

Pondick's sculptures at CAM ask viewers to complete the picture

By Joan Porat
Staff writer

Among Rona Pondick's 11 sculptures and eight drawings on exhibit through July 16 at the Cincinnati Art Museum is a platter stacked with red thermo-plastic balls, each wearing a toothy grin, and looking much like forbidden fruit.

There is also a pint-sized, upside down "female" chair wearing black, spiked heels, and bearing a suggestive title, "Fallen." Nowhere is there any "Jewish" art to be seen.

Why, then, has the Jewish Museum in New York selected her work for its forthcoming spring show, "Too Jewish?" The museum's director, Norman Kleeblatt, admits that "A lot of works in the show are more obviously Jewish in reference," but "she sets the stage," he told *The American Israelite* in a phone interview prior to Pondick's CAM opening.

"Her work is very upsetting; it makes you want to laugh and cry at the same time. All these images—from the Holocaust to vaudeville—rush through your brain," Kleeblatt says.

Discovering what makes Pondick's work "too Jewish" became a challenge for this writer.

Kleeblatt suggested, as a start, asking her what it was like to be a Jewish woman studying for a master of fine arts at the Yale



Photo by Jose Freire Fine Art
Rona Pondick

Art School in the mid-70s. According to Pondick, at that time, the school was under the thumb of dictatorial "minimalists," who insisted that art be devoid of any emotion or reference to identity.

Doctrinaire about the importance of form, composition and design, "They frowned upon any kind of content. The art had to have pure, clean, minimal, formal look," she said. "I arrived trying to find out who I am within my work and was told, 'Throw all that away.'"

"For this kid, raised in Brooklyn by Russian immigrant grandparents, after my parents divorced—to end up at the Yale School of Art was really something. But it was a male, WASP

world." A world with which she frequently found herself butting heads with almost everyone except another Jewish student—with whom she found "an immediate bond, and who eventually became her husband.

She began "dealing with bodily references" and was strongly challenged for exploring the body as the site and source of personal and political content.

All of Pondick's sculptures in this show are composed of body parts or furniture associated with the body. They invariably elicit psycho-sexual interpretations from reviewers, but Pondick says it is often "young kids who say what they see, and

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—Rona Pondick

they're right on the mark."

Confronting minimalist philosophy head-on, Pondick states that viewers should first respond emotionally to her work, then intellectually. They may not understand it intellectually, but they will have a response, she says.

"If someone looks at something of mine and finds it hysterically funny at first, and later finds a darker side, with a continual flipping back and forth, in my eyes I've succeeded. It reminds me of Kafka, whose stories have an unbelievable black humor and are deadly serious at the same time. Kafka has been an important influence," she states.

Masses of spheres (shrunken skulls?) With large, toothy mouths initially evoke playfulness and innocence, but then

the mind quickly flips to more provocative, even menacing thoughts of terror and death.

Pondick points out that even she isn't aware of all the implications of her work. "At the Israel Museum in Jerusalem I showed 20 feet of brown wax spheres with teeth. If you think about teeth, teeth survive after we decay. Everyone saw the Holocaust in it; I couldn't believe I didn't think about that, that it would be such a strong reading."

"By using the fragment, I'm showing part of the whole. The mind makes a leap to fill in the rest. The viewers are engaged in a more active way than if everything were laid out in front of them," she says.

Contradictions, intrinsic within her work, are part of her cultural tradition, she says. "Arguing different points of view is a very Jewish (Talmudic) tradition," she noted. "I think art is supposed to raise questions rather than give answers. At my family's dinner table, the highest praise came if you could play devil's advocate and intellectually argue a point whether or not you agreed with it."

Although Pondick's work is aggressive, powerful, and discomforting, the 43-year-old artist herself is warm, friendly, and quite comfortable to be with.

She recalls being sensitive to gender issues at an early age, when upon reaching adolescence, she was no longer allowed to sit, as she customarily did, with her grandfather in their Orthodox synagogue.

"The first time I had to go upstairs with the women, I was very upset. My grandfather raised me to feel that I could do or be anything. He wanted me never to feel that because I was woman I was any less than anyone else." From then on, he never asked her to go back to

synagogue with him.

Her grandmother spoke only Yiddish, and outings to the Yiddish theater were frequent. The theater introduced her to Jewish humor and its darker polarity, she said, and pointed to similar polarities of vaudeville-type humor and deathly seriousness in her own work.

Underlying everything Pondick does is the belief that people must confront those issues that make them uncomfortable, whether they be issues of power, sexuality, death or anti-Semitism.

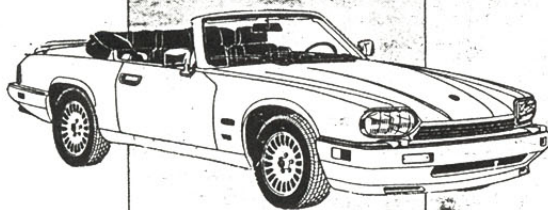
In fact, it is the latter that sparks the most aggressive verbal response from her. Because Jews fear anti-Semitism, they may try to deny their identity and assimilate, she says. "But denial is counter-productive."

"It is healthy to confront an anti-Semite and say, 'You're being anti-Semitic,'" she states. "You have to say: 'This is who I am.' Then you are in a position of equal power."

Pondick contends that her work was selected by the Jewish Museum because the exhibit is trying to get people to say, "I'm Jewish, and if those aspects identifying me as a Jew come through my work, that's okay. I'm not going to deny who I am."

This CAM show is part of a series of small, one-artist contemporary exhibitions, organized by the museum's curator of contemporary art, Jean Feinberg. Pondick's sculpture has been shown extensively in international group exhibitions. She has had 14 one-person exhibits in the United States and Europe, and took over the Billy Rose Pavillion at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem for a three-week exhibit. This is the Manhattan artist's first solo museum exhibition in the Midwest.

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