



Boston Herald Friday, May 22, 1998

Ears speak of longing in Pondick's drawings

In the midst of the white-walled calm of the Howard Yezerksi Gallery, Rona Pondick's artist's books and drawings seem elegant at first, until their contents assert themselves. Multiple ears and mouths squawk at one another in some sort of ferocious hieroglyphics, while page after page features the handwritten words "I want I want I want," repeated to obsessive excess. Pondick smiled as she surveyed her bizarre scenes, admitting, "I like playing around with things that have an absurd quality."

Certainly there is something odd about an ear with a cartoon-style speech balloon issuing from it. Stranger still is the set of teeth floating within that loopy bubble. The image would be humorous if it didn't seem so threatening — and that's Pondick's point. The artist who has long been fascinated with the charged presence of body parts, is tantalized by Franz Kafka's writings.

"He's simultaneously funny and deadly serious," she explained.

If Kafka could imagine a man

becoming a cockroach, Pondick can flesh out equally disquieting scenarios.

In 1992's "Corporal Politics" exhibition at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, Pondick's sculptures included her now-famous "Little Bathers" — dozens of pink baseball-sized heads whose only feature is a set of yellowing teeth. Other pieces included an overgrown bed lashed with baby

bottles; black tights oozing into a pair of baby shoes; and a loveseat in which two legs outfitted in

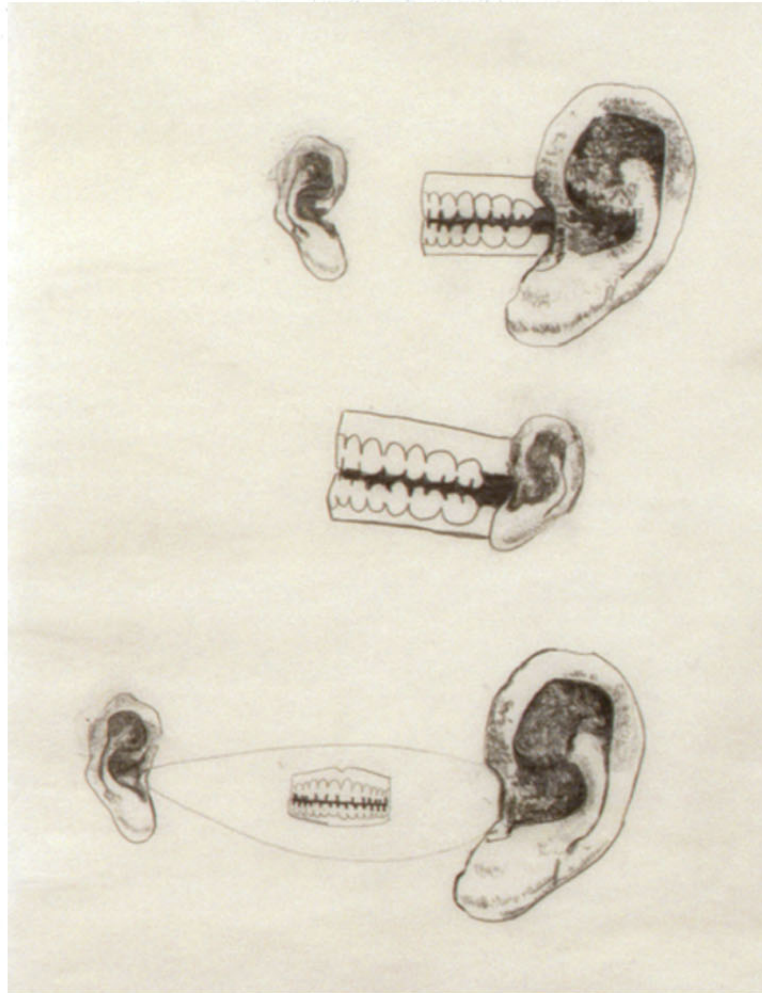
men's shoes flank a tiny leg set into a girl's Mary Jane. In Pondick's universe, the usually comforting boundaries break down, no match for humankind's most primordial instincts.

The works on paper and artist's books in this show combine the visceral punch of the three-dimensional works with the feeling of a personal message. Sometimes this message takes the form of words or numbers, and sometimes it appears in symbolic form — as ears, mouths and cryptic speech balloons that occasionally look like whales.

"I want," the title of three of the

VISUAL ARTS
by Joanne Silver

HOWARD YEZERSKI GALLERY



ORGAN TRANSPLANTS: Ears and mouths take on Kafka-esque ironies in Rona Pondick's artist's books and drawings, showing at the Howard Yezerski Gallery.

books, has its origins in a response Pondick gave to another gallery several years ago. The gallery had asked her for an artist's statement to accompany an exhibition, and Pondick faxed back the word "No," written 100 times. When the gallery called back to say it was brilliant, Pondick started giving a lot of thought to the power of words.

Subsequent pieces have focused on "no," "mine" or "I want" written over and over in childlike handwriting, as if it were an assignment or punishment. The meaning varies, however, despite the mantralike repetition — from the defiance of big, bold lettering to the insecurity implied in a small "I want" erased into near oblivion. Pondick said, "For me, the words 'I want' almost describe the human existence. It's the

drive that keeps you alive and allows you to generate. If you take the wanting away, you get depressed."

Mouths and ears give a physical location to the longings implied in Pondick's words. As orifices of the body, both mediate between external and the interior worlds. Both are sensory organs, and thus capable of reaction, with or without conscious understanding.

Pondick plays on the tension between orderly forces and

more chaotic ones. The deep blues, grays and blacks in her "I want" series suggest a nighttime or undersea environment, a place of shifting forms, meanings and desires. The "Ear to mouth" mixed-media works (which are incorporated into the book "12345") similarly turn what is expected on its head. Here, the ear can send, not merely receive, and the mouth, too, hints at a myriad of associations. Just as Pondick has used the bed as a symbol of birth, sex, illness, death and fantasy, she now robs the mouth for its metaphorical richness.

Working with ultra-thin papers, which she collages into sheets of exquisite fineness, Pondick's "Ear to mouth" drawings have a texture that can resemble skin, and a delicacy that belies the power of the images depicted. In one picture of ears attached to a mouth, the space between the rows of teeth looks like a ragged length of barbed wire or thorns. Pondick clearly intends her ears — and her art — to do more than whisper sweet nothings.

Pondick's recent work is at the Howard Yezerski Gallery, 14 Newbury St., through June 20.