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## RONA PONDICK

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FINE ARTS

Reading the massive pile of critical literature on Rona Pondick is like crawling naked through psychoanalytic razor wire. All the vague allusions to oral and anal fixations, the specious bandying about of terms like "repression," "compulsion," and "fetish," the detection of penises, vaginas, and breasts in every artwork—it's painful to read, not because of the uncomfortable psychic truths it turns up, but because it's so full of bad causal reasoning and outmoded shrink jargon. Not that Pondick doesn't ask for it; any artist who uses beds, baby bottles, and shoes as her signature materials is obviously tempting her viewers to play Freud.

On the surface, the principal works in Pondick's brilliant show certainly did appear to invite psychoanalytic readings. Grouped on the floor in one corner of the

gallery, *Milk/Milk*, 1993, consisted of 17 roughly basketball-sized objects covered with saggy breastlike forms terminating in baby-bottle nipples. Scattered around the floor, *Mouth*, 1992–93, consisted of 600 roughly tennis-ball-sized objects covered with black flax that looked like pubes. Six of the little things have nipples, but the rest have mouths with rubber teeth. (In *The Village Voice*, Elizabeth Hess called them "cunt/mouths," though they look less like cunts than like *scrota dentata*.) Hanging from the ceiling above these works was *Legs*, 1993, 25 polyester-filled shafts covered in pink lace and terminating, at either end, in a brown man's shoe ("leg/penises," according to Hess). These works seem to include all the right elements—milk, mouths, and genitalia—how could they not be trappings of the Oedipal triangle, souvenirs of the primal scene?



Rona Pondick, left: *Legs*, 1993, mixed media; right: *Milk/Milk*, 1992–93, mixed media. Installation view.

To the person who asked me what magazine I was writing for so you could find out what Pondick's work "means": you're starting out from the wrong assumption. Listen to the other person in your tour group who said Pondick's little mouthballs somehow reminded her of the creatures in the film *Gremlins*. Pondick's works are just that: something that produces malfunctions, a little devil in the machine. They take up objects from psychoanalysis's bag of tricks precisely to produce short circuits in its magic act of "meaning." As is true of the Minimalist aesthetic which has always exerted a strong influence on Pondick (she studied with Richard Serra at Yale), the forceful literality of her sculptures often overwhelms the suggestive nature of the materials. It's as if the artist gives you the pieces of a puzzle but they don't quite add up: rather than a nice clear picture of Oedipus Rex, you get a fractured image—a mouth here, a genital there. The result is deadly funny, too, unlike bona fide Minimalist works, and you get the sense that Pondick's humor serves less to reveal the unconscious in jokes than to play jokes on the (viewer's) unconscious. For in the final analysis, though Pondick may bait you or tempt you to play Freud, her works lie on the floor not on a couch.

—Keith Seward