

RONA PONDICK

"Just try to explain to anyone the art of fasting. Anyone who has no feeling for it cannot be made to understand it."

Kafka *The Hunger Artist*

In *The Hunger Artist* Kafka burlesques our ideals and illusions about art, religion and death. Unlike mystics and artists, the "hunger artist" has no lofty beliefs in the spiritual rewards of denying the flesh, no access to magical powers, not even the personal satisfaction of making himself a spectacle and becoming famous. He fasted simply because he could not find food that he liked. His life's work was chosen not out of great ambition or noble purpose but as the result of a childish self-indulgence.

Through the paradigm of the hunger artist Kafka asserts that art is made as a result of the artist's inability to control or overcome his irrational, physical responses to the world. This inability, in turn, represents the supremacy of fate and the impossibility of transcending death through the will. Instead of searching for forms through which to express the eternal and transcendental qualities of life, the hunger artist, ironically, finds his ultimate expression through starvation and death. The art of fasting becomes a metaphor for the willingness to express, through art, the inevitability of death with no illusions.

The sculpture of Rona Pondick raises similar questions about will and chance, illusion and reality, persistence and death. Even the basic module of her sculpture, a scatological/sexual form at once feces and penis, burlesques its originals in a style worthy of the hunger artist. And, like the hunger artist's fasting, this form represents for her something both willed and irrational—willed be-

cause she has chosen it with all of its offensive qualities, irrational because it appears to be organic and accidental.

It is the variety of contexts and configurations in which these modules appear that conflate the issues further. The dominant formation which Pondick has been developing for a number of years is best described (and is, by the artist) as a pile. The word itself implies a kind of randomness—less organized than a stack for example—but there is an act of will involved, although not one that creates a predictable visual order. From this initial form Pondick has explored two contrasting yet complementary directions—the "knots" which are more closed and defiant in their stubborn formalism and the "beds" which are more seductive and literal, yet full of powerful contradictions.

Until several years ago the pieces that developed from the knot image were cast in bronze from brown wax originals. In most of the recent work, however, she has retained the wax as her primary medium and combined it with other materials such as steel wool, rubber and acrylic. This shift away from bronze indicates a choice to increase the scatological emphasis and seems to have been the result of the discovery of a new working method—that of throwing the forms to produce the initial piles rather than building them up in a more controlled fashion. In this way she was, paradoxically, better able to create and control the appearance of accident and at the same time allow a more aggressive quality to enter the work.

The image of the knot seems to have forced itself out of the internal energies of the piles as the initial randomness became reduced through the artist's associations. Like finding images in clouds or inkblots, each piece began to acquire an identity, still amorphous but more specific than before. As each one progressed, Pondick further explored the associations it evoked, questioning their meaning and relationship to the whole and selecting and strengthening those that seemed most appropriate. In this way she creates and controls the viewer's interpretation, while paradoxically retaining the quality of randomness or unpredictability that developed from the initial phase.

Although Pondick's work has its roots in post-minimalism there

is no direct relationship between these pieces and the knot forms of Lynda Benglis, which depend much more on a literal reading for their meaning. For Pondick, the importance of the knot as a structuring image lies in its multidirectional physical force. While a pile simply pushes downward, a knot twists round and round and this more complex linear aspect becomes another way to capture and direct the eye of the viewer.

The materials Pondick combines with the wax help to further develop the reading of each piece. In *Silver Lining*, (1987) for example, the steel wool surface undermines the density and weight of the imploding knot form, so that it begins to look as light and airy as a dustball. As the title implies, the lightness is meant to represent a kind of felicity which is both created and contradicted by the steel wool, itself a rather earthy material, not pleasant to the touch and which is, ironically, used for the mundane tasks of scrubbing and cleaning. This kind of material contradiction evokes the alchemical transformations intended by the artists of Arte Povera. The difference is that Pondick's mutations are unstable, moving back and forth between readings like an alternating current, and in this way undermining the illusions rather than relying upon the nostalgic mysticism inherent in so much of the European work. In other words, there is still a part of *Silver Lining* that could be used to clean the bathtub.

In contrast to the apparent near-weightlessness of *Silver Lining*, *Mine* (1987) made entirely of brown wax, possesses all the impacted force its title implies. To begin with its most literal interpretation, the piece can be read as a bomb that has just detonated, its surface only beginning to break apart, as if a second later nothing will remain but burnt shrapnel and the destruction it will create. If we read the title as a possessive pronoun, however, we are presented with a Brancusi-like ovoid made entirely of feces, still moist and fetid, smeared together aggressively in a primal act of self assertion. In the universe of *Mine* all substances are rank or dangerous; forms are never neutral or pure.

This scatological emphasis is further developed within a more conceptual framework in the "bed" pieces. As was previously mentioned, these are piles in an-



Rona Pondick, *Mine*, 1987. Wax. 32" × 28" × 22". Courtesy fiction/nonfiction Gallery.

other form, that is, pillows in different sizes and shapes and stuffed with various materials, stacked atop one another before being crowned with a single feces-penis shape usually cast in bronze. Initially, the pillow form was chosen as an aggressively absurd context in which to view the basic scatological module. The pillows were seen as resting places or beds for these forms and from there a more literal image of the bed slowly began to emerge. While the knot image had a formal function the bed refers more narratively to its various connotations but most frequently to that of the grave.

The artist's refusal to indulge in illusions and to overemphasize any one aspect of existence has also led her to create pieces in which the associations she juxtaposes are less disturbing and in which she explores persistence as well as death. For example, *Angel*, (1987–8) which combines elements of both the knots and the beds and consists of a pile of white fecal forms made of plastic, wax and fiber resting on a stack of small, white pillows. Although the forms appear to be a seething mass of worms or larvae bringing decay and defilement upon what was once a pristine spot, there is also a sense of regeneration. The linear and implosive energy of the knots has been quickened into life and the pillows create, not a grave or a deathbed, but a nesting place—a source of vitality. While, on a personal level, death is terminal, here it seems to be viewed in a universal framework in which all life depends on cycles of decay and rebirth.

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