

Rona Pondick

Not much art being made today makes one think about toilet training—once learned, it's usually forgotten. Rona Pondick, however, brings the subject back to mind. You cannot hide from it—the things that grab attention in her work look very much like turds. In *Beds*, her site-specific installation at the Sculpture Center, Pondick hits us below the belt with her signature forms. If the simple ability to shock had been her only achievement, then her work could be easily dismissed as crass and one could run out of the gallery with averted eyes (which probably happened more often than the one incident I witnessed on a Saturday afternoon). As with most of Pondick's work, a quick glance will provoke this type of reaction and prevent you from learning its full significance. Overall, Pondick presents a didactic environment that shocks on many levels but addresses issues much larger than the scatological.

Immediately inside the gallery door, Pondick has placed a white bed of three progressively larger pillows that overwhelm a bare wood base and flare out toward the door. The bed, which looks clean and comfortable, seems to be literally inviting the viewer to enter and perhaps test its softness; but the yard-long, gauze-wrapped, somewhat-browned cylinder laying in the bed has staked its claim to the comfort, which has suddenly disappeared for the viewer.

The three beds in the middle section of the installation have very little to do with comfort. Made of stacked sandbags, each stretches over fifteen feet. Pondick makes her beds with lead sheets that are rolled up at the foot (echoing Richard Serra, one of her teachers at Yale). The lead has been hammered around the sandbags up where someone might try to sleep, creating back-breaking bumps that could be read in many ways, from figure to landscape. Each bed is capped with a dingy pillow; on the first Pondick has presented three brown-black wax turds as hors d'oeuvres. Despite the humor in that scenario, there is also something frightening about this part of the installation. Unlike the first bed, or even the later one, these are beds of disaster and death—sleeping on sandbags and under poisonous lead can lead to lying in state. The

formality of the beds' spacing and the subdued light add to this effect, while the dimness allows the bright light from beyond the next wall to invade this preceding room and tie the installation together.

In the small space in the back of the gallery Pondick has piled dark purple satin pillows which are, like the first white bed, comfortable (even voluptuous) but threatening. Here the turd is hairy, gray and wedged high between two pillows. The thin passageway between the two sets of pillows is inviting, but what if there are more turds in the dark? Once safely inside, the temptation is to tentatively slide your hands in the cracks while noticing how lumpy the pillows are here as opposed to their sleekness outside. The urge to experience the work by touch is overwhelming.

There is an obsessiveness here that approaches the mystical and the ritual. The

installation as a whole has the makings of some type of ceremony waiting to happen, especially when you think of Pondick's work in terms of tribal sculpture—the material references of her work and the manner in which it is made hint at the ceremonial use of bodily waste and other natural substances to create a charged object.

Overall, Pondick offers us a new look at the once-again current emphasis on objects in art. She is making permanent objects from things we would never think of keeping in any other context—if you find excrement on your pillow, you get rid of it. She acts as a good foil to the likes of Haim Steinbach and Jeff Koons. In their cases, most of the objects they present would be desired in several contexts—lava lamps and alarm clocks, vacuum cleaners or basketballs. But their objects are not necessary, while Pondick's definitely are. Of course, she also has much in common with them, particularly with Steinbach in her similar use of a minimal base upon which her arrangements rest. But it is ironic (and important: consider all of our recent problems with handling our own waste) that the possessions that Pondick represents are truly our possessions—they come from us, but we don't have any desire to keep them. In fact we have been trained to ignore them, but Pondick rubs our noses in it. (*Sculpture Center, September 6–October 1*)

Terry R. Myers



Rona Pondick, *Beds* (Installation view, center of three rooms), 1988. Sand bags, sheet lead, wax, pillows. Courtesy The Sculpture Center.