

# Living | Arts

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## Exhibit puts disturbing face on sculptor's work

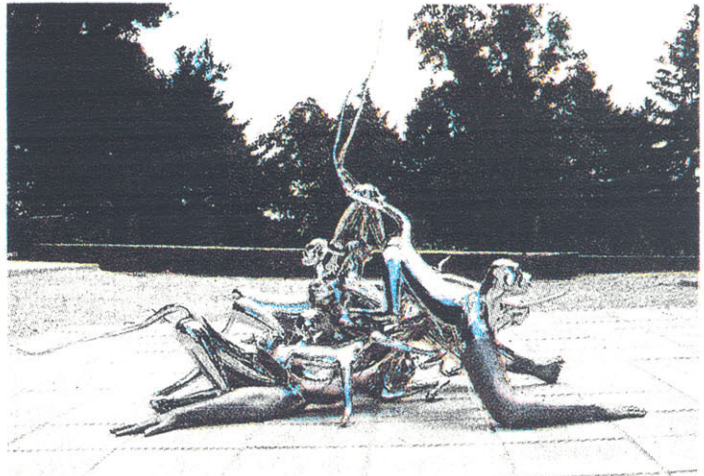
By Christine Temin

GLOBE STAFF

LINCOLN — The face is morbid and still, the eyes closed, the mouth slack, as in a death mask. The head wears dangling earrings made of other heads, diminishing in size as they trail away from the earlobes. Twirling out from either side of the human head are ram's horns. The skin and horns are heavily textured, matte in finish. Only the scalp is shiny, like a saint's relic that has lost its patina after being rubbed by thousands of the faithful.

Welcome to the new world of Rona Pondick, one of the most distinguished — and disturbing — of contemporary sculptors. Pondick's work has long centered on the body: beds, baby bottles, breasts swollen with milk, and lumpy little orbs with chattering teeth — cast from the artist's own — were among her staple images. Her materials were often ephemeral: wax, plastic bottles, even paper towels.

The latest works of this New York-based sculptor, though, have a gravitas that their sometimes smart-alecky predecessors lacked. Both subject and material have become serious and weighty, and although these new works are not monumental in scale, they are in sensibility. In bronze and steel, Pondick is creating sculptures that combine parts of humans with parts of other animals. The ingre-



dients are a constant, but the effects are not. Certain works look freakish, straight out of a science fiction film. Others suggest the hybrid beasts of myth: the sphinx, for instance.

Pondick's new work is the subject of the sixth annual solo show on the sculpture terrace of the DeCordova Museum. The exhibition, through May 11, 2003, also occupies a small room adjacent to the terrace and the DeCordova's roof.

It's a stunning and scary display that brings up such current issues as genetic engineering and evolution. Pondick is steering

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**Rona Pondick's "Monkeys," with its steel primates, is one of several unsettling works that touch on genetic engineering and evolution.**

# Sculptor's eerie exhibit unsettles

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away from feminist content into a Brave New World that has so intrigued artists that there are major touring shows devoted to the theme. "Dolly," the cloned sheep, has affected contemporary art almost as much as contemporary science.

The components of Pondick's combo-creatures differ radically in scale; they're trapped in the same body, helpless. That inert lump with stubby, vestigial legs couldn't possibly support the huge head attached to it, which has collapsed onto the platform. Pondick's immobilized heads remind me of artist Tony Oursler's video that projects a face onto a head resembling a stuffed pillow, with the shriveled body underneath almost an afterthought. An air of desperation prevails in the work of both.

Almost always, the human elements in Pondick's pieces are heads and hands — the parts of our bodies that define us as thinkers and makers, and separate us from other species. To accentuate this contrast, Pondick often uses a shiny finish for the animals, a matte one for the people. The human parts are astonishingly detailed. The wrinkled feet and knobby knuckles are utterly lifelike. Pondick uses techniques both traditional and space-age to achieve these eerie effects. There's a *lack* of detail in the animals, and it's impossible to tell whether they're en route to some more complete life-form or in the process of becoming extinct.

Pondick's "Monkeys" is Darwinian: A pile of shiny steel primates clamber over each other, all aimed in different directions. A human hand forms a frustrated fist; tails flare upward impatiently. In another work, an amorphous blob struggles to drag the human leg and foot attached to it. This piece has a rusty patina, which makes it look worn and ancient, as if the creature had been trying to accomplish its task forever.

On the roof, silhouetted against the sky, is "Pine Marten," a life-size human hand, tiny human face, and a mass of flesh lying on a pedestal. The face tilts upward, as if praying for the out-of-synch components to catch up to each other.

One work in Pondick's show seems less tortured. "Dog" is a yellow stainless steel sphinx, with human hands and head and the body of a canine. While the closed eyes in the other works suggest death, here they seem to indicate an inward focus, a meditative state.