

Taking Cues From Kafka

Sculptor Rona Pondick melds human, beast and steel at Cranbrook, in the first major survey exhibition of her work.

SUZANNE CHESSLER
Special to the Jewish News

Rona Pondick literally has placed herself into the hybrid sculptures she is showing through Nov. 30 at the Cranbrook Art Museum. In the mix of human, animal and plant structures — coming together in specific works — are representations of her own body parts.

“Rona Pondick: Sculpture 1992-2003” includes 15 projects with two room-size installations and an outdoor installation on the museum grounds. Her surreal approach comes across in each piece, including *Dog*, which uses stainless steel and combines a man’s head and arms with a dog’s body, and *Monkeys*, which uses stainless steel and intertwines human arms with animal visages.

Pondick’s exhibit will be shown at the same time as the exhibition “Transfigurations: The Body in 20th Century Art,” which is comprised of key works from Cranbrook’s permanent collection and regional private collections to demonstrate translations and transformations of the human subject.

“I’ve been doing body fragments for more than 15 years and started using my own body parts five years ago,” explains Pondick, 51, whose approach relates to Kafka as her cultural hero. “While working on *Ear*, I made a model from my own ear. I took a life cast from my head, scanned that into the computer and formed a mold.”

The Cranbrook exhibit will be Pondick’s first major showing in Michigan.

Joe Houston, who organized the exhibit, planned it to display the broad spectrum of the artist’s investigations into the psychology of the human form to evoke primal human urges, appetites and desires.

He also wanted to explore her use of



Rona Pondick: “Dog,” 1998-2001, yellow stainless steel. The sculpture combines a man’s head and arms with a dog’s body.

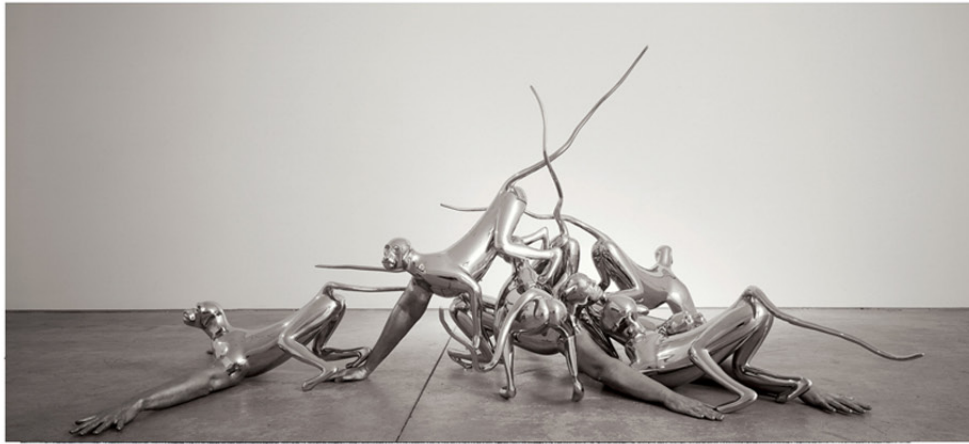
unconventional media to heighten an awareness of the body’s materiality and vulnerability.

The exhibit chronicles the artist’s use of raw materials, such as wax, fabric, dirt and found objects. It moves on to her interest in stainless steel and silicone to explore the new frontier of genetics.

“Each work defines itself as a piece of art in a historical frame and in my own time,” the artist explains about merging the past with the present. “I’ve been attracted to sculpture because I am three-dimensionally oriented and only relate to the sense of touch.”

Pondick, born in Brooklyn, has been fascinated by art since she was 5 years old.

“It’s the way I played,” she says. “I drew as a teenager and always wanted to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At a very early age, I found myself connected.”



Pondick's "Monkeys," 1998-2001, stainless steel, intertwines human arms with animal visages.

Pondick received her bachelor of arts degree from New York's Queens College in 1974 and her master of fine arts degree from the Yale University School of Art in 1977.

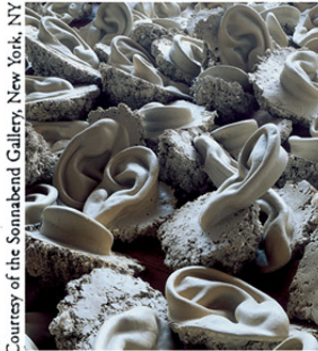
After being represented in solo and group shows around the world, she saw her projects included in the collections of many art centers, such as the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the Whitney Museum of Contemporary Art in New York.

"I work all the time," Pondick says. "I realized a long time ago how open-ended art is and how context has a lot to do with interpretation." Explaining how a work of art can change with the outlook of the observer, she references an earth installation that had viewers in South Africa thinking about black magic and voodoo, viewers in the Netherlands thinking about death, viewers in Austria thinking about the Holocaust and viewers in France thinking about genetics.

Pondick merges traditional casting techniques with 21st-century digital technologies to achieve uncanny results," says Houston, Cranbrook curator of exhibitions.

Pondick works, she also projects an interest in scale and probes what makes something feel a specific size. She also is curious about how different materials will change an image.

The installation *Crimson Queen*, in stainless steel and bronze, was made specifically for the Cranbrook grounds. She visited the area almost a year ago to determine its placement.



Courtesy of the Sonnabend Gallery, New York, NY

"Ear (Detail)," urethane and paper pulp, 300 elements: "I made a model from my own ear. I took a life cast from my head, scanned that into the computer and formed a mold," says Pondick.

"I wanted something low and hovering to go along with the horizontal thrust of the nearby pool," she says. "Although it appears to be a plant or tree, viewers soon start to see that it is not. What seem to be buds are actually tiny heads."

Pondick, who is Jewish, has designed a tree sculpture for a Los Angeles synagogue on commission. The artist, who thinks of the tree as a strong Jewish symbol, structured blossom forms into orbs with teeth. She wanted the piece to appear as if it were dying

and regenerating at the same time.

Pondick has been married to painter Robert Feintuch for nearly 30 years, and the two maintain a loft where they have very little living space but separate and large studio areas.

"I like to work alone," she says. "When it's time for the sculpture to go to the foundry, the pieces become very public." □

"Rona Pondick: Sculpture 1992-2003" will be on view through Nov. 30 at the Cranbrook Art Museum, 39221 Woodward, Bloomfield Hills. Hours are 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays and 11 a.m.-9 p.m. the fourth Friday of each month. \$6; \$4 students/teens/seniors; free for members and children 12 and under with adult admission. www.cranbrookart.edu or (877) 462-7262.