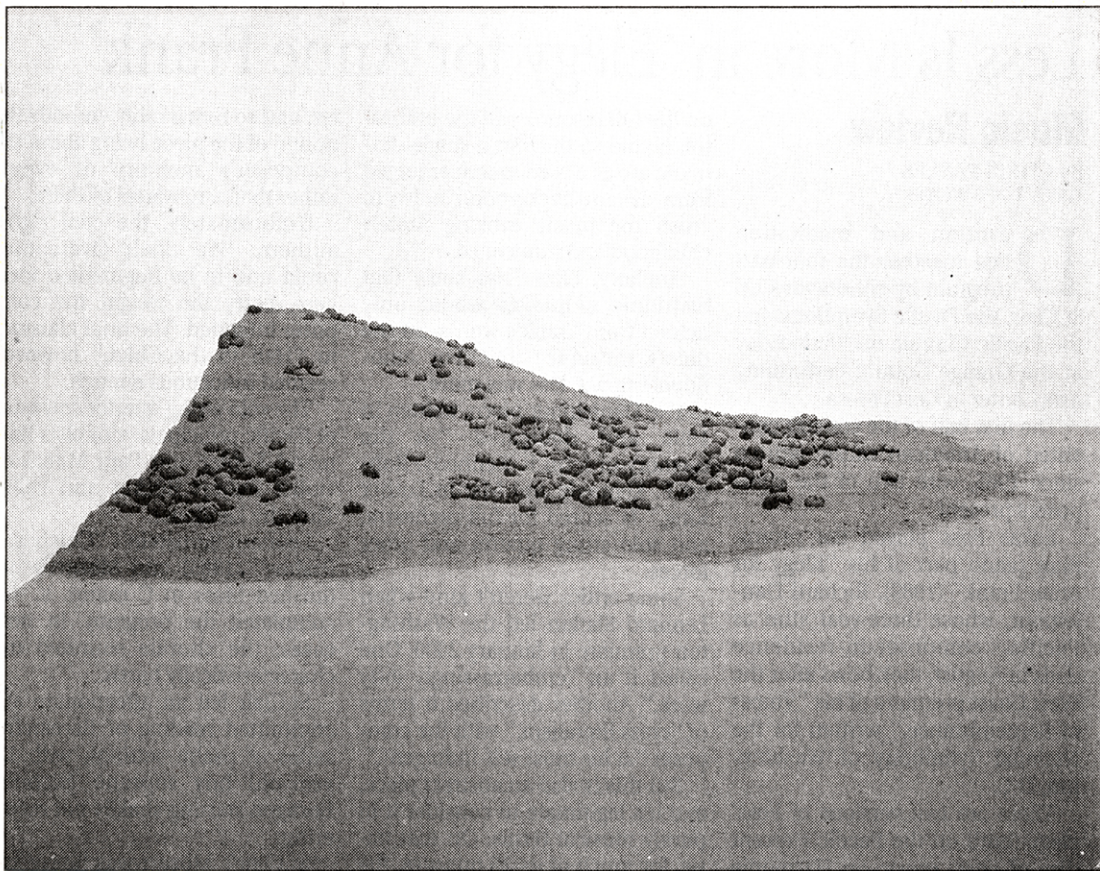


Art Reviews

By LEAH OLLMAN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES



Patricia Faure Gallery

Rona Pondick's "Dirthead," opening its first U.S. showing, is a desolate scene of disturbing power.

Pondick's 'Dirthead' Powerfully Depicts Grisly Effects of Mankind's Evil History

The pluralism of the current art scene is not just a matter of coexisting diverse styles but also one of a vast range in scope. Nothing is too mundane for an artist's consideration these days, and nothing's too heady. One might trace stains on a sidewalk, another might reflect on the human condition. With traditional hierarchies of content looser than ever, each has an equal shot at the badge of credibility.

Rona Pondick's two powerful installations at Patricia Faure Gallery fall near the big-picture extreme on the spectrum of possible concerns. They let loose an avalanche of thoughts about creation, purpose, destruction, nature, evil and history. Though they don't refer to specific incidents, their intensely palpable presence grounds them in physical reality, and all too many actual episodes in history come to mind, especially with the installation Pondick calls "Dirthead."

On a wedge of dry dirt that rises to about 4 feet, where it meets the far corner of the gallery, the New York-based artist has scattered several hundred small, dark, knobby objects that read instantaneously as both animal excrement and desiccated skulls. Each is roughly the size of a fist, lumpy and crudely formed, with cracked, dirt-encrusted surfaces.

What charges these odd deposits with unsettling power is the set of teeth each bares, sculpted of the same brown earth-wax-plastic blend as the rest of the form. The clenched jaws are the defining features of the tiny faceless heads, causing them to seem tortured, tense, pained. They read as the residue of disaster-massacre, famine or drought, and the abbreviated plain stands as a mass open grave.

It's a desperate scene, bereft of

life. Life here has turned to waste. The walls of skulls at the genocide museum in Tuol Sleng, Cambodia, come to mind, as do Holocaust photographs of heaps of emaciated bodies killed in concentration camps or mass executions. The lives represented by the skulls in Pondick's work appear to have ended in unnatural ways, and yet genocide and starvation have recurred with such frequency in the last century that perhaps we should classify such deaths as natural after all.

This is the first U.S. showing of "Dirthead," which was commissioned for the Johannesburg Biennial in 1997 and has been exhibited since in several other countries, eliciting strong response and varied interpretations in each context. Pondick has been mining the potency of that particular bulbous, toothed form in her sculptural work for more than a decade. Mildly grotesque from the start, its visceral charge lessens or intensifies depending on Pondick's choice of materials, the setting she stages and the number of such objects she assembles.

In her other installation here, "Apple Tree" (2001), 40 of the headlike forms cast in stainless steel rest on a patch of living turf, as if just fallen from a leafless stainless steel tree. Now they are fruit—smoother, fuller, more seductive than the shapes in "Dirthead"—but the clenched jaws remain.

Are these poisoned apples, forbidden fruit or the sorry condition of civilization as a result of eating from that tree? The tree itself appears too pure and elegant to bear the blame. The burden rests, perhaps, more with the culture we choose than with nature, which births us, and here we are again, prompted by Pondick's densely symbolic work, to ponder just where to draw the line between nature and culture, the pure and the polluted.

● Patricia Faure Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., Santa Monica, (310) 449-1479, through May 19. Closed Sundays and Mondays.