

# art|tech

BY GEORGE FIFIELD

## Rona Pondick

Lifelike, unnatural, hybrid sculptures address questions of fear and desire.

The artist Rona Pondick has been using three-dimensional computerized processes in her most recent work. The need for this cutting-edge technology came out of a new series she has been creating: sculptures that fit the definition of "monsters." They are unnatural hybrids, combining parts of her body with animal bodies to create unknown creatures. Pondick titles them *Dog*, *Marmot*, *Cougar*, *Fox*, or *Monkey*, but there is something not quite right about even the animal parts. They are hairless and smooth and have an embryonic feel. Pondick started with a life cast of her head and limbs and created animal bodies to affix them to. She reworks the life casts laboriously and fixes them to her animal parts to form a seamless creature. Molds are made, and they are then cast in different materials: rubber, bronze, and stainless steel.

In her most recent work she has needed to fit the life cast of her head correctly with the other components. For a new work called *Monkeys*, she needed to change its size down to six inches. Yet she wanted all the human elements in these sculptures to be lifelike in a way that she couldn't achieve by modeling them. She even wanted the human parts of these sculptures to have their actual skin texture.

That is when she found out that she could have the life cast of her head scanned in 3-D and "printed" at any size she wanted. She says, "The good news was that we did [produce] a six-inch head. The bad news was that it took a year. The level of detail I wanted made this very difficult. Each time we would scan my head the computer would crash. In the end we needed three-quarters of a million dots (cloud points) to create my head. The file was so big the computer was always crashing. What was supposed to take a week to scan took six months. Then we had problems producing my wax head three dimensionally. It took another six months, but it was really worth it. This wax head had all the minute detail of my life cast and looks like a death mask. The details are so fine that it worked perfectly when I combined my shrunken heads with the monkey bodies and the casts of my arms."

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Rona Pondick—*Marmot*, silicone rubber, 6 x 29 1/4 x 21", 1998–1999.  
Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery.

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Her sculptures seem to embody the philosophical associations of the word *monster* as in "monstrum," an omen or a dire warning. Her work directly addresses fears of genetic creation and manipulation and embodies technology as a subject as well as a process.

Pondick explains, "It started when I combined my head and arms with the body of a dog and then with the bodies of a cougar and fox. These pieces immediately made me think of mythology, science, and an image of a mouse I recently saw in the newspaper. This mouse had an ear growing out of its back. I had two immediate thoughts: first, that the image looked just like my work, and the mouse photograph was of something real. This was produced in an actual scientific experiment. How interesting, exciting, and terrifying! Biological experiments raise so many important philosophical questions. Cloning, for example, redefines the question of self. These experiments provoke lots of fears and desires. Fear and desire are two words I've always thought of to describe my work." The work itself is quite sensual, particularly the ones in stainless steel, which look to be made of liquid mercury.

This is because Pondick's adventures in cutting-edge technologies include the final output of her work. She wanted to try casting in new materials, especially stainless steel. "I visited Dick Polich's foundry," she recalls. "He was willing to take on projects that were very demanding, technically difficult, with a lot of problems to solve. When I first showed Dick the *Fox* and *Cougar* in their original materials, he said this is going to be impossible. Going from a completely matte surface to a mirror finish in any metal is hard enough, but next to impossible in stainless steel. And of course, that's what I wanted to do. Dick said that if this was going to work, I had to perfectly resolve the surface transitions in the original. It was a real challenge." It has taken three years to complete four sculptures. Pondick adds, "I am totally obsessed. As I tell you this, I wonder what has kept me from panicking."

This past fall, one of the earlier works made without the computer assistance was exhibited at Sonnabend Gallery. At the opening, one of the attendees showed great interest in the sculpture *Dog*. After asking many questions, he finally said, "Of course, this was all done by computer." Pondick explained that although she was trying out computer technology, in this case it was made entirely by hand, to which he replied, "that isn't possible, how can this be done by hand?"

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