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*BOMBSITE*

*THE ARTIST'S VOICE SINCE 1981*

Rona Pondick  
by Shirley Kaneda  
WEB EXCLUSIVES



*Ram's Head*, 2000–01, stainless steel, 8 x 24 x 10.5 inches. Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York.

I first met Rona Pondick in the early '90s when she and her husband, the painter Robert Feintuch, were invited to spend the weekend at a mutual friend's house on Fire Island. At the time, she was coming to prominence with works that dealt with the fragmentation of the body: mouths, teeth, and ears rich in psychological and scatological references. Rona's output has been impressive since then, and she is one of the few artists I know who is always experimenting with materials and forms to extend the parameters of her sculpture in unexpected and startling ways.

For this interview, I went to see her in her loft on Cooper Square and talked about *The Metamorphosis of an Object*, her current show at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts. In arranging and curating the show, she selected a number of historic sculptures from different cultures—East and West, some dating back a few thousand years—from the museum's collection to be shown alongside her own. This idea produced provocative juxtapositions, giving lucid insight into Rona's working methods and interest in the fragmentation of the body and the more recent idiosyncratic hybridization of natural and animal forms with the human body, which she elucidates below.

—Shirley Kaneda

**SHIRLEY KANEDA** You just showed me installation photos of your latest show at the Worcester Art Museum and what struck me was the spectrum of history you've incorporated into this show, which you mentioned spans all the way from 2,000 B.C. to the present and involves a range of different cultures. What was the impetus of having an almost mega-historic context for this show and for your work?

**RONA PONDICK** I was thinking about my own history and I was trying to construct an exhibition that dealt with the simple act of looking. I wanted someone to be able to walk in and not need labels and written explanations telling them what they're looking at. I was also trying to bring different audiences together—audiences that would look solely at historical work with audiences that would normally just look at contemporary work.

**SK** That's interesting, and I suppose the goal is to have viewers develop a fluid context between historical and contemporary works even though, stylistically, they look different. To do that, you really need to *look*; people now seem to depend so much on the taped recordings now at museum shows. Michael Kimmelman just wrote something in the *New York Times* about how "looking" might be coming back in terms of viewing works of art now, which I'm hopeful about.

**RP** It seems as though people are enjoying the experience of looking. The curator, Susan Stoops, has said that visitors seem comfortable without labels and elaborate explanations. People are getting it on their own. By breaking the show into three general themes—how hair translates in sculpture, how gesture and posture make meaning, and the use of repeated imagery—we've created a space where people are very comfortable looking at the relationships between the individual pieces. I love the fact that people are spending a long time on their own before reaching for the brochure. People are very engaged—visually, emotionally, and intellectually. Shortly after the show opened I gave a talk to the docents who give tours throughout the run of the exhibition. At the end of the talk a couple of docents thanked me, saying they thought they knew the pieces in the museum well—they had been giving tours for 20-plus years—but felt like they were seeing the pieces I chose for the first time.

**SK** How did you decide on these different categories, and how do they relate to your work?

**RP** When Susan invited me to do the exhibition, she asked if I would be comfortable incorporating pieces from the

collection, knowing I was deeply involved with historical sculpture. We got into some very interesting and wonderful exchanges about how this could be done. My initial idea was to make the show about how sculptors make their work and what they think about. We started talking about how I approach making my own work, using that as a guide. At the time I had been thinking about how hair translates in sculpture because I was trying to figure out how to model it in my own work. I became obsessed with looking at all the ways that hair was abstracted. Somehow, our brain recognizes a variety of abstracted forms as hair. From the snail-like forms in Buddhist sculptures to the stylized carved or real hair in African pieces to more natural-looking, flowing, Roman hairdos, it all looks like hair.



(Left:) *Monkey with Hair*, 2002–03, stainless steel and modacrylic hair, 14 x 41 x 32 inches. Installation view of *The Metamorphosis of an Object*. All installation photos courtesy of the Worcester Art Museum.

**SK** But the way the hair is represented in your sculpture seems to introduce a level of realism that didn't seem to be there in your earlier works. I'm thinking about works from the '90s, the late '80s. While they were of course figurative, there's a different kind of realism in your work now, which is coupled with simplified animal forms, for example.

**RP** As soon as you start using skin texture or hair you're talking about highly articulated forms which could be read as realistic. But if you see hair that's modeled, it's abstracted. It's not a one-to-one relationship. If you look at an early Egyptian or Roman death mask, something directly removed from someone's face, you would expect it to read factually

or realistically. But in fact, most of those death masks don't look real because they don't have skin texture. It sounds like when I introduce skin texture in my work, you see it as introducing realism. I think the level of attention I bring to the appearance of things is part of what makes them psychologically disturbing.

**SK** Obviously your goal is not about realism or how realistic you can make something look. It's part of the repertoire of representation in your work, but how did this transformation to a more realistic way of representation come about? Was it because you started using digital technology?

**RP** No, I think it came from my wanting to have two highly articulated realities merge into one. I'm trying to bring together opposites. I've been doing this pretty much from the beginning.

**SK** Yeah, I remember when you first started showing your work in the late '80s when postmodernism had come to the fore. Do you feel comfortable applying that term to your work? It's a large term, but I'm specifically thinking about disparate qualities coming together, the hybrid quality of your work.

**RP** These are qualities that have intrigued and propelled me for a long time. I don't know if that's postmodern or not.



(Third from left:) *Muskkrat*, 2002–05, stainless steel. Installation view of *The Metamorphosis of an Object*.

**SK** I think this is where we share a certain interest in what we try to express in our work: a contradictory nature, an understanding that something is not singular, that it's always open-ended. And in order to express that, you need to show it *visually*, not textually. I think one of the strongest aspects of working visually is being able to experiment with opposite or disparate qualities.

**RP** I don't know if you do this, but I find myself constantly trying to understand how my artistic ancestors did things.

**SK** When you say ancestors are you talking about other artists?

**RP** Yeah, artists throughout history. I spend a lot of time going to museums. I feel as comfortable looking at an Egyptian sculpture as I do looking at a sculpture made today. I'm not surprised by the fact that I love Giacometti and Egyptian art, and it also makes perfect sense to me that Giacometti looked at Egyptian work as well. These are my ancestors. I look to my ancestors when I'm struggling with my own work. Why reinvent the wheel when it's all there? We're all linked but different at the same time.

**SK** I believe that, too. Despite the fact that we cling to "known styles," there is a possibility that a third way of looking at something can emerge from already established points of view. So I don't have any problem, say, reusing, or regenerating from something established in the past. In fact, I think there isn't much else. (*laughter*)

**RP** If you look throughout history, what's wonderful about art is that it's mutating and spiraling. It doesn't move in a linear way. We artists take things from maybe the last 100 or 1,000 years and twist them and re-do them, putting them into our own voices and time periods. In one section of the Worcester show I put a bronze Thai Buddha from the 15th–16th century next to my yellow stainless steel *Dog* that I finished in 2001 next to a Mexican ceramic from 900–1200 next to an Egyptian Middle Kingdom limestone from 2060–1780 B.C. I found it interesting that sculptures from different time periods and cultures—in many different materials, all made in different ways—looked like they made perfect sense together.

**SK** Well, that's what's so surprising with some of your recent sculptures. Thinking about the bonsai pieces, for example: the bonsai form and the tiny hands growing at the ends of their branches are both known figurative elements on their own, but somehow the combination creates something very refreshing and very *you*. One is a generic representation of a bonsai tree, right down to the scale. And then the tiny hands remind me of Egyptian-inspired ornaments. It's extremely personal, and very much one artist's perspective—yours. I find that quality in a lot of your recent works; even though when I look at a figurative form you use—like your own face or the way the hands or animal forms are realized—and recognize it, the decisions you've made in terms of scale, material, and texture produce something very unusual.

**RP** The first time I merged a fragment of my own body with an animal form a light bulb went off. I realized that animal-human hybrids have existed since the Neolithic era, and if you look throughout history, it's an image that has repeated over and over. Now, when you look at the way science is advancing with cloning and genetic manipulations in both human and plant forms, it's chilling how it all comes together.



*Pleasant Azalea*, 2007–09, painted bronze, 31.5 x 27 x 44 inches. Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York.

**SK** One of the first reactions I had when I saw one of your hybrid animal-human pieces was discomfort. It was familiar, because as you said it exists in historical pieces, but your combination of surface, materials, scale, realism, and stylization was jarring. But really compelling! I couldn't stop looking at it. It almost felt like looking at something you shouldn't be looking at.

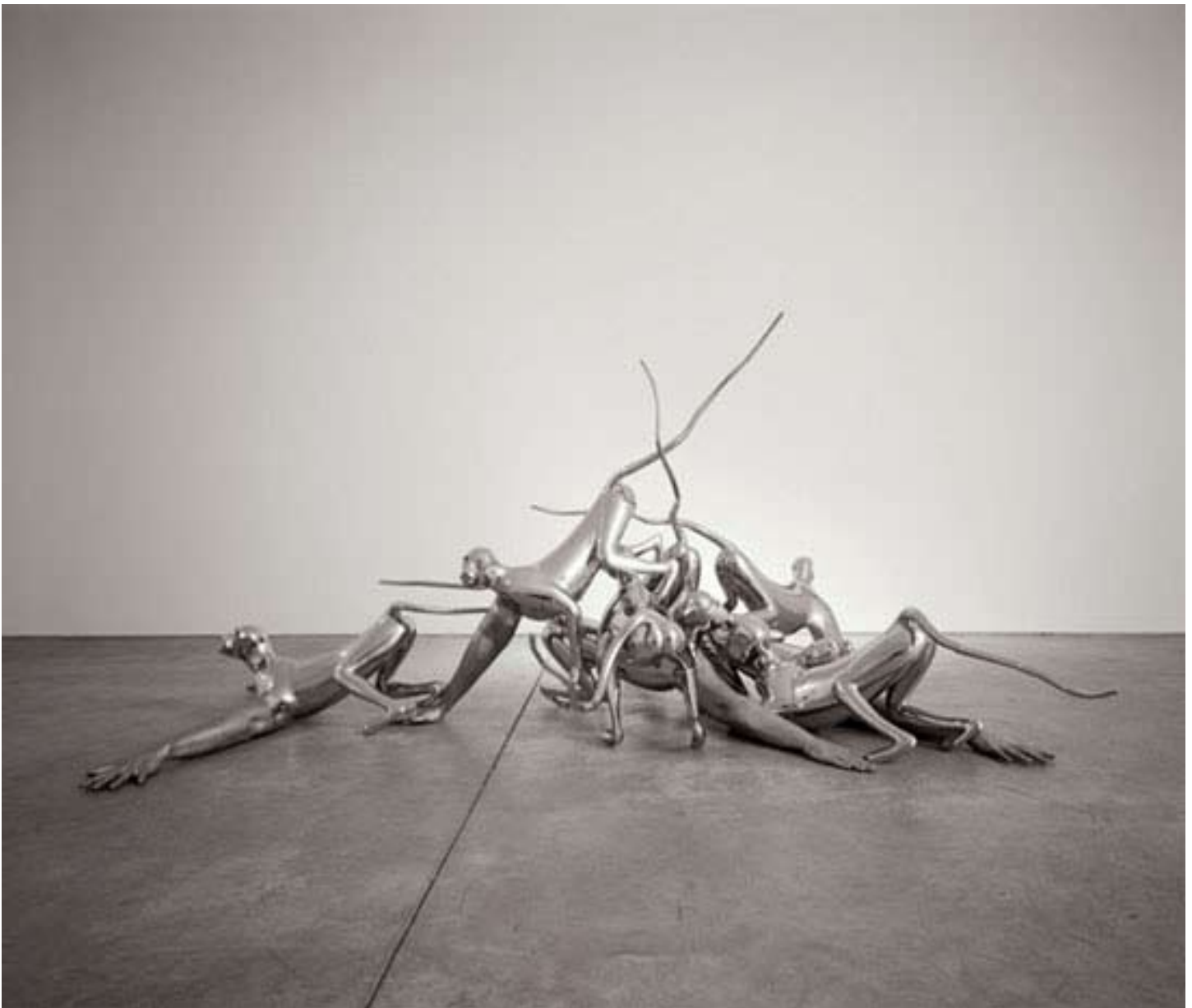
**RP** I know exactly what you mean. You have a cut in your arm and you can't stop picking at it, or there's a car accident and—

**SK** Everyone slows down. (*laughter*)

**RP** Right, everyone slows down instead of hurrying by without looking. We are strange! How is it possible that we all have such different responses to the same thing? What one person finds hysterically funny the next person is appalled by and finds incredibly disturbing. Just think about the emotional range we all go through in a single day. It's really quite vast. I want all of that in my own work.

**SK** Definitely. Because your work is figurative, I think the contradictions can be interpreted psychologically. Whereas my work is abstract, so it's a little bit more general; contradictions just stand for contradictions, and aren't necessarily interpreted as something psychological.

**RP** Absolutely. I'm aware of it. Sometimes it takes me a while to understand what I'm doing in a piece, psychologically. When I'm working on a sculpture I don't always understand what I'm doing and it can take me years to understand fully what it means. But I'm definitely aware of the emotional interpretations. People want to believe there's a narrative. Because I'm bringing contradictory fragments together, I believe the viewers try to bridge the gaps and wind up projecting a lot of themselves into my work.



*Monkeys*, 1998–2001, stainless steel, 41.25 x 66 x 85.5 inches. Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris / Salzburg.

**SK** I look at the piece *Monkeys* and see a very beautiful piece. Formally it's extremely graceful, in the way that the bodies just seem to expand, but it's also very sexual and sensual.

**RP** *Monkeys* is a piece about baroque movement. I wanted it to feel like it was in motion. I think the smooth surfaces and undulating forms have a sexual and sensual reading. While a lot of the piece has highly reflective surfaces, the human elements have very detailed skin texture. I think some people find this a little disturbing, because it looks so real. I find it odd that people think stainless steel looks so much like skin.

**SK** It's not lifelike, or it is only in terms of the lines, but not the material.

**RP** Right, and I think there's something a little startling about that. The treatment of the surfaces are so different, and I've noticed that people become quite engaged with themselves when they're looking at my sculptures because of the reflective, mirrored surfaces. They're pulled into it.

**SK** Was that the reason for using stainless steel?

**RP** One of the reasons I use stainless steel is because it looks like mercury. It's a material that always looks like it's in flux. It's moving. Metamorphosis is an essential quality in my work, so it's a perfect material for me to use.

**SK** Do you think you use untraditional materials, in relation to what sculptors have used historically?

**RP** I think the way I *combine* materials may be seen as unusual. I've used a lot of different materials over the years. While some people might think it's strange to take hair and combine it with stainless steel, either material alone is not so unusual. Material transcendence is really important to me. I'll never forget the first time I saw *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* by Bernini. I couldn't believe this marble sculpture looked like it was quivering and actually reaching an orgasm. To me, this was a sculpture that totally transcended the material it was made of, and I thought a lot about that when making *Monkeys*.

**SK** Well, that was the genius of Bernini. He was able to transform the material into something that was more than lifelike.

**RP** Exactly. For me, the challenge in *Monkeys* was to have the piece be full of movement and read as a sexual and sensual cluster of animal-human hybrids.

**SK** Well, I think you've succeeded. So, when you're making your pieces, you're not specifically thinking about a particular emotion. But obviously your work has a very strong underpinning of psychosexual content. How do you feel about this in terms of our culture today? It's a subject matter of great interest to many artists.

**RP** Yes, the psychosexual is definitely in my work. Aren't we all psychosexual beings? We all have emotions and sexual drives and they seem intimately connected. It seems very natural for it to be part of my work.

**SK** What do you think of Louise Bourgeois, in terms of this subject matter?

**RP** I think she is using her life and her life experiences. But her work is autobiographical.

**SK** So yours is not?



**RP** I'm using myself in my work but I'm not dealing with a specific event in my life, like Bourgeois is. I see relationships between my work and hers, but I also see big differences; in particular the way she uses her relationship to her father as a central subject.

**SK** That seems to be the key to her work, in terms of what's been written.

**RP** I don't want to emphasize myself in my work, even though my body parts are all over the place. Honestly, the reason I started using my own head instead of someone else's is that I didn't want to go to jail. I didn't use straws in the molding process and I painted in rubber around my nostrils, which could have killed me. *(laughter)* I've used that same cast of my head in so many of my sculptures. I manipulated the head by hand, because it was so unpleasant doing that first life-cast. I never want to do it again.

**SK** I don't think of them as self-portraits. I know it's you, but maybe because of the repetition in the usage of yourself, that somehow it loses the aspect of self-portraiture.

**RP** I want to tell you a very funny story, which happened at Sonnabend's opening show in Chelsea. I was standing next to my sculpture *Fox*, and Bill Jensen walked up to me and asked, "Is that a portrait of Antonio Homem?" *(laughter)*

**SK** Sonnabend's director?!? *(laughter)*

**RP** At first I thought this was very funny. I'm standing right next to a life cast of my own head, and he's asking me if it's someone else's! I realized that this was great, because the sculpture had become a generalized me. People have written about these sculptures as male or female, and most of the time not about the fact that it's a depiction of me. I like that.

**SK** The expression actually seems expressionless; it doesn't really give a lot of detail in terms of your face. Your eyes are closed.

**RP** Well, if you do a life cast, your eyes have to be closed. It's a very internal expression.

**SK** And very uncomfortable.

**RP** It was horrible! Imagine inches of rubber and mesh and then two inches of plaster encasing your head and neck. Luckily I kept a pad and pencil on my lap before starting. Halfway through it, I was flipping out, feeling like I was suffocating. I had sensory deprivation, and I wanted that thing *off*. I started writing, "Get this fucking thing off of me!" *(laughter)* I quickly started making casts from my arms and legs. Now, many years later, I see that using my own body parts does mean something. If I started using someone else's, that would take on a whole other meaning. Maybe years from now I'll see these as self-portraits, even though at first that was not my intent.



*Fox*, 1998–99, stainless steel, 14.5 x 8 x 38 inches. Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York.

**SK** That's interesting, because we've almost come to expect to see you in the piece, even though it's not meant to be seen as a self-portrait.

**RP** It's also interesting because I'm not the same age I was when I made my first life cast. It's locked me in time. The way I use myself in my work is similar to the way dancers use their own bodies—just an instrument or tool. I also think of Rodin, who kept hundreds of hands in drawers because he wanted to have many parts around him to collage into a sculpture. He had an endless supply of body parts that he could just grab and use.

**SK** Really? Well, that leads to the issue of fragmentation in your work, because that has always been very present, like with your disembodied mouth works such as *Red Bowl*. And it also ties into the psychological interpretation of your work; fragmentation is such a contemporary condition of our world, it's just part of our state of being. The notion or ideal of the whole doesn't resonate with the reality of global culture. People move from one culture to the next without necessarily being part of any one culture, which inevitably results in our fragmented selves.

**RP** I don't think I've ever made a sculpture that's not a fragment or made up of fragments. One way I engage the viewer is to show a part of something rather than the whole. The whole is complete. It makes sense. It's logical. The viewer is

more passively engaged. I'm interested in creating an active engagement with my work. Early on I realized that you can't control viewers or their responses. Instead of trying to control, I made a conscious decision to let my work be open-ended, suggestive, with contradictions, where there is room for multiple interpretations. There are times that people are laughing, finding something incredibly funny about my work and then two minutes later someone is telling me how disturbing they find the same sculpture. I love that. In fact I try to play with it; I'll consciously push a piece in the opposite direction if I feel like it's becoming too one-dimensional.

**SK** How did you come to be interested in these ideas of being able to compartmentalize and differentiate competing ideas? Did it have something to do with your background or personal experiences? In my case, I had to negotiate different cultures when I was growing up, which allowed me to take different things at different times.

**RP** It may have come from Kafka, one of my biggest loves. Kafka saw his own work as being funny and deadly serious at the same time. To straddle both is, I think, poignant and compelling.

**SK** And more real, it's not some sort of illusion about the world, it's able to see the world, people, and conditions as they are.

**RP** I've been obsessed with Kafka for a very long time, since the '80s. I think I've read everything he's ever written. I remember reading that when Kafka read *Metamorphosis* aloud, he would howl with laughter. At first I found this puzzling, because I didn't find it funny. I kept rereading *Metamorphosis* and I got to the point where I saw the humor. I started seeing it with different eyes, and I wanted some of the same qualities that I experienced in his writing in my own work.

**SK** Well, at some point you realize this is so absurd that it's hilarious. When I think of realism I think of the Italian neorealist movies of the '50s; there is no confusion as to what truth or authenticity was. At the same time, I think there is always an imaginative quotient to that. Just because something is done realistically, it doesn't mean it's devoid of imagination. In fact, it's the imagination that fuels the realism into something that becomes believable.

**RP** I think most people would say that Greek art deals with realism. But in fact it's quite abstract. None of the drapery is done through direct observation. It's all made up. Egyptian work is very abstract, too. If you're talking about hyper-realism, like Duane Hanson, where it's all about fooling people into thinking it's "real," maybe that's closer to realism. But I'm not interested in that.

**SK** There's another artist, Ron Mueck, who also deals with this type of realism, but in his work I think scale is what makes it. I wanted to ask you about the issue of scale in your work, because you seem to make things which are life-sized, as well as the bonsai trees, repeated heads, or earrings, which are very small.

**RP** I make scale shifts a lot. Often huge scale shifts within a single sculpture. In *Ram's Head*, my head is life-sized, and then I give myself earrings made of my same head, repeated four times, descending in size from two inches down to a quarter-inch. Even though the scale changes, everything is perfectly detailed. I believe you look at a life-sized head very differently than the same head that is miniaturized. When something becomes very small, you're pulled closer into an intimate viewing.

**SK** I think the various shifts that occur in your work are a way to give the viewer a sign that different things combined. The viewers are led to experience the work both physically and emotionally. It's a really intelligent formal way of putting something together.

**RP** If you see something in its expected scale there is no surprise. I'm more interested in having surprises and discoveries unfold in a sculpture. I'm trying to pull the viewer in by changing scale or doing something a little off. It takes some viewers a few minutes to realize that something is illogical or doesn't make sense. Some take a long time. For example, the branches on one of my bonsai trees end in miniaturized hands. How the viewer interacts with my pieces and discovers them is something I'm very interested in.

**SK** Definitely. Today more so than ever, we need more visual experiences that question the notion of consistency, that everything makes perfect sense and there is no need to question anything. We accept too much at face value. There's just not enough reflexivity going on.

**RP** You were telling me earlier about an article Kimmelman had written about looking. I'm happy to hear that someone is writing about this.

**SK** Yeah, I think it was about being in the Louvre and looking at how much time the viewers were spending with the pieces.

**RP** This is one of the reasons I love going to museums. I love looking at the art, but I also love seeing other people as engaged as I am, and I know they're not all artists. One of the best moments I witnessed was when my husband and I were at the Borghese Palace, and this very loud American in shorts walked into the room, looked at the Bernini sculpture, and shouted, "Holy shit! What the fuck is that?!?" (*laughter*) At first, Robert and I were very embarrassed because of how he said it and what he looked like, and then I turned to Robert and said, "I want people to respond to my work that way. That's a great response."

***Pondick's The Metamorphosis of an Object at the Worcester Art Museum closes October 11. Pondick's limited edition portfolio, The Metamorphosis of an Object, is currently on view at Sonnabend Gallery, New York and at Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston.***