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Rona Pondick: Orchestrated Obsessions *by Janet Koplos*

Turning to stainless steel, this New York sculptor fashions human-animal hybrids that are also self-portraits.

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Rona Pondick: Cougar (detail), 1998-99, stainless steel, 8 by 17½ by 43 inches. All photos this article courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York.

Opposite, Swinger, 1992, wax, plastic teeth, newspaper, shoe, wire, 28 by 20 by 20 inches. Collection Peter and Eileen Norton.

Rona Pondick: Orchestrated Obsessions

Rona Pondick introduces a new group of (mostly) stainless-steel sculptures delineating a disturbing fantasy: they show the artist's body caught in the midst of metamorphosis into animal forms.

BY JANET KOPLOS

It's been five years since Rona Pondick had her last solo show in Manhattan, and those who saw her mid-'90s works at Jose Freire or the 1997 exhibition at Sidney Janis could be forgiven for not recognizing the new sculptures at Sonnabend as the work of the same artist. For those five years, Pondick has been struggling with a new primary material, stainless steel, and a new theme, the combining of her body with those of various animals. What links the new work to all that has come before is the tension of obsessiveness.

The story of her work is told in pictures in a new book that accompanies this show and her other exhibitions this year—it's like a coming-out party—at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris, the Galleria d'Arte Moderna of Bologna, the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Mass., and the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands. The book consists of two introductions, an interview and excerpts from previously published writing about her works, but most fascinating is the visual narrative of the documented work itself, with its psychological motivations spilling out in very different materials and forms. Infantile, juvenile and adult desires and fetishes are the heart of Pondick's work.

Her earliest sculptures were unmistakably fecal forms. Brownish accumulated globs, made of wax that gave them a lustrous attraction, were shown in pairs or even in a precious, seemingly hoarded, 2-foot-tall pile called *Mine* (1987). From there she moved to beds, making them of white pillows, black cloth and wood, as well as a sweetly turned-down expanse of lead sheet (a pun, but not really one to laugh at). *Milkman* (1989), a grimy pillow cushioning a pair of white shoes in which stand milk-filled baby bottles, introduced two new forms that would occupy her for some years: shoes—the classic fetish object—and nipples. She strapped baby bottles to a featherbed with a grid of ropes; she made turdlike piles of flattish,



Pondick's mouth/balls, representing existence reduced to appetite, have appeared on platters, in candy jars, in floor installations by the hundreds.

sagging, teated sacs shaped from paper towels, plastic and wax. Shoes were combined into frenzied balls or became the termination of pieces of humanoid furniture with haunchlike legs.

By 1991, Pondick was creating installations of single, vastly elongated lumpy legs that end in a man's black shoe or a baby's white one, combined with large numbers of hand-size irregular balls of various materials and colors whose most prominent characteristic is a large set of teeth. The wax teeth of *Little Bathers* (1990-91) are big and irregular, with a nasty yellow color; in many other works of the period she used joke-shop plastic "chattering teeth," which are bright white with equally bright red gums. These mouth/balls represent existence reduced to appetite. They appeared on platters, in candy jars, in floor installations by the hundreds. The yellow teeth reappeared in yellowish balls dotted with bristly black hair; an installation of these monstrous entities in 1992-93 included a few truncated baby bottles with the same coarse hair around the nipple. In 1997 she showed similarly oral *Dirt Heads* made of earth, wax and thermoplastic, strewn about in installations including several tons of soil.

Other motifs in Pondick's orchestration of obsessions are ears and

Milkman, 1989, wax, plastic, pillow, baby bottles, shoes, 18½ by 34 by 22½ inches. Collection Jake and Ruth Bloom.



Above, Pump, 1989, shoes, paper, plastic, 29 by 33 by 37 inches. Collection Martin and Sharleen Cohen.

Right, Untitled Tree (detail), 1997, 60 cast-aluminum elements, each 3 by 4 by 4½ inches, under a 15-foot-high cast-aluminum tree. Collection Joel and Sherry Mallin.





Left, Fox, 1998-99, stainless steel, 14½ by 8 by 38 inches.

Below, Untitled Animal, 1999-2001, carbon steel, 6½ by 44½ by 21½ inches.



Pine Marten, 2000-01, stainless steel, 9 by 6½ by 18½ inches.

words. Ears, which are both erogenous body parts and functional openings of the self to the world, were major features in her 1995-96 production called *Mine* (the same title as the fecal sculpture, and for this artist a significant word) staged in the Grand Lobby of the Brooklyn Museum of Art as part of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's "Artists in Action" series [see *A.I.A.*, Sept. '97]. Some 300 ears, made of urethane and paper pulp, littered the floor during a dance performance conceived by Pondick. Another important feature of that set was an enormously elongated hard bed covered with the repeated hand-written words "I want." Pondick here seemed to be stating in the clearest way an essential fact of human nature. She concurrently used this kind of basic expression in an artist's book for which she hand-lettered the words thousands of times. In this practice she is not so much mimicking a child as revealing the child that remains within the adult.

In the late '90s the mouth/balls became apples on metal trees. Perhaps that use of metal led her to the recent stainless-steel works. Stainless steel is an unusual artist's material. One thinks about its hardness and wonders how it is worked. Whereas Pondick's themes up to this point had to do with elemental urges—to suck, to eat, to shit, to sleep, with auto- or other eroticism as a subtext—the new works address a fantasy rather than an urge. Here Pondick combines cast parts of her own body—head, arms, legs—with replicated parts of monkeys, a dog, a fox, a marmot, a pine marten and a cougar; in one piece, she also gives her head the horns of a ram. For the animal parts, she worked from taxidermy specimens. The sculptures are made in editions of six, and most are shown on the floor.

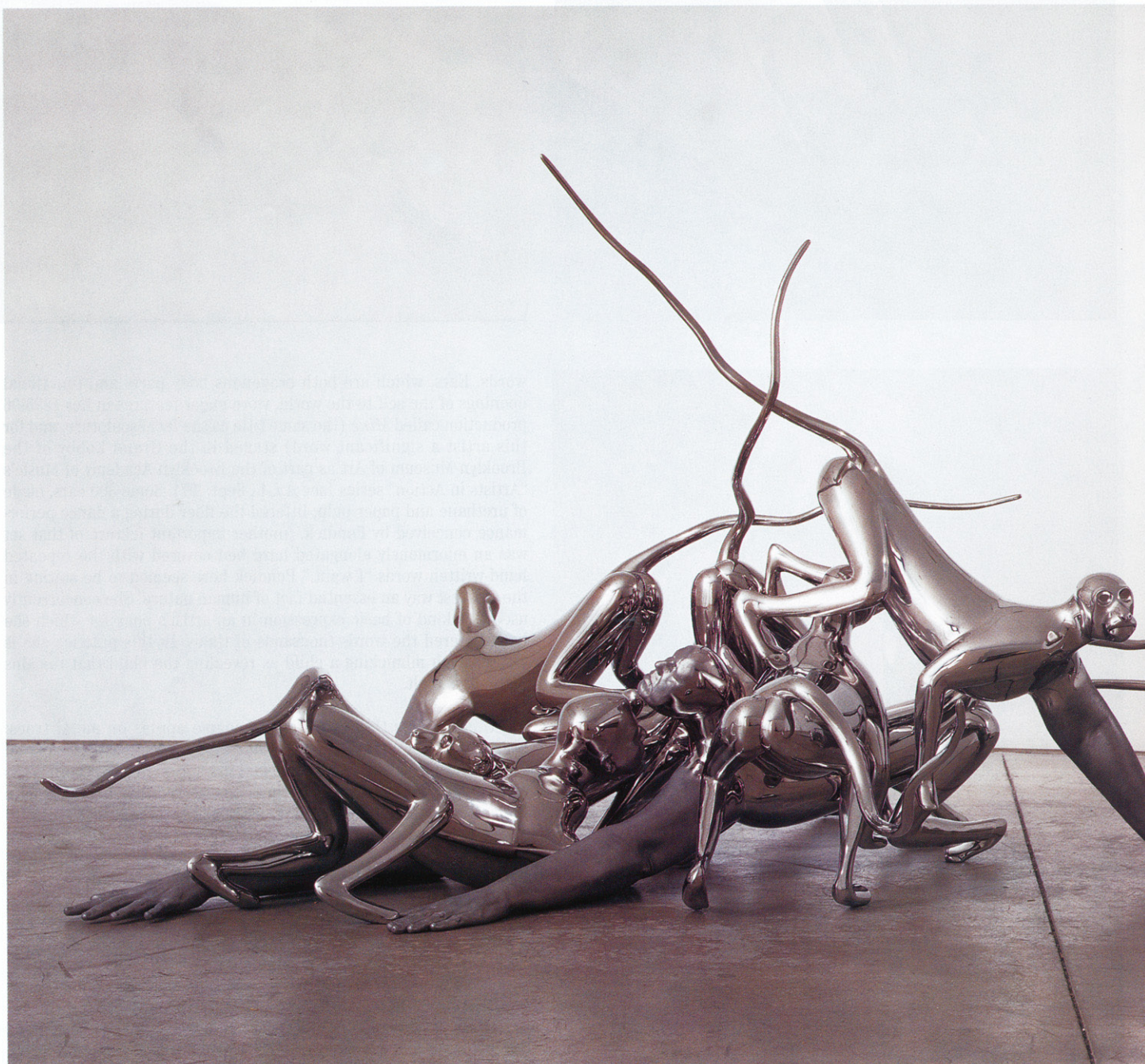
Pondick's combinations of human and animal castings don't project human consciousness into the animal, but rather suavely fuse the disparate parts. The animals are always polished to a shine that looks utterly liquid and are generalized into rounded, nonspecific forms. By contrast, the matte human skin looks gray and dull but is very finely detailed and tactile. Considerable discomfort is implied by the

In Pondick's new work, the union of human and animal is most often crippling, entirely lacking the magical powers of mythical hybrids.

physical combinations. The cougar's foreleg, for instance, turns into Pondick's right arm, but the angle is entirely wrong: the arm looks broken and rotated, and a swollen-looking joint bridges the two

incompatible parts. The only human part of *Fox* (1998-99) is the head, but it's too large and heavy-looking for the fine-boned, furless body, and it sags to the floor.

The casts of Pondick's arms and legs are striking enough in their verisimilitude. But most disconcerting are the heads. The measurements from a life cast were entered into a computer model-making program that allows her to scale a head to any size with utter fidelity. The bronze *Worry Beads* (1999-2001) consists of 14 heads in graduated sizes up to about 2 inches in length. Stepping up from small to large and then back down to small again, the chain of glossy,



Monkeys, 1998-2001, stainless steel, 41 1/4 by 85 1/2 by 66 inches.

green, perfectly detailed heads lay captured under Plexiglas on a pedestal.

Although Pondick's eyes are closed in these heads, her expression is stern; it's not as if she were sleeping, in which case her face would be relaxed. The face is not easy to recognize—those who know her are not accustomed to seeing her hair slicked back (or, occasionally, polished away)—yet the head is utterly specific, very individually human. She looks emotionally distant, as if deeply concentrating. There is for the viewer something improper about looking down upon her face or head in such a helpless form, wedded to these animals.



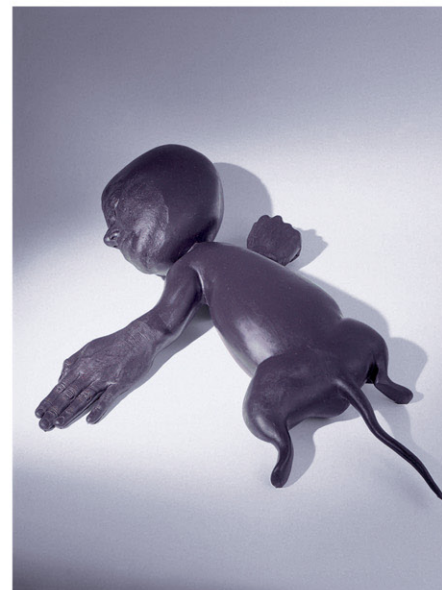
Monkeys (1998-2001), the largest work in the show, consists of a 7-foot-wide band of monkeys clambering over one another, spiky tails raised or extended. Each has either Pondick's face or one of her arms, and those parts look strangely lost amid the almost ungraspable tangle of monkey bodies. There appear to be nine different arm casts in this work. On one of the animals, the glossiness of polished steel extends up around Pondick's face, like a balaclava. The monkey faces themselves have sunken eye sockets that are almost skull-like.

The most distorted creature is *Marmot* (1998-99), the only work in the show made of silicone rubber. Here Pondick's head is an earless balloon recalling a Tony Oursler projected face. The animal body looks like a cartoon. It has both of her hands but not much of her arms, so these appendages suggest flippers. This work, the first one a viewer saw when entering the gallery, was the smallest piece shown on the floor, at just over 29 inches in length.

What's the meaning of these bizarrely metamorphic and sometimes painful combinations? The surreal union is most often a crippling one, entirely lacking the magical powers of mythical hybrids. Here human and animal morph into an industrial substance whose hardness and beautiful perfection only emphasize the fragility of the creatures themselves. In these times, one might suppose that such work comments on genetic alteration or environmental issues. But in the context of Pondick's earlier sculptures, these have to be read as nightmares, and as personal. She seems to remain engaged in a search for self and meaning.

The effect here is nobility, elegance, endurance. The most inspiring aspect, perhaps, is the doggedness (that's the very word) with which Pondick has pursued an exact vision in an intractable material: five years of labor, in her quiet studio and a noisy foundry, to produce a sufficient body of work to make up a show. The drive here is clearly an artistic one, with her obsessiveness guaranteeing that a vision is made real as she sees it. □

Rona Pondick's new work was on view at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris [Feb. 14-Mar. 9], Sonnabend Gallery, New York [Mar. 30-May 4] and the Galleria d'Arte Moderna of Bologna [Apr. 9-June 30]. It can be seen this season at the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, Mass. [July 20, 2002-May 14, 2003], and the Groninger Museum, Groningen, the Netherlands [Sept. 21, 2002-Jan. 12, 2003]. Rona Pondick: Works 1986-2001 is a 158-page book in English and Italian jointly published by the five venues. Subsequent locations to be announced.



Two views of Marmot, 1998-99, silicone rubber, 6 by 29 1/4 by 21 inches.