

LOS ANGELES

Rona Pondick

ASHER/FAURE

With shoes standing in for missing human figures, milk bottles signalling the convergence of bodily nourishment and sexual pleasure, and wadded globs of brown wax symbolising the joys and terrors of toilet training, Rona Pondick's ambivalent sculptures combine Freud's notorious stages of oral and anal gratification in objects that are both phallic and vaginal. Her strange conjunctions of

found and crafted things refuse to sublimate these animalistic impulses and socialised behaviours onto the psychoanalyst's third stage of genital gratification. Conspicuously absent from Pondick's oeuvre, representations of genitalia are replaced by actual shoes. According to her works, genitally-focused sexuality is not an uncomplicated, natural occurrence, but results when secondary pleasures are substituted for the satisfactions of primary desires. Without a normative vision of resolved adult sexuality, Pondick's sculptures focus on pre-genital sexuality: free of (menstrual) blood and (pubic) hair, her works explore the intense satisfactions and traumas that constitute the volatile ground adult sexuality attempts to recapture by pretending its gratifications are primal and by denying they are derived from prior experiences in which one's genitals played no role.

Baby (1989) conjoins the life-sustaining power of the maternal breast, the infant's learned ability to control his excrement, and society's desire to dress up or to circumscribe these base, often aggressive impulses. Around the bottoms of two empty baby bottles Pondick has packed lumps of dark brown wax to form two leg-like columns resembling giant turds that end in a pair of unlaced and slightly used white baby shoes. Lying forlornly on its side, this work recalls the infant's helplessness — its absolute dependence upon its mother — and suggests that the baby's existence and identity are almost entirely defined by digestion, by the transformation of milk into faeces through its movement from mouth to anus.

Dark, phallic and disgusting, Pondick's sculpture asserts that every individual's earliest experiences revolve around a struggle to incorporate the awesome power of the breast: to overcome the extreme vulnerability, powerlessness and pleasure of breast feeding by taking control of one's own bodily products, primarily faeces, in lieu of the nipple. At the opposite end of Pondick's awkward construction, the useless baby shoes anticipate the next stage of the child's psychosexual development by symbolically taking the place of male and female genitalia. Both vaginal and phallic, these skin-like constructions intimately wrap the human foot and

transform these sensitive appendages into protruding signs of physical strength or coded representations of status and prestige. Untied and opened in Pondick's sculpture, these shoes do not yet stand in for the literal bondage and containment society will exercise on the bodies of its members, but suggest that prior experiences of oral and anal gratification will be forcefully subsumed by, or bound up in, adult sexuality.

In *Foot* (1990), Pondick replaces the androgynous baby shoes with a single pink spiked high heel. Out of the woman's shoe rises a wall-mounted 'leg' of lumpy brown wax that is partially wrapped in stained tissue paper. This faeces-like appendage emphasises the self-control and restraint on which toilet training is based and aligns this self-discipline with the rigours of culturally prescribed femininity, both regimens that make bodies more presentable to polite society. Pondick's sculpture reveals that in these enforced programmes, denial and elimination predominate at the expense of the gratifications of oral incorporation. The shoe, now ruthlessly gendered, preserves its phallic power only as a tiny pointed heel. No longer a nipple-like dispenser of maternal pleasure, but a weapon designed to serve male fantasies of cruelty and domination, the woman's high heel forces its wearer's buttocks to protrude, exciting male desire for genital gratifications that may seem primal, but are in fact a displacement of prior, less contrived satisfactions.