



CLAIRE LIEBERMAN, COLLAGES, FEATURED, GROTESQUE, INTERVIEWS, SCULPTURE, WINTER 2013

WHO IS THE KEEPER?



Rona Pondick, *Dwarfed Yellow Pine*, 2010-12, painted bronze, unique,
26 x 35 x 24 1/8 inches, courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York

By Claire Lieberman

If the luscious and the grotesque can ever coexist, surely they do so in the sculptures of Rona Pondick. A new exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery, her first New York show in several years, possesses an eerie beauty. Pondick's "hybrids" evoke an entire world: part extension of self, part animal territory. Pondick's bronzes and stainless steel sculpture appear to have a reconstituted, synthetic flesh. In contrast to the rougher surfaces of her earlier works, these pieces display a futuristic, liquid modeling. Her face, formed from a body cast, is inserted into each piece. In the case of *Dwarfed White Jack* (2010-12), a multitude of tiny heads, piercing space, emerge from the ghostly white buds of branches. Similarly, the glittery eruptions in *Dwarfed Yellow Pine* (2010-12) transform a pale, fallen tree limb into a multi-headed mythological figure. In another piece, however, the head is in the right place, but its scale has been diminished as it sits, shrunken, atop a sinuous, shining body. The distortion in this work is especially pronounced: the bulky creature seems poised to jump a great distance, and stands encumbered by a massive, hyper-realistic hand that hangs down like a loaded gun.



Rona Pondick, *Wallaby*, 2007-12, stainless steel, edition of three,
24 x 44 3/8 x 10 7/8 inches, courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York

Pondick speaks of the "psychological" nature of her work and one wonders whether she is culling material from her own recollections. I recall in this connection the words of Flannery O'Connor, master of grotesque: "Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days" (89). But given her interest in Kafka, perhaps Pondick is pondering the broader struggle of the self in an irrational world.

Her pieces have a long, slow evolution, sometimes five years or more, and one can feel the intensity of the process by which they were created. Her sculptures are full of contradictory impulses, shifts in scale and perceived weight. Some appear lightweight as their metallic surfaces move the eye at a quickened speed. In *Prairie Dog* (2011-13), an oversized hand simultaneously engulfs form and melts into it in a way that recalls animatronic technology. In *Ginko* (2007-12), Pondick collects tree branches for their “supple quality,” cutting and reconfiguring them to create a malleable appearance. Hands emanate from the twigs in an uncanny balance of horror and elegance. At the same time, I find a humorous side to her art: *Ginko* and *Dwarfed Yellow Pine* remind me of *Little Shop of Horrors*.

In a visit to her East village studio, I asked Pondick about the grotesque and humorous qualities in her work¹.



Rona Pondick, *Ginko*, 2007-12, stainless steel, edition of three, 57 3/4 x 41 x 33 3/4 inches , courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York

CL: Your sculptures are both playful and disturbing. Can you comment on the humorous qualities in your work?

RP: I'm interested in contradiction. Ugly beauty. Things that are deadly serious and absurd simultaneously. Metaphor is something I've always been interested in. When meaning is layered it unfolds slowly, allowing the viewer to engage very actively, rather than passively. Kafka has been an inspiration and is someone who has dealt with contradiction in literature and embodies what I want in my own work.

CL: You mentioned the pieces are not self-portraits. I would describe them, alternatively, as part extension of self. What was your motive for using the head repeatedly?

RP: At first I didn't consciously decide to re-use the same head. At the beginning I was plastically changing the head either by removing the neck and hair or changing the scale of it. After 15 years of using the same head, while I do see it as an extension of myself, I don't see my sculptures as self-portraits. I use my body the way a dancer does. I see it as a tool.

CL: Why did you utilize a death mask?



Rona Pondick, *White Beaver*, 2009-11, painted bronze, edition of three, 13 x 31 1/2 x 9 1/4 inches, courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York

RP: I wanted to use something directly removed from my body. For me, a mold taken directly off my face was the most obvious way to do this. I never thought of a life cast of my face in relation to a death mask, but in hindsight I can understand people making a relationship or link.

CL: You spoke about an injury you sustained. Has it had an impact on your work?

RP: Seven years ago I was facing paralysis. I had extensive neurosurgery. My spinal cord is scarred and I have permanent spinal cord injury. It has been quite a challenge to learn how to use my body all over again, like a child, learning how to walk and then use my hands again. I'm too close to analyze how this experience has impacted my life. I'm just trying to continue doing what I love most in the world.

CL: The notion of the prosthetic and the truncated appendage are both active sources and images in contemporary art. How do they play into your work?

RP: The body fragment has always been in my work. Since 1998 I have used hybrid forms because I think they are powerful fictions that have existed since the beginning of time. In my hybrid sculptures I merge my body parts with animals or trees. I think the oppositional forms, surfaces, scales, and images create tensions that we feel both psychologically and viscerally.

CL: You mentioned Bernini as someone you think about, saying: "I see an influence in the sculpture of Bernini. He uses material in a way that is transportive."

RP: My artistic ancestral roots are Egyptian, Etruscan, Romanesque, Giacometti, Bernini, Riemenschneider, Philip Guston, and Bruce Nauman. This is a short list. I am constantly in museums looking.

Regarding Bernini, I am excited and interested in how he materially transforms emotion. For example, in "Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" Bernini transformed stone into a quivering material that feels like it's having an orgasm.

CL: You've described your sculpture as "symbolic" and "suggestive." How does your sculpture create "psychological" states?

RP: I'm interested in setting a stage where my sculptures are layered in their meanings. I use scale, weight, and gravity to make emotion that I want the viewer to feel both viscerally and psychologically in their own bodies. I'm interested in things that straddle two worlds.



Rona Pondick, *Navel*, 2008-10, painted bronze, edition of three, 7 3/16 x 11 1/4 x 11 1/4 inches, courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York

In her anxious fusions, Pondick suggests the unstable relation between one's self-image and one's sense of inner distortion. Perhaps unintentionally, her figurations recall both Bernini (consider his use of animals like the three-headed dog Cerberus) and Giacometti, with a dose of post-pop thrown in for good measure. Embedding her highly articulated beings in the distant past, even as they look to the future, she embodies humorous ideas in a somber form. Her persona seeks to absent itself from the refined grotesquerie of her art. And yet, there is a dreamlike stillness to each piece. It is difficult to say which part, the human or the non-human, has the upper hand. The strength of Pondick's art lies in the way our fear of losing control is aroused and then allayed by the uncanny intimacy of her own likeness and by a sense of relief on seeing the fantastical transformation that it has undergone.

Notes

Research assistance from Nicole Hiromi Shaub.

¹Studio visit February 23, 2013, NYC

Works Cited

O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, Macmillan, New York, 1969.