



OF TWO MINDS: PONDICK'S HYBRID SCULPTURES IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Unlike the pictorial arts, which invite us to look beyond their physical substance to the worlds they conjure, and favor transparency to image and idea, sculpture endorses obduracy and opacity. By ancestry if not active affiliation, all sculpture partakes of the relic and the talisman, of features that inhere to its constituent substances and the processes that have shaped them. In choosing to place her own work amid historical objects dating back five millennia, Rona Pondick highlights that heritage, drawing attention to sculpture's enduring reliance on the hospitality of base matter to transcendent spirit.

This is one way to look at the hybrid forms Pondick has made for more than ten years, in which human features – her own – are linked with those of other animals. These hybrids connect her with art's originating impulses in ritual and magic. One of the very first known artworks is a Paleolithic lion-headed human figure believed to be around 32,000 years old; it was carved out of a mammoth tusk using a stone knife. In ancient cultures of the Mediterranean, hybrids marshal the strength, agility, and intelligence associated with powerful animals on behalf of individual and communal well-being. The natural dominion of big cats, for instance, is associated with divinely endowed mortal rule in the lion gates of Assyria as well as the Egyptian sphinxes. In Greek myth, conjoined figures can represent mortal threat (as in the snake-haired Medusa), but also – and sometimes simultaneously – powerful seduction. There is humor, of the sort connected with some sharply felt impropriety, in some of the Greeks' mythological conjunctions, but, as a rule, more terror than comedy. In all these ancient cultures, assimilating the (distinctly) human to the (commonly) animal is only a step away from finding sentience in polished metal and carved stone – or, at least, expressive and perhaps spiritual power. Eyes closed and breath held, Pondick has taken this momentous step in each of her hybrid sculptures.

The categories into which the exhibition at the Worcester Art Museum is organized each draw out a different aspect of the connection she thereby forges. Under the heading "Ges-

ture and Posture," which embraces the largest number of objects, are those most insistent on physical presence. Included are sculptures that share features that link them with particular force to viewers – that encourage in us, even if involuntarily and only imaginatively, a reciprocal movement or stance. The chosen sculptures all stand upright, their arms (with one exception) clasped at the waist, whether in prayer or some other signal of deference. All suggest some combination of dignity and humility. Pondick's *Muskrat* (fig. 2), though only ten inches high, is big with importance, its polished torso swollen and sleek, but its head (like all of Pondick's current sculpture, derived from a cast of the artist) is very small. Laughably small. The tail is irrepressibly erect, as of a dog that can't conceal its eagerness to please. But the arms – or, actually, their proxies, two forefingers, one extended and one bent – are pressed demurely together. Cartoon-style (that is, childish), the feet are rounded and splayed. *Muskrat* is a hybrid not just phylogenetically but also ontologically: in its headlong recapitulation of the evolution of the species and of the individual, it shows just how gloriously unpredictable both processes can be.

For company, *Muskrat* has a handful of similarly diminutive but proud standing figures (pp. 68–69), one a Teotihuacán ceramic just two inches tall. There is also a female votive figure from ancient Greece, and, from southern India, an eighteenth-century bronze representation of the Hindu monkey god, Hanuman (fig. 1), a devoted, brave, yet fickle prankster; in Hinduism, as in Greek mythology, hybrids speak of the foibles as well as the strength and wisdom of the gods, and in the Worcester Art Museum's example, the contending forces of humanity and divine mischief swell Hanuman's features with mirth.

At thirty inches tall, Pondick's *Otter* (p. 65) is more substantial than *Muskrat*, but its posture is self-deprecating and withdrawn. Narrow-shouldered, its head retracted and slightly tilted, and with one arm defensively extended, it seems uneasy, inwardly focused. Perhaps it is dreaming. It is joined by a four-foot-high wood male ancestor figure from

Fig. 1
South Indian
Hanuman
18th century
Bronze
4 3/4 x 1 3/4 x 1 1/4 inches
(12 x 4.4 x 3.3 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1985.332

Fig. 2
Rona Pondick
Muskat
2002-05
Stainless steel
Edition of 3 + 1 AP
10 x 12 1/2 x 4 3/8 inches
(25.4 x 31.8 x 11.7 cm)

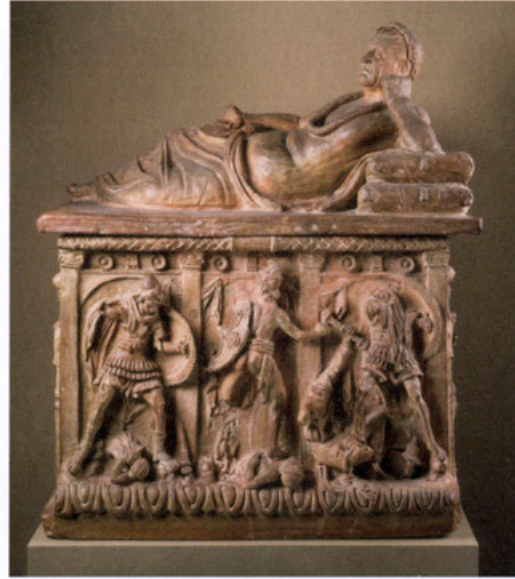






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Fig. 3
Rona Pondick
Pine Marten
2000-01
Stainless steel
Edition of 6 + 1 AP
9 x 18 3/8 x 6 1/4 inches
(22.9 x 47.9 x 17.1 cm)



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Fig. 4
Etruscan
Cinerary Urn
160-140 B.C.E.
Terra cotta
44 1/4 x 35 1/8 x 20 3/4 inches
(112.4 x 89.3 x 52.7 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1926.19

Fig. 5
Greek
(Canosa, Southern Italy)
Orante Figure
Late 4th-3rd century B.C.E.
Terra cotta
36 1/4 x 12 1/4 x 8 3/8 inches
(92.6 x 31.6 x 22 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1927.45

New Guinea (p. 64), the hunched shoulders and down-thrust chin of which are similar to those of *Otter*. But a clay woman in a turtle shell from Mexico (p. 65) is a beaming, open-armed fertility goddess of irresistible extroversion. Only the shell that shields her body – and significantly inhibits its sexual availability – suggests the kind of ambivalence that the other two figures seem to represent.

Most directly descended from ancient prototypes is Pondick's sphinxlike seated *Dog* (p. 54), its extended forelegs human (they are cast from the artist's arms), its haunches and hind legs canine, and its expression grimly commanding. *Dog* is joined by a variably authoritative range of seated figures (pp. 54–55), including examples from Southeast Asia (a bronze Buddha), Mesoamerica (a terra-cotta male), and Middle-Kingdom Egypt (a limestone male). Hieratic, symmetrical, and frontal, the historical figures all convey the kind of serene omnipotence associated with secular rulers believed to be invested with divine power. The tense concentration in the face of Pondick's *Dog*, by enormously effective contrast, betrays in its effort the tragic futility of claiming such infallibility – and the basic human imperative to nonetheless exert control, over one's animal instincts at the very least.

The body language of Pondick's *Pine Marten* (fig. 3) and *Cougar*, and of the historical sculptures with which they are grouped (pp. 58–59), is of a different order. And the emphasis here tips from posture to gesture. *Pine Marten* is prostrated, its hindquarters limp; its torso is propped on a human hand that is grotesquely large by comparison; its human face yearns upward. Like a swimmer, or a corpse, *Cougar* flings wide its arms, one human and one feline; its helpless cat's body floats between them. The Greek, Etruscan, and Italian Renaissance sculptures that accompany these two small figures each gesture naturalistically – a hand is held to a chin in thoughtful contemplation (fig. 5), an ample body lies comfortably in posthumous self-reflection (it adorns a sarcophagus) (fig. 4), a muscular figure advances in vigorous contrapposto.

The dreamlike distensions of hand and head in Pondick's

small sculptures, and the condensations and cross-species displacements of body parts, externalize the psychological complexities that are present, though constrained by convention, in the historical works. There, asymmetry and realism are the radical innovations that distinguish the sculptures from the older and more traditional objects of other groupings. *Cougar* and *Pine Marten*, on the other hand, submit classical naturalism to very different perceptions of psychological experience. In so doing, they illustrate a more modern understanding of hybrid imagery. In her book *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*, Marina Warner writes that while a protean transmigration of souls is a primary characteristic of the pagan gods, in Christianity heaven and beatitude are states of fixity: it is hell that is characterized by instability of the boundaries between higher and lower beings.¹ Hence, for example, Dante's hell, and Bosch's, looks a lot like the state of the world described by Ovid. If the dreamland inhabited by *Cougar* and *Pine Marten* is not quite Dantean – and Pondick's frame of reference is hardly confined to the Judeo-Christian tradition – neither do these distorted figures emanate the implacable command of an ancient sphinx, or the open invitation to pleasure of a satyr.

It is indicative of Pondick's goals and working processes that one area of concentration for her research into historical precedent is the treatment of hair. Deceptively familiar as a marker of social affiliation and self-definition, hair has several complicated characteristics. Alive to the touch at its roots and insensitive at its ends, it is both living and dead, and indeed notoriously continues to grow after its host body is deceased. Inessential to a modern human's wellbeing, it nonetheless remains a crucial designator of potency and allure, and historically has often been cut and saved, as a keepsake, a memento mori, or a religious relic. Not least important, it is extremely difficult to represent sculpturally (and not much easier to paint), since its essence is linear though its visual impact is volumetric. As a result, hair tells us a great deal about a given culture's strategies of abstraction, as well as its ideals of physical beauty.





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Fig. 6
Japanese, Heian Period
Juichimen Kannon
(Eleven-headed *Kannon*)
Early 10th century
Wood with traces of
polychrome
67 x 19 1/4 x 15 3/8 inches
(170.4 x 50.1 x 39.7 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1959.72

Fig. 7
Chinese, Yuan Dynasty
Head of Guanyin
1260-1368
Wood, polychrome,
and gold leaf
47 3/8 x 21 1/4 x 24 3/8 inches
(121.6 x 55.2 x
63.2 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1932.15

In two of the groupings in this category, Pondick assembled work that complements her own interest in expressing the tactile qualities of hair. All of her sculptures forcefully engage the sense of touch, with vivid contrasts between the mirror-polished stainless steel surfaces that represent animal skin and the subtly textured passages that simulate human skin, and hair. The heavy lock of hair cradling the head of a nearly bodiless *Mouse* (p. 82), and the even weightier crown of hair that seems to hold *Fox* (p. 86) face-down on the floor, imbalance these works physically and psychologically. *Mouse* is joined by a quartet of carved heads (pp. 82–83) boasting hair that ranges from the consummately elegant (a Roman portrait of a lady whose coif culminates in a woven bun at her nape) to the almost hysterically elaborated (the floral headpiece of a Yuan Dynasty *Head of Guanyin* (fig. 7), of painted and gilded wood, and the limestone head of a female votive figure from fifth-century B.C.E. Cyprus bearing a troupe of mythic figures dancing around its crown).

Fox, on the other hand, is joined by two works (p. 87) in which hair is given the most cursory representation, though the heads in question are no less expressive for the simplifications. A portrait of a young man from second-century Roman Egypt, taken from a death mask, has a cap of hair incised with parallel lines as straight and regular as heavy rain, melancholy and final. By contrast the cursorily modeled, tousled hair of Auguste Rodin's *Head of Sorrow* – a bronze head of a woman crying out in grief – submits to the disorder of profound emotion, or, at least, to one culture's conventions for conveying it.

Anomalous within Pondick's self-portrait-based work is a series of monkeys endowed with luxurious coats of long acrylic hair. Two of these flamboyant hybrids are joined by a trio of carved heads, a relief plaque, and a single example, from Angola, of a head adorned with hair made of foreign material – a lavish wig of tubular beads (pp. 74–76). Also part of this assembly, and standing in almost comic contrast, is a Roman portrait (possibly of Diocletian) carved from black basalt, its mouth a grim down-turned slash, and its bullishly

broad head nearly bald; scant hair at the sides is indicated with sketchy vertical hatching. As in our own day, having a head without hair is sometimes as much an emblem of ruthless power as being profusely hirsute.

The dynamic complexities of gesture and posture lend themselves readily to three-dimensional representation; staging the experience of touch depends on it. But the trope of repetition is less commonly associated with sculpture, and a signal achievement of Pondick's recent work is that it reveals how rich – and risky – repetition can be. For one thing, the sympathy that self-portraiture generally compels in viewers is challenged, in a way that is profoundly disorienting, when the likeness is multiplied. Other provocations are particular to manipulations of scale. In two-dimensional imagery, relative diminution of recognizable form is an indication of spatial recession; in sculpture, the miniature has a different meaning, generally associated with preciousness. But when realistic sculptural forms are repeated with incremental changes in scale, the demands of illusion collide, disturbingly, with the insistence of physical presence.

The tiny heads that appear as buds at the ends of slender branches in Pondick's *Pyracantha* (p. 99) are uncanny in a particularly affecting way. Associated with trees rather than, as in most of her recent sculptures, other animals, and so small that they are only legible at very close range, these heads seem horribly trapped, like Daphne of Greek myth, who was transformed into a laurel tree to escape the unwelcome attentions of Apollo. But if the heads on Pondick's tree sculptures seem caught in an especially tragic predicament, they are also, in their proliferation, virulent and menacing. This is true despite – or perhaps because of – the delicacy and grace of these arboreal sculptures.

Historically, the amplification of power that comes with multiple incarnations of a single being is often associated with transcendence. This appears to be true of the decoration on the headpiece of a Japanese *Kannon* figure (fig. 6), with its circling parade of kindred heads, and the corona of arms and heads framing a seventeenth-century South Indian war god

(p. 98), both of which are grouped with *Pyracantha* and *Gillie* (p. 98). It is in anxious negotiation with this kind of power that some of Pondick's oddest and most disturbing sculptures seem to have been conceived: the green bronze *Worry Beads* (p. 93), which are made of graduated heads strung together like seed pearls, and belong to an uneasy zone between sculpture, ornament, and ritual accessory; and the apotropaic *Ram's Head* (p. 92), an extravagantly horned portrait of the artist, with little effigies dangling from its ears like jewels for some fearsome self-consuming cannibal.

Among the historical works that accompany these poly-headed sculptures is also a very small glass bottle from first-century Rome (p. 92), a smiling face on one side and a grave one on the other. In representing the essential duality of both human and divine character, rather than an infinite multiplication of identity, it speaks for a simpler and more fundamental experience of fragmentation – and, perhaps, for a sense of alienation that lurks in all of Pondick's hybrids. On one level, that alienation can be associated with the nearly universal experience of rupture between humans and the natural order that has long absorbed the interest of environmentalists and philosophers alike. More than thirty years ago, critic and novelist John Berger wrote: "Until the 19th century . . . anthropomorphism was integral to the relations between man and animal and was an expression of their proximity."² The loss of that intimacy has meant an impoverishment of our symbolic language. Though it is still an article of faith that "the animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man," the contract between the species has been severed. "That look between animal and man . . . has been extinguished,"³ as Berger says. Writes philosopher Giorgio Agamben: "Up until the eighteenth century, language – which would become man's identifying characteristic par excellence – jumps across orders and classes, for it is suspected that even birds can talk"⁴ – a claim, it is worth noting, that some current researchers are actively defending. In a book that examines the social causes and ethical consequences of defining humans by our distinc-

tions from other animals, Agamben begins with a description of a thirteenth-century Hebrew bible in which the righteous men seated at the messianic banquet of the last day are represented as having the heads of animals: an eagle, an ox, a lion. Agamben speculates that these apocryphal hybrids reflect a belief that "on the last day . . . man himself will be reconciled with his animal nature."⁵

Our steadily worsening relations with the rest of the natural world – and the creative and psychological deficits that accompany our depletion of its resources – are not Pondick's primary concern. But she does engage with them in the course of her effort, itself part of a venerable tradition, to understand what shapes psychological character. In taking up a kind of imagery that stretches back to the origin of human culture, she not only plumbs internal experience but also scans a continuum of expression, drawing on forms of understanding that go far beyond a lifetime's contingencies.

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NOTES

1. Marina Warner, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
2. John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 9.
3. *Ibid.*, 26.
4. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 24.
5. *Ibid.*, 3.