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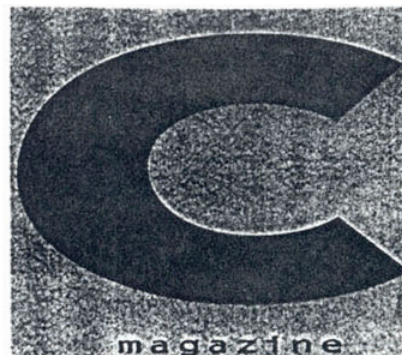
## RONA PONDICK

Jose Freire Fine Art Inc., NEW YORK

Rona Pondick has become known over the past five seasons for her Gustonesque reductions of feminist anxiety into mutant figurations on the floor. This installation takes up the entire boxy L-shape of the Freire gallery: one side dominated by polyester-stuffed leg stumps hung from the ceiling along with pink ribbons, the other by spills of small shrunken plastic and flax denture heads, maniacally poised like intense magnifications of piranhas' or spiders' mouths, ready to bite. Elsewhere, many-breasted plastic and wax buddhas of baby-bottle-nippled sagging breasts creep urchinlike along. Pondick's stump legs, teeth heads and nipped creatures have been seen before. But showing them together creates a horizon of narrative impulse that spills out beyond them, infusing the pieces with the optical illusion of movement. The *mise en scène* increases the nervous energy and at times stages the work as a break-out from the safety of objecthood.

It so happened that I was reading the book *Guillotine: Legend and Lore* by Daniel Gerould (Blast Books) at the time I saw Pondick's exhibition. The book talks about the culture of theatricalized death and the chamber-of-horrors culture that surrounded the physical facts of the guillotine, adding to the tone of the Terror. The book also implies that the Terror has had a pervasive influence on all subsequent representations of death and horror in western culture. Generally, it might be hypothesized that Pondick has created but another in a long line of western-style chambers of horrors. More specifically, I noted an uncanny visual affinity between Pondick's installation and an anonymous late 18th-century print reproduced in Gerould's book and captioned,

"satirical etching of Sanson [the executioner at the time] beheading himself." The print features a headless body that, at a quick glance, is objectified as simply a stiff leg and a very large foot (compensating for the loss at the other end no doubt). Above, classical drapery lends a theatrical aura to the proceedings and below are pyramid piles of the proverbial heads-will-roll of the Terror. All the ingredients of Pondick's spasm of physical revulsion are there: the truncated body, the ceremonial bunting (ribbons), the shrunken heads. Pondick's vocabulary may indeed derive from well down the migrational path of the rolled-heads motif and include prostheses, cannibalism, the party joke of chattering teeth and Guston's Auschwitz. But in a very real way, all of this iconography goes back to the Terror. The irony inherent in western notions of death started then: the instantaneous death provided by the guillotine was first seen as humanitarian. Only later, to the humanitarians'



horror, was it seen as enabling mass death and also therefore calling into question the meaning of the death of the individual.

Whether or not Pondick invests her forms with the ironies of the Terror (idealism run amok) is unclear: but the scenario is suggested that she has abstractly staged her own anxiety about life and death as a privatized counterpart to the theatre of execution. The theatricality of the installation brings back the obsolete trappings of public death: the piece counters the detheatricalization of death that has proceeded apace through the 19th and 20th centuries. Though individually her forms still seem to out-existentialize Guston, the panorama of the willies staged about them in fact, by



Photo: Jennifer Kotter, courtesy Jose Freire Fine Art Inc.

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(1993); Installation

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reference to antique rite, pulls back from the edge and uses Grand Guignol terrorism as a way to restore some respect for life and death to contemporary culture. Questions of "identity" and "gender" and all other fashionable penultimate issues are wiped out by a glimpse at this existential landscape, this devolutionary pool, this crash site where, whatever it was that scattered all this material here, a bomb, a gun, a harsh word, an act of cruelty, it did not care anything of the humanity involved. In this landscape, one half expects Pondick's denture heads to squeak out nearly unmakeoutable "help me's" (à la the original *The Fly*) or scurry to spell out S.O.S. on the gallery floor. Such a rich and deep exploration of the landscape of death is notable for transcending the gender politics of the live and kicking that dominates the self-pitying nature of so much body art at present.

Robert Mahoney