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# Rona Pondick

WITH PHONG BUI

On the occasion of her forthcoming exhibit of sculptures and drawings at Sonnabend Gallery (*Rona Pondick*, March 23 – April 27, 2013), and after having recovered from Hurricane Sandy, sculptor Rona Pondick welcomed publisher Phong Bui to her East Village studio to discuss her life, work, and more.

**PHONG BUI (RAIL):** In 2002 a book was published by the museums participating in a traveling exhibition of your work. The publication was an overview of your work from 1986 – 2001 and included an interview with Octavio Zaya where you identified several influences on your work: Donatello, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Franz Kafka, and your mother. Why was your mother so influential?

**RONA PONDICK:** My mother has been a complicated presence in my life. My Jewish grandparents, who came from Russia during the Revolution, raised my older brother and me. My grandparents were fabulous: eccentric and kooky. As a result I lived a life that was sheltered but very loving.

**RAIL:** Were your grandparents observant Jews?

**PONDICK:** There's a very interesting story that answers your question, which I've never shared with anyone. My grandfather always used to repeat to me, "You can do anything your brother can. Don't let anyone tell you that you have to do something differently because you're a woman." East Flatbush was a tough place to grow up. I'd play on the streets and if I ran into the house crying, saying someone hit me, he'd say, "You go back and kick him in the nuts. Don't stand here crying; go out and defend yourself." [Laughs.] My grandfather went to synagogue on High Holidays. I'll never forget the time we went during a Jewish holiday and I had just gotten to the age where girls were separated from boys. When we got home I said to my grandfather, "I don't understand. I thought you said I can do anything my brother can." He never answered me, but we stopped going to synagogue after that. We never celebrated another Jewish holiday.

**RAIL:** He just gave it all up to demonstrate that he would stand behind what he said to you earlier—you're equal to men.

**PONDICK:** Yes, but I didn't realize this until I was an adult.



Rona Pondick, "White Beaver," 2009–11. Painted bronze, edition of three, 13 x 31 1/2 x 9 1/4". Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

**RAIL:** It's similar to what the painter Josephine Halvorson's mother did for her, although her circumstance was a bit different. Josephine was very competitive with her mother, who is an artist, and they were drawing each other. Then at one point her mother recognized that Josephine was frustrated that she didn't feel she could make a good drawing, so her mother stopped drawing altogether because she didn't want Josephine to compare herself.

**PONDICK:** My grandfather saw that I was very interested in drawing so instead of buying me toys he bought me art books, paint sets, and he would frequently take me to museums. He loved that I loved to draw. I drew from reproductions of old master drawings in museum catalogues. He did anything he could to encourage me to draw and to appreciate art.

**RAIL:** So from the outset you knew that you would be an artist.

**PONDICK:** Not really. My mother was pushing me into a more academic field of study, and when I went to Queens College I was a history major. It was in my first drawing class that I took as a freshman that it became clear as day that this was something I would devote my life to.

**RAIL:** I remember when we first met two years ago you said Tom Doyle was one of your teachers.

**PONDICK:** Yes. Tom was quite wonderful, very nurturing, and we connected right away. He would say things to me like, "You remind me of my first wife Eva (Hesse). It's eerie."

**RAIL:** Did he mean your work?

**PONDICK:** My whole sensibility.

**RAIL:** And what were you making at the time?

**PONDICK:** When I first started working with Tom my work was all over the place. If I remember correctly, the faculty at Queens was very divided. There was a figurative group on one side and an abstract, more minimal group on the other side.

**RAIL:** You mean Louis Finkelstein on one side and Tom Doyle on the other.

**PONDICK:** Yes. I also studied with Robert Pincus-Witten, whom I adored. He was a fabulous teacher, very generous with and protective of his students.

**RAIL:** And how did you get the idea to go to Yale?

**PONDICK:** I think it might have been Pincus-Witten who suggested that I go to Yale because I would be in a competitive environment among equally gifted students. For economic reasons I thought it would be easier to be in graduate school than to be on my own in New York. When I applied I got a full scholarship, which was amazing.

**RAIL:** Who was there with you at the same time?

**PONDICK:** The painter Robert Feintuch (who is my husband), Roni Horn, Joseph Egan, Colin Thomson, Ed Rath, Jill Levine, and Michael Young. David von Schlegell was the head of the sculpture department. I loved that his studio was in the building with all 12 of us students, the whole department. It was the right moment for me to leave New York because as much as I loved Minimalism, I knew from the very beginning it was not my sensibility. While I was at Yale I used it as a place to experiment as much as I could. I tried all kinds of things. I started drawing from my own body, making works that referred to the figure that were expressive, which was the opposite of what everyone else was doing. Process art and experimentation with materials on and off the floor were very popular at the time.

**RAIL:** You also studied with Richard Serra?

**PONDICK:** Not really. Richard was just a visiting artist at Yale. He came a number of times over two years. He liked what I was doing, and whenever he came we spent a long time talking. It was during his last visit that he said to me, "I've spoken to Paula Cooper for you. She's ready to meet you." So what did I do? I didn't follow up on it. In retrospect, I didn't do it for a specific reason. I had no idea who I was as an artist. I thought if I start showing at such a young age, how am I going to allow myself to fail, which I think is important? Can I be strong enough to experiment in the public eye? Will they allow me to do that? Instead, I spent a very long time working on my own allowing myself to mature. It was a bumpier journey but I'm glad I did it because it made me feel strongly about making my work and letting it evolve. When I believe in something, I do it.

**RAIL:** You made a wise decision. It's always better to show when you know yourself, especially when you see your work as a lifetime evolution, in spite of this country's obsession with youth culture. I've seen talented young artists get consumed, then spit back out after their brief popularity, and they often find this the biggest failure that they can't overcome.

**PONDICK:** I couldn't agree more. I think that artists, like wine, mature with age. I'm 60 and I still feel young as an artist. I'm not interested in making work that's branded, that's going to repeat itself because of pressure from a gallery or public demand.

**RAIL:** I don't think you have to worry about that! [Laughs.]

**PONDICK:** I don't! [Laughs.]

**RAIL:** Just to go back to your grandfather a bit: based on what you've told me, he seems very instrumental in shaping you into who you've become. Your mother seems invisible in some ways.

**PONDICK:** My relationship with my mother was and is tragic. The impact she had on me as a person does feed me artistically.

**RAIL:** How about Kafka? Did you realize the profoundness of his impact as soon as you read him, or was it gradual?

**PONDICK:** I read *The Metamorphosis*, as most people did, in high school and I loved it immediately, but I didn't catch on to the enormity of its impact until later in life. When I got out of graduate school, I was exploring: I went to the Met every day to draw from things I loved as well as things I didn't.

**RAIL:** Could you give an example?

**PONDICK:** Sure. I loved Egyptian art, but I didn't understand Greek or Baroque art at the time. Drawing different works became a way for me to understand the mechanics of how they were made as well as the overall fluidity of form. My exploration was not just visual. I was also rereading *The Metamorphosis* again and again. Each time I read it, I couldn't believe that I would see things slightly differently. Something that was disturbing would start to become hilariously funny. This led me to read Kafka's biography by his close friend, Max Brod, who saved his work from obscurity by defying his wishes to destroy his archives. Quite often Brod talked about the fact that Kafka himself found *The Metamorphosis* hilarious, that he, too, would laugh out loud. I thought, how interesting. Here is my soul mate. I felt the way he straddled the real and unreal, as well as the tragic and the comedic, was masterful. The way things were layered was never simplistic and never one-note. And, I thought, this is what I want in my work.



Rona Pondick, "Pillow Head" (detail), 2009. Painted bronze, edition of three, 10 ¼ x 14 ½ x 15 ½". Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York.

**RAIL:** And Kafka had profound doubts of the value of his writing, which is why, we presume, he asked Brod to destroy his entire archives. Although, he—who ostensibly is a Czech writer—wrote largely in German, not Czech. So the question is, if Kafka had written in Czech would he be as well known as he is today?

**PONDICK:** In Kafka's *Letters to Felice* he revealed his relationship with his fiancée Felice Bauer, whom he was never able to consummate a relationship with. In *Amerika* he writes so accurately about America without ever having visited. Much of his writing seems to have come from fantasy instead of direct experience. Maybe this made him doubt his writing.

**RAIL:** Absolutely. Now that we're on the Kafka trail, I thought you gave a terrific answer on a panel of artists who were in the Whitney Biennial in 1991. Someone asked you how the motif of teeth emerges in your work, and you said in addition to teeth being sexual, every time you're angry at somebody you just want to bite them. And one woman came up to you afterwards and told you that when she gave birth to her child, she wanted to eat the child, as if it was the same impulse. So instead she went out and bought a suckling pig the same size as her baby, and ate the whole thing.

**PONDICK:** Right. And they say artists are insane.

**RAIL:** We are [laughs]. In any case, this story about consumption reminds me of two things. First, Kafka was tortured by his own sexual desires, and he had a pronounced interest in pornography. He led many relationships with different women, from hotel chambermaids to journalists, from kindergarten teachers to prostitutes at his endless visits to brothels where he contracted tuberculosis. Second, since Goya is also one of your favorite artists I wonder if you have seen his "Saturn Devouring His Son" (c. 1819 – 1823) at the Prado? He grips the back of his son's torso, from which the head and right arm have already been devoured, and he is about to take a bite of the left arm. Art historians have suggested that if you look closely you may see Saturn's erect penis, or even that the erection was originally prominent, but painted over for public view. So we have sex, violence, eating, life, and death all mixed together in that picture. It's very complex, to say the least.

**PONDICK:** I wasn't aware of the erect penis. I love Kafka and Goya who both make layered, intense work. I strive for that intensity in my work.

**RAIL:** You also have references to painting, both in terms of imagery and formal issues. For example, your first show *Beds* at the SculptureCenter in 1988 evoked Guston's late paintings.



Rona Pondick, "Ginkgo," 2007–12. Stainless steel, edition of three, 57 ¾ x 33 ¾ x 41". Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York.



Rona Pondick, "Dwarfed Yellow Pine" (detail), 2010–12. Painted bronze, unique, 26 x 35 x 24 1/8". Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York.

**PONDICK:** I am as comfortable looking at painting as I am looking at sculpture. One of the most wonderful things about being in a relationship with another artist is that you understand each other on so many levels. Robert and I both love to be in the studio. When we're not in the studio, we love to look at art and then talk about it. We are both comfortable looking at each other's loves, and they become our shared interests. When I made the installation *Beds*, it was generated from the idea of a metaphoric place where I was going to take the viewer on a journey through three physical spaces based on a life cycle. I love Guston, but he wasn't an influence for this installation. But I can see why you would think of him as an influence because of all his bed images.

**RAIL:** Like "Painting, Smoking, Eating" (1973)?

**PONDICK:** Which is a great painting.

**RAIL:** Would you say that some of the scatological references in pieces like "Pair" (1986) or "Mine" (1987), refer in some ways to Guston's abstractions between 1961 and 1965, which were painted with a certain brevity, predominantly black-and-white with floating forms in the middle, which Bill Berkson described as "dark and heavy with care"?

**PONDICK:** Often it takes me 20 years after finishing work to understand it. When I'm working and in it, it's difficult for me to understand what the driving force is. My accumulated pieces were made of warm, microcrystalline wax that I rolled into tube-like forms and flung across the room. Sometimes I missed and half the wax would wind up on the wall [laughs]. The process was similar to Serra's thrown, lead pieces from 1968. The action was closer to Pollock than to Guston, though I can see now that the forms and textures have a kinship to Guston. As I developed as an artist, Guston's images had much more of an influence on me.

**RAIL:** I suppose I was also thinking of Guston's relationship with Kafka.

**PONDICK:** I love and admire Guston's paintings of the light bulb and the head with the single eye, like "Painting, Smoking, Eating," "Studio Landscape" (1975), and "Head and Bottle" (1975). I was also thinking of Renoir's late paintings of the bathers, which I didn't particularly like. I had a strong physical response to Renoir's pink paintings. Even though people think of Renoir's colors as sweet, innocent, and voluptuous, they put my teeth on edge. Both Guston and Renoir helped make "Little Bathers" (1990-91), one of my first teeth sculptures.

**RAIL:** One wouldn't think of "Little Bathers" or "Pink Treats" (1995) as beautiful [laughs], which brings up Baudelaire's classic analysis "On the Essence of Laughter" (1855), which dialectically explores four interrelated pairings: innocence versus corruption, horror and humor, wholeness and fragmentation, and nature and the unnatural. And of course, the Odilon Redon lithographs in your studio refer also to Baudelaire's admiration for Edgar Allan Poe. He not only translated Poe into French but also related to Poe on many levels: they were both neglected by the literary establishment of their time, and they embraced mysticism, the fantastic, the grotesque, the macabre in their writing as much as they were trying to search for answers for their philosophical questions.

**PONDICK:** Aesthetic pursuits and existence.

**RAIL:** Exactly, all of the above. And the so-called "grotesque" usually appears when the codified "conventional" style of the day stops being productive and generous because of its tendency to be doctrinaire. I'm thinking of artists of your generation like John Newman, Kiki Smith, Petah Coyne, among others. Did you have any rapport with them?

**PONDICK:** Although we may share mutual interests I didn't know them until I started exhibiting. The first time I met Kiki was when we were both in the Whitney Biennial together in 1991. My world was my studio and Robert. I felt fulfilled talking with Robert. We talked about ideas, not just what we were doing at the moment in the studio, but what's important philosophically. Honestly, I wasn't interested in a lot of what was going on in the galleries at the time. Instead, I went to the Met for inspiration.

**RAIL:** Even in the '90s!

**PONDICK:** Oh yeah. I've always loved going to the Met, then and now. I love looking and trying to understand how things were made and why. Honestly, I had no idea that other artists were simultaneously interested in the body. I think it's fascinating when there's a zeitgeist, and all of a sudden artists, who don't know each other, have parallel interests.

**RAIL:** Like the motif of the shoes, which may or may not have specific reference to Guston, but you and Bob Gober were exploring it pretty much at the same time, around 1989-90.

**PONDICK:** Again, I had no idea that he was doing shoe sculptures at the same time I was. In the late '90s, I wanted to stop using repetition in my sculptures and installations and focus on creating psychologically charged, discrete objects. This took my work somewhere else. In 1998 I

started making my first animal/human hybrid piece called "Dog" (1998-2001). I made "Dog" over and over again in different materials, at least five times. First I cast it in aluminum bronze but wasn't happy with it, so I re-made it once again. The final version of the sculpture was cast in yellow stainless steel.

**RAIL:** Why did you choose the dog image, and not any other animal?

**PONDICK:** I don't know why I choose any image, but I liked the stance of a seated dog. This all started from my desire to marry my body parts with animal forms. I made life casts of my head, my hands, and my arms; those were the body parts that I started with. The head—my first life cast—is the same head that has been in every single sculpture that I've made since then. I have changed the head plastically and have changed its scale so it looks like it's been altered. The hybrid images of the animal/human and tree/human move throughout history from the beginning of time to now. For me, it's a challenge to see if I can make it my own.

**RAIL:** What about the issue of scale, which I don't think was brought up before, particularly in the hybrid works?

**PONDICK:** I learned about scale by looking at Alberto Giacometti's work.

**RAIL:** His surrealist phase or the later works from direct observation?

**PONDICK:** The later works when he was obsessed with trying to understand and locate what he saw in drawing, painting, and sculpture.

**RAIL:** Which gradually disappeared.

**PONDICK:** Yes. If you look at the scale relationships in Giacometti—those sculptures of the standing single figures or heads—you understand how he makes something an inch tall feel monumental. Giacometti makes internal scale shifts within one sculpture. For example, in "The Cage" (1950), a standing figure is next to a head, which is oversized in relation to the figure but much smaller than a life-sized head. The relationship between these two forms is amazing. Like Giacometti's "Dog" (1951), I use the animal form because it is recognizable and holds its scale no matter where you put it.

**RAIL:** How do you adjust that in relation to your hybrid works?

**PONDICK:** I make scale changes within individual pieces. I love to play with scale in the relationships I make between the human and animal forms.

**RAIL:** What do you mean by "play with the scale"?

**PONDICK:** Twist it.

**RAIL:** Twist it and what? Blow it up bigger, smaller, different sizes in order to see how it fits physically, or has it already pre-existed in your head?

**PONDICK:** No, I'm playing with it in a plastic way. When I merge a very small human head with a much larger animal body I am looking to make a scale relationship that feels psychologically and plastically right. I think that scale has emotion.

**RAIL:** Would you say that there is continuity—not necessarily bad or good—from your early work, from the early sculpture, to the hybrid human/animal?

**PONDICK:** Absolutely. I think on many different levels, despite the various permutations of form and materials, the sense of psychological layering is consistent in my work. But I am not a linear thinker and I don't make things in a linear way.

**RAIL:** What about the tree/human hybrids, which began in 2001 to the present? How specific are you in the selection of obscure types of trees like the "Firethorn" (2005-06), "Fukien Tea" (2003), and "Azalea" (2005-06), among others?



Rona Pondick, "Wallaby," 2007–12. Stainless steel, edition of three, 24 x 44 3/8 x 10 7/8". Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery, New York.

**PONDICK:** I first started using the tree in 1995. It wasn't until later on that I merged the tree with human forms. The trees are picked partially for their bark texture. I take the trees, cut them up, and use them to make my own trees. Honestly, it's hard for someone who doesn't cast in metal to understand this, but a form needs to be a particular shape in order to get a good casting. Nature is not so kind. It doesn't present forms that allow metal to flow, so I have to construct my own trees, which I love doing. I cut trees up into hundreds of parts and dowel and pin them back together, changing their overall form and shapes until they feel right. I also model missing parts and branches by hand. I model the joints to make all the parts fit together so it looks like nature made it, but the trees are complete fictions. It's like drawing in space.

**RAIL:** Could you talk about the issue of self-portraiture, which you also share with your husband Robert?

**PONDICK:** I never made a decision to make a self-portrait. It started when I wanted to make a life cast of my head. I decided I was going to do it with medical silicone because I wanted perfect skin texture. I also didn't want to use straws so that I could breathe easily while my head was encased in rubber and plaster, which meant I could possibly kill myself in the process. I didn't want to subject someone else to this danger. My head was coated in medical silicone and plaster for over two and a half hours. I had sensory deprivation. I really freaked out. I was very lucky that I had a pad of paper and pen on my lap. I didn't know what would happen, but as they started coating the layers on I started choking, but I was able to write, "Slit the rubber; I'm choking." By the end I was writing, "Get this off of me. I'm losing it. I'm freaking out." It's a horrible feeling to be encased like that, but I got what I wanted. I made life casts of my hands, my arms, and then later of my legs in the same way.

**RAIL:** So it wasn't conscious in the beginning but then it became a motif in your work. Do you think of it as a formal or emotional issue?

**PONDICK:** I found it fascinating that very few people could tell that the cast of my head was of me. I was reading a biography of Bernini at the time and he talked about the fact that once color is removed you no longer look like yourself. I realized that most people didn't know the cast of my head was me. In other words, my head became a generic head.

**RAIL:** When did the inspiration to accumulate fragments of similar forms become raw impulse? Where did the impulse to do the opposite—mending fragments of totally different forms into one supposedly unified form—come from?

**PONDICK:** It's a really interesting question but I don't know how to answer it. I don't know where most of what I make comes from. I know I am fascinated by material sensation. Have you ever seen Bernini's "Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" (c. 1650)—the way you feel St. Teresa's orgasm in the material? That really intrigues me and excites me.

**RAIL:** That was John Graham's reading of her crossed eyes, which blur the line between a religious and a sexual orgasm, which had a great impact in de Kooning's early women.

**PONDICK:** I love de Kooning.

**RAIL:** How do you see your new drawing relating to your recent sculpture?

**PONDICK:** I started drawing the same head that's in my sculptures. What is not visible in my sculpture but is visible in my drawings is how much change and hand manipulation occurs. Robert teases me and says that in the sculptures I'll work thousands and thousands of hours making something with my hands, and in the end it looks like nature made it. I want my hybrid sculptures to feel whole so you don't see my constant revisions, the way I tear things apart and put them back together again, modeling and remodeling, until both my tree/human and animal/human pieces feel right. In the drawings you see more of the making. I let the histories show through the layers and layers of drawings that I glue together. I let the ghosts show through.

**RAIL:** As if you're building a palimpsest.

**PONDICK:** Exactly. Lightness instead of weight.

**RAIL:** All along you have stuck to your vision, despite your running against the current. What does that feel like?

**PONDICK:** I'm comfortable out there but it does get chilly. ☹️

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