

RONA PONDICK

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BED

MILK

SHOE



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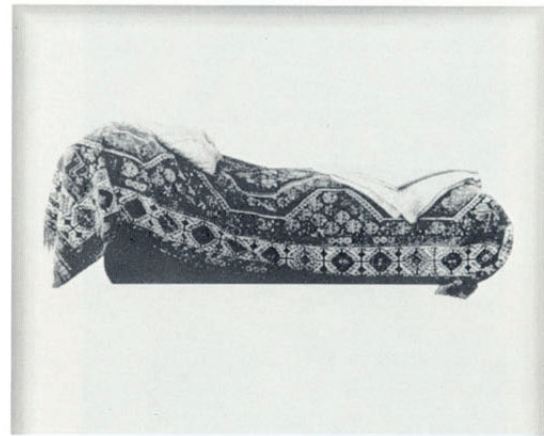
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Rona Pondick has become known for her scatological art works which consider the excremental with a respect normally reserved for precious gems. In *BED MILK SHOE*, Pondick has directed her attention toward those elements named in the exhibition's title. Although they are not as overt in their affront on one's sense of propriety, the new body of works exhibited here explore the same tenuous relationship between the sacred and profane.

Such new works as *Milkman*, *Pump*, and *Double Bed*, continue to explore the mythology surrounding the life-cycle of the human body. The works operate like fetish objects which function as surrogates for displaced desires. Through their presentation, one can read into the assemblages an array of signification which invokes aspects of the biological as it participates in the process of socialization. The elements deployed in *BED MILK SHOE* are armatures which express the libidinal impulses of the human psyche. As a form of fetishization, they reenact the viewer's mediation between the self and the social by reifying dream, myth and fantasy into tangible expressions.

Pondick has worked with the bed as a motif throughout her career. It is a sign laden with spheres of human reference that span the beginning to the end of the life-cycle. It is the locus where we spend over half of every day: a place where we have the most intimate contact, where we release our subconscious, and where our mind and body are free to rest. The bed is the tangent between birth and death, the alpha and the omega of human activity. Hence, the exhibition's title could continue *BED MILK SHOE BED*.

"One of the most unexplored regions of art are dreams." (Henry Fuseli).

The bed is a support which admits another realm of consciousness. As the place where we lie prone, it serves as an alternative support to our encumbered frames. It is, therefore, a structure which liberates an aspect of our physicality, allowing an alternative reality to take over. As living beings we lie down, vulnerable, and surrender ourselves to the subconscious. The bed is, therefore, an expression of the dream. As an escape from the shackles of our daily routine, the

dream state releases us from the restrictions of social propriety. Here, our inner consciousness arises, for in this realm of sleep we are the curators of fate, and revisors of history. The dream world is fettered by nothing other than the limits of the psyche. It is where we enact our delusions, and act upon our dissatisfactions. This state is, therefore, a direct affront to reason. As André Breton pronounced, the dream is; "pure psychic automatism . . . intended to express . . . the true process of thought, free from the exercise of reason, and every aesthetic or moral preoccupation."

The dream is conceived as a window into the self where "gleams of a remoter world / Visit the soul in sleep" (P.B. Shelley). The evocation of the dream state is the basic premise of Freudian psychoanalysis. By placing the patient on the sofa, Freud created a quiet, intimate setting for healing. His bed, shrouded in carpets, was the only prop offered to the patient. Freud, as analyst, sat behind the bed viewing the analysand, while remaining unseen. The patient, lying on his back, was left with nothing to focus upon but his own thoughts. Here, the imagination generated by his crisis was encouraged to surface. Freud's bed epitomizes the interdependence between the emergence of the self-conscious and the prone position.

The prone position is itself a topos that signifies another aspect of the dream state. This concept is typified in examples of reclining figures on antique sarcophagi which rest above a sculptural frieze that depicts various dream sequences. Dreams are represented as a metaphor for spiritual release and life outside of the material body. The connection between sleep, dreaming and death has a long tradition. The earliest sarcophagi originally took the form of urns which held the remains of the deceased. As containers, they are akin to both the womb and the tomb; they symbolize the unity of life and death. They link life with the after-life where the soul of a dead person can be born again.

As the sarcophagus is a metaphor for eternal rest and rebirth, the physical place of the bed is a metaphor for the physical dimension of human relations. The tangent between birth and death is procreation. This act signals the perpetu-



ation of the life-cycle. As ranging the gambit from life to death, and from the internal creation of the sub-conscious to the actual creation of life, the bed signifies all that is human.

Pondick's beds are arenas wherein all of these levels of signification occur. Her *Double Bed* is like a woven armature which intertwines fantasy, myth and dream. Two long pillows made of a white rubberized vinyl are snared by a rope net. At certain junctures in the net's weaving, baby bottles are cinched into its matrix. The bed is like the base of a minimalist sculpture, the net a cartesian grid. Upon this rational setting, Pondick sets into play the richness of the bed metaphor. The construction of a bed out of a rubbery, water-resistant fabric, and its juxtaposition with a grid of milk bottles with rubber nipples, implies multiple dimensions of wetness. This effect connotes nursing, mothering, and the inception of life. The combination also resembles a raft; an object that evokes the perils of survival and the preservation of life. The vinyl surface, responsible for evoking the piece's wetness, is also a protection from it and, therefore, from bed-wetting. A dream-like state is evinced from this waiver between various possible interpretations. The bed is a raft at sea, a drift of multiple meanings.

Double Bed also employs milk imagery as it is made of white fabric and baby bottles. Milk, as a liquid substance produced by the body for the body, evokes the perpetuity of the life-cycle. It is laden with symbolism and confronts multiple aspects of myth. Liquid in the womb is food, the milk of the mother's breast is the baby's link to survival in the outside world. Milk has life-giving properties like blood; it is an aqua vita at the infant's first sup which provides his necessary sustenance. As man explains the origins of the world through myth, milk lies at this fount. Ovid's account of the Golden Age portrayed the rivers flowing with milk and honey. Zeus' wife Juno could make a mortal immortal with a simple suckle from her breast and Boethius was fed philosophy through the milk of Philosophy's breast.

The whiteness of milk is an icon of the primordial void, unblemished and uncorrupted by the baseness of the world. Whiteness is the All (it is the combination of all colors of light)

and the source. It represents where we came from and the standard of perfection toward which mankind strives. As an icon of perfection, white connotes the (Neo-) Classical ideal of purity and beauty. Hence, it functions as its very own myth.

Milk not only signifies myth but, on a more mundane level, it is also the product of myth. As nourishment, milk has entered the socialization of the body as an alchemical substance which makes our bones grow in size and strength. Milk has become the epitome of a health food. In order to extend the bond between mother and child, society has dictated that it must be drunk daily. Even though it is cow's milk (a dubious source of nourishment), and not mother's milk, it has been indoctrinated into the American health code. "There is no finer investment for any community than putting milk into babies." (Winston Churchill).

In various creation myths, the apples in Eden and the waters of the world in Hindu lore have a dual function. They operate between an elixir of eternal life and a poison. The myth of milk follows such a duality. Not only is it a source of nourishment, but on occasion milk is a venom. It spoils, and it also has been determined to have negative effects on people who consume it during their adulthood. In her art, Pondick subverts milk's mythic stereotype by treating it as taboo. She does so with as much cunning as that demonstrated in Alfred Hitchcock's film *Suspicion*. In the movie, Cary Grant's wife suspects him of murder and fears that he is trying to kill her. She has become sick with fear. In a gesture meant to soothe her illness, Grant offers her a glass of milk; a substance epitomizing such positive values as health and nourishment. However, this gesture has an ambiguous nature, as his wife may be correct in suspecting that the milk has been poisoned.

By presenting milk in bottles, Pondick emphasizes milk as a consumer product. It is packaged, and like all commodities, an object of desire. The presentation of milk bottles with nipples also invokes women's breasts. Here, Pondick slyly reveals our culture's propensity to package the woman's body as a consumable product. Breasts are desired not only by children but by adults for whom the act of suckling is per-



formed for erotic pleasure. This duplicity, where the infantile and adult merge into a single organism, is explored in Pondick's *Milk*. The piece incorporates numerous rubber nipples embedded in a soggy mulch of paper towel sacs. They combine to create two spherical conglomerations that resemble large masses of protruding breast-like forms. Their number exceeds the limits necessary for nourishment and turns the piece into an erotic emblem. Here, need has been transformed into libido. The spheres of the adult and child are akin to those of life and death, of innocence and tainted knowledge. As dream and myth belong to the individual's construction of his personal and social world, his daily salvation is found in fantasy. For Pondick, shoes manifest that realm. They are appendages which have become synonymous with the body. This theme is addressed in René Magritte's surreal fantasy *The Red Model*. The painting portrays a hybridization of a shoe and foot where such an affinity is the result of the shoe's necessary relationship with the foot and vice versa. However, their dependence is the result of a socialization process and not of survival. Shoes, as surrogates for the body, are emblematic. They are social symbols of status and statements of cultural identity.

As consumer products their accumulation also exceeds function. Here again, desire displaces need. Since the person can be judged by the shoes he wears, one's personality is expanded with every new purchase. This fantasy of acquisition can be taken to an extreme and become a nightmarish form of abuse. When Imelda Marcos' purchased thousands of shoes for her personal consumption, they no longer were statements expressing individuality but became icons of power and unleashed ego. "The problem of shoes demonstrates how the most barbaric things pass as acceptable through the force of habit. One feels, thanks to *The Red Model*, that the union of a human foot and a leather shoe arises in reality from a monstrous creation." (Magritte).

Like a uniform, shoes are stand-ins for the human being. Like a genetic code, they embody the record of an individual's personae. In France, during the Bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution, an entire period environment was

reconstructed around one of the few remnants of Marie Antoinette's personage, her shoes. Hence, her individual personality signified the personality of an age.

The idea of the shoe fitting its wearer, is indoctrinated in culture at an early age. In the children's tale *Cinderella*, the glass slipper is an emblem of a prince's quest for love. The correlation between shoe and love is in some way derived from an erotic association between the foot and sexual fantasy. This association has a far reaching history. In wedding rituals, rice is thrown for good luck and old shoes are given as gifts to bless the couple with healthy children. A less prevalent tradition belongs to the Chinese custom of foot binding, also known as "Golden Lilies," where the foot is first mutilated and then revered as an erotic device.

This projection of sexuality into the shoe or foot defines Freud's notion of the fetish as an "object selected as a substitute for the penis." He attributes early sexual awareness as occurring when a young boy realizes that his mother has no penis. The "foot or shoe owes its attraction as a fetish to the circumstance that the inquisitive boy used to peer up the woman's legs toward her genitals."

In *Milkman*, Pondick offers a startling juxtaposition which places us in the position of Freud's adolescent viewer. From a pair of white men's shoes placed upon a dirtied white pillow, we peer up toward the body. Instead of finding two legs and a torso, as one would expect, we find two breast-like phal-luses. Such a realization completely undermines our ability to make normative conclusions from our observations. Pondick stuns our predictive abilities by forcing us to discard our preestablished code of acceptable social behavior. Her goal is to enlighten the viewer through bewilderment. By combining milk, shoe and bed, Pondick exposes the laden layers of signification that her vocabulary so richly portrays. This union explores, in all of its indescribable complexity, the psycho-biological aspects of the human life-cycle as mediated by the social. A single work unlocks the infinite realm of fantasy, dream and myth.

BED MILK SHOE BED.



Double Bed, 1989
plastic, rope, plastic pillows, baby bottles, 9 x 162 x 73 inches



Milkman, 1989

wax, plastic, canvas pillow, baby bottles, shoes, 18½ x 22½ x 34 inches



Milk, 1989

wax, plastic, paper towels, baby bottles, 22 x 35 x 32, 22 x 33 x 32 inches



Pump, 1989
wax, plastic, newspaper, shoes, 29 x 33 x 37 inches



Soles, 1988-89
wax, steel wool, plastic, shoes, 25 x 31 x 29 inches

Essay acknowledgements:

Kirby Gookin would like to thank Keith Seward at Art Resource, Joseph Kosuth, Joe Wolin and Mary Chung.
Editor: Robin Kahn.

Photographs accompanying the essay:

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design: Robert Feintuch and Rona Pondick.
design execution: Marcia Salo.
typography: Advance Graphic, NYC.
printing: S & R Hayden Corporation, NYC.
copies: one thousand.