

LOS ANGELES TIMES

## ART REVIEWS

## Guilt, Innocence Entangle in Pondick's 'Heads'

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

If all the wads of bubble gum you ever had snuck out of your mouth and stuck under table-tops and chair seats were collected in an empty room, the pink blob might look a little bit like **Rona Pondick's** sculpture, "Heads." If you can imagine that each of the chewed-up and spit-out components of this fantasized mess grew nearly to the size of your head and sprouted life-size pink teeth, then you will have a pretty good picture of what's waiting for you at Asher/Faure Gallery.

From the foyer, your attention is immediately drawn to the doorway of the main exhibition space, from which emanates an electric pink glow. On the thin strip of floor framed by the door lie a dozen or so balls of irregularly shaped stuff. Their lure is irresistible.

They pull you into their orbit and cause you to walk past a tiny child's chair, barely noticing that it's wearing shoes and has an extra leg that extends from between a deep crevice in its fleshy, lace-covered cushions. Too curious about the pink orbs in the next room, you treat this psychological time bomb of a settee as just another object in the world—ordinary, boring and perfectly ignorable.

With each step you take toward the main gallery, more gummy blobs become visible until you are suddenly in the presence of a cluster of the little, now menacing things. Their alluring cuteness instantly disappears when you real-



Rona Pondick's upended chair, "Fallen," left, serves as object of perverse delight for "Heads."

ize that they are uncountable parts of a teeming mass that totally overruns the space and anyone who might venture into it.

Angled around the bend in the L-shaped gallery, almost all of the open-mouthed units face another kiddie chair—this one upended, with its black high heels pointing helplessly, but also somewhat viciously, into the air. This immobilized creature creeps up behind you. Even more so than the one in the foyer, it initially escapes your

attention, which is riveted to the massive spill of pink spheres dominating the exhibition.

The chair's upside-down position creates the impression that the

mouthy wads are animate and mischievous, that they have been swarming around the room, tipping over furniture, and perhaps using the defenseless little chair for their

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own perverse purposes. At present, they seem to be on a demonic search for more trouble to get into, which you, the visitor, just might provide.

You draw the inescapable conclusion that you're being toyed with by a master of theatrics. Resentment flashes through your mind, only until you realize that the manipulation to which you are being subjected is much less insidious and far more enlightening than that involved in growing up and coming to terms with the pleasures and violence of sexuality and objectivity—issues Pondick's work provocatively and intelligently raises.

Childhood returns, in her art, as a far from innocent ground over which normal adulthood has layered even weirder expectations and more extreme distortions. Whereas children see the objects that make up the world in terms of an anthropomorphism that is both frightening and exciting, this enlivening vision is "corrected" when we grow up and begin to see things objectively, as dumb arrangements of only so much inanimate material.

Pondick's objects play havoc with these neat categories. They marry adult knowledge with childhood fantasy in order to explore the

strange intersections between guilt and innocence, aggression and affection.

Her collection of heads and pair of kiddie chairs both elicit our sympathy and assault us with obnoxiousness. If her charming little seats and misshapen, gum-like skulls seem sweet and vulnerable—to the point that they are threatened by the scale of the gallery—they also seem nasty and vengeful to the point of being wickedly demented.

Despite the diminutive size of her chairs, something unsavory lurks beneath the surfaces of their supposedly innocent curves and swollen or folded protuberances. Despite the fact that Pondick's pink heads occupy the same space as pets, too many exist for us to share the affection we hold out for domesticated animals.

Her sculptures remain utterly unlovable. Like human mutants too numerous to be distinguished or disregarded, they embody our fears of failing to get what we want—and worse, of getting exactly what we deserve. Simultaneously engaging and discomforting, alluring and repulsive, her art acts out a psychoanalytic drama of ambivalence, a scene of compulsion in which it is not contradictory for something to be two things at once.

■ *Asher/Faure Gallery, 612 N. Almont Drive, West Hollywood, (310) 271-3665, through Dec. 21. Closed Sundays and Mondays.*