally Mann, Christian Marclay, John Miller, Celia Álvarez Muñoz, Cady Noland, Rona Pondick, Rebecca Purdum, Alan Rath, Tim Rollins + K.O.S., Jim Shaw, Lorna Simpson, Kiki Smith, Philip Smith, Jessica Stockholder, Alex Webb, Carrie Mae Weems, and David Wojnarowicz. This floor looks very little like a museum, installed more like a playground often made to be politically correct. Much of the work is installation-oriented: Cady Noland’s stacks of beer cans and various types of metal hardware as well as Dawn Fryling’s blinding halide lights and empty frames are each given their own rooms because of the adolescent nature of the work—if you are obnoxious enough, you’re given a lot of space. Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s and Rona Pondick’s installations are more elegant and thought-provoking in their different approaches to the minimalist legacy, both of which reinvest the movement’s formal conventions with socially powerful content, while Jessica Stockholder’s enormous stage-like construction is just plain formal, no matter how theatrical it tries to be. Larry Johnson’s photographs of cartoon landscapes effectively redirect appropriation and text-based visual practices into issues of sexual difference and orchestrated sincerity, as well as into issues of painting, which is blatantly maligned on this floor—Rebecca Purdum’s canvases, for example, are not indicative of the best American abstract painting being made by members of this emerging generation. By now, the body (as a politicized entity) has forcefully re-entered the exhibition, not only in Pondick’s work, but also in Nayland Blake’s objects and Kiki Smith’s sculptures, and most impressively in

the photographs of children-playing-grownups by Sally Mann, who is the major discovery of the exhibition, even though her name has been in the news because of recent attempts to censor her work.

Installed in the lobby gallery of the museum, Group Material's (Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Karen Ramspacher) *AIDS Timeline* effectively brings the entire Biennial back to some of the most important concerns of today. Like *Paris Is Burning*, this installation makes its point without losing its necessarily visual impact. Ultimately, this Whitney Biennial should be remembered not for the bad work, or for its all-too-obvious playing of art world politics, but instead for its presentation of a significant amount of work which is successful in its mixture of visual form with specific political content, creating situations which themselves are not didactic but empowering. ["Having a Ball, Wish You Were Here," *Lapiz*, October 1991, pp. 76-78.]

**Dan Devine (Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery, Center for the Arts, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut)**

Dan Devine is an under-known New York sculptor whose work merits a much higher level of attention, particularly after this near-ideal installation of his concrete sculptures (curated by Klaus Ottmann) in the exhibition space at Wesleyan that is itself built entirely of concrete. Hunkered down close to the floor of a chapel-like room with a dramatic high ceiling, his highly detailed, sometimes pigmented chunks of manufactured rock initially appear in this context to have formed themselves out of their surrounding material, like some perverse arrangement of stalagmites. Upon closer inspection, it's clear that these bizarre things are not quite part of the natural world because of the visual effects and associations of their conglomerate (none of them have a predetermined top or bottom), technological surfaces.

(some of the paintings also reveal the underlying grid used to plot them). The movement in these works comes from two sources: first, in the wide range of painting effects found from canvas to canvas—*Night Sky #2*, 1991, is almost leather-like while *Night Sky #3*, 1991, is slicker, seemingly illuminated or even printed instead of painted—and second, in our own path as we walk toward these pictures which start as solid black rectangles from across the room and slowly turn into deep space as we move in on one of them. This reading of the night skies as objects is supported in this exhibition by their hanging alongside *Desert Surface #1*, 1991, which is not a painting of cracks in the sand, but a trompe l'oeil depiction of wood painted on an actual piece of wood that the artist found in the desert. Its painted cracks give way to the real thing underneath. In all of these works, Celmins forces the visual to accommodate the tactile in a vast area that incorporates the infinitesimal (a painting called *Web* from 1992), the portable (the wood), and even the absolutely intangible, making each of these categories responsible both for their levels of believability and for their capacities for acquisition. [*Flash Art*, Summer 1992, p. 116.]

**“Masquerade (Body Double)” (Postmasters, New York), “Play between Fear and Desire” (Germans van Eck, New York), “The Whole Part” (fiction/nonfiction, New York)**

Three group exhibitions currently on view in New York are doing abstraction (read: abstract painting) a great service with their presentations of works that squarely redirect our attention away from rehashed formalism (found in much of the “safe” abstract painting we are being inundated with these days—painting that has never lacked a superficial audience and a steady market) and toward the body as a site for visual and psychological source material that maintains its relevance to us and our status as conflicted, *living* things

(who was it who said that it was meaningless to talk about a “death of painting” because it never was alive to begin with?). These exhibitions all include solid works that actively manipulate abstraction and its imagery to re-address issues that bring the whole enterprise back to life, jerking the claims of abstract painting back into line and keeping them from spiraling off into the kind of detached pseudo-elitism that quickly becomes boring.

In “Masquerade (Body Double)” at Postmasters, works by Jeanne Dunning, Lari Pittman, Lucas Samaras and Matthew Weinstein are each in their own way infused with the presence of the human body. In Samaras’ manipulated Polaroids of himself the translation is direct and literal. Dunning’s photographs of peeled fruits force us to read them as metaphorical eviscerations of a humanoid body because of their scale and detailing of circulatory systems. Pittman’s *For now inside, later to be released upon maturation* (1988) offers two large eyes that stare out at us, effectively animating the physicality of the canvas—this painting *is* a trapped body. Weinstein’s paintings (which, by the way, keep getting better) are the most “abstract” in the show but, once again, they utilize traceable clues (silhouettes of body builders, Mickey Mouse ears, car-body colors) to show us in no uncertain terms that these works are most interested in participating in our lives in the same way that other bodies do.

“Play between Fear and Desire” at Germans van Eck combines paintings and sculptures by Eric Bainbridge, Saint Clair Cemin, Glenn Goldberg, Jill Levine, Fiona Rae, Elena Sisto and Daniel Wiener into a colorful romp through abstraction that literally reaches out and grabs our bodies in order to provoke our participation. Standouts here are Levine and Wiener, whose sculptures (which are quite unlike anything else out there, even each other) disrupt the conventions of abstract painting by taking highly suggestive forms that often seem to resist their paint jobs

or positions as art objects. The abstract painters in the group—Goldberg and Rae—are more interested in heaping on the references (to popular culture, to other cultures, etc.), the better to make us feel more comfortable with their respective reuses of the language.

“The Whole Part” at fiction/nonfiction, which includes photographs by John Coplans, sculptures by Rona Pondick, and paintings by John Wesley, remains, unlike the other shows, more in the representational mode. However, the abstracting that is going on here is quite unsettling, as body parts in all three cases are lopped off, snapped one on top of another, and left hanging. Pondick’s sculpture, called *Swinger*, made of wax balls with chattering teeth and a man’s shoe, and dangling from a wire, is the best thing here. In these shows, abstraction truly does get a life and it’s a pretty strong one, powerful enough to drain the energy from a lot of the relatively thin stuff going on around it. [“Abstraction Gets a Life,” *Tema Celeste*, Summer 1992, p. 82.]

### **Stephan Balkenhol (Städelmuseum, Frankfurt)**

Balkenhol’s wood figures normally appear to have social responsibilities that constantly shift within the steadfast stance of their upright postures. Here three characters find themselves estranged from each other, even stranded.

On a platform in a round concrete building stands *Man with black pants and white shirt* (all works 1991), in a square one across the lawn *Woman with green dress*. Both are staring straight ahead, faces impassive, body language confined. Only four dead-on views of each figure are allowed through windows in the front, back, and sides of each building. Looking in, we’re made to feel as if we’ve just interrupted something between this couple, possibly an impassioned, distant communication. They’re not going to let on that they’ve noticed us, possibly due to the fact that up in a niche on the second floor of the museum’s exterior

version of this exhibition will be heavily edited down), but its not really necessary to identify any by name. Suffice it to say that the most important thing about this show is that it reminds us in no uncertain terms that there sure are a whole lot of lazy artists out there, and more often than not their work means very little. [*Blocnotes*, Winter 1994, p. 93.]

**Catherine Howe (Elizabeth Koury Gallery, New York)**

In the six recent paintings shown here, Catherine Howe continues to develop her critical investigations into the residual contextual power of two celebrated patriarchies in American painting: the social realism of the Ash Can School replayed in her unidentified portraits of young white and black women, and the grand gesture of Abstract Expressionism made symbolic in her DeKooning- and Still-like backdrops. The paintings are getting better, not only due to their more fulfilling melding of the two painterly styles (i.e., in formal terms), but also due to the increased presence of the women depicted, all of whom seem much more substantially self-identified in this work than ever before. [*Blocnotes*, Winter 1994, p. 93.]

**Rona Pondick (José Freire Fine Art, New York)**

It is absolutely impossible to shake the nagging feeling that we've just missed something extraordinary when we enter an installation of Rona Pondick's highly loaded sculptures. Why exactly are we on edge? Is it that we have been denied the intense, maybe even sexual, pleasure of participating in some sort of playful, uproarious event which was in progress right up until the very moment before we so rudely intruded? Or have we indeed been spared something unspeakable, something which could have made us run out of the room? Pondick's sculptures are distinguished in their substantial ability to behave simultaneously as art (meaning, for example, that they are mindful of such things as sculptural form, or even history) and something else not so easily

defined (perhaps more like—dare I say it?—entertainment, or even life itself?).

Even if we took only one cautious step into either of Pondick's last two major installations—*Pink and Brown* in late 1992 at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and most recently, in May of 1993, an untitled installation at José Freire Fine Art in New York—we still wouldn't be that mistaken if we believed that we had just stumbled into the aftermath of some bizarre "social" event: a party even, complete with colorful and festive decorations, that at some fateful point got utterly out of hand. At Freire, *Legs* made of bright pink lace and stuffed with polyester were hanging throughout the room, like streamers at a high school dance. In all honesty, they were splayed legs, all wearing brown men's shoes. Leg-like forms were literally all over the gallery, metamorphosed incessantly into suggestive hybrid forms: a couple of wickedly funny and just plain wicked things, both called *Nipple Swing*, which hung like trapezes, each wearing baby shoes on their ends and sporting a nipple from a baby bottle on what can only be called its "crotch"; a thoroughly disturbing object in the center of the room named *Small Spiral*, which looked like a large pink gumdrop that had swallowed a shoe and a baby bottle; and finally, a quite animated pile of pink stubs with shoes called *Soft Spirals*, which just barely peeked out into the main gallery from another smaller room—its full, lumpy girth trying to hide from us, not unlike Kafka's Gregor Samsa when he had the misfortune to wake up one morning to find himself turned into a big, quivering, awkward bug. Pondick's objects have more in common with such a creature than they do with most art objects, even those which also rely upon manipulated depictions of the body and/or isolated body parts. Unlike the highly articulated limbs of Robert Gober, or the full figures of Kiki Smith, Pondick's sculptures clearly are much more unreal than they are real, and—even more significant—more burlesque than they are representational or

grotesque. *Love Seat*, one in a series of body-as-furniture, child-size chairs which Pondick has been making over the past few years, sat in this installation in the smaller room past *Soft Spiral*. Too loaded to sit still anywhere else, its deliberate delineation of physical attributes coded "male" and "female" infiltrated the aggressive connotations taking place throughout the bulk of the installation, reminding us without hesitation that all of Pondick's work traffics in a potent challenging of the traditionally manipulative power structures at play in such tangible things as the determination of gender roles and sexuality, as well as in much less graspable (but no less essential) things like love and hate, or judgments of what is and is not "normal." [*Galleries Magazine*, February/March 1994, pp. 106.]

### **Dan Devine (Public Art Fund, New York)**

Made of poured concrete, any of Dan Devine's sculptures could survive physically as an outdoor piece, but this feature of durability has almost nothing to do with the real reasons his first major public commission is a complete success. Devine's sculptures have been "public" in the fullest sense of the term for some time; this large-scale piece, titled *The Secret of Las Meninas*, should be thought of as his most conceptually solid statement to date, and a critical example of public sculpture done right.

A commission designed and administered by the Public Art Fund in New York, Devine's sculpture is situated in a park surrounded by the MetroTech Center, an active and seemingly well-designed complex serving both business and educational purposes, developed in an economically depressed and previously under-utilized area of downtown Brooklyn. The park had become something of an oasis even before any art had been installed; therefore, Devine's first attempts to make the sculpture on site were considered to be intrusions by much of the diverse community of park-users who had quickly made the place their own. Giv-