

VISCERAL MEANING: HOW SCULPTORS SEE

Susan L. Stoops

*Sculpture is solid by nature, but the meaning it holds or its symbolic interpretations can vary.*¹

At its most elemental, a group exhibition visually points to difference and relatedness. At its most sophisticated, the model moves beyond aesthetics to create a sensory and perceptual adventure that leads us to alternate meanings of works of art, even those we may know intimately. Most often, this revelatory experience is due to a new context for looking. On the present occasion, this context is provided by the juxtaposition of recent sculpture by Rona Pondick with her selection of figurative sculpture from the Asian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, European, Pre-Columbian, and Oceanic collections of the Worcester Art Museum that she feels resonate with her own creative process.

Since 1998, Pondick has combined both ancient and new technologies to produce a powerful group of sculptures that fuse human and animal bodies or human and flora forms. For this dramatic departure from her earlier work, the artist turned to carving, modeling, and casting – traditional sculptural processes new to her – and also began to work with 3-D computer scanning and modeling to preserve extreme detail while she manipulated scale. Her hybrid sculptures are cast primarily in stainless steel or bronze, their human parts made from life casts of Pondick's body. She sculpts the animal bodies by hand, following three-dimensional models; for tree forms, she combines parts of real trunks and branches with hand-modeled elements to produce a natural effect that conceals her intervention.

Why accept Pondick's invitation to serve as guide to centuries of sculpture from around the world? Since achieving international prominence in the early 1990s, Pondick has become one of the most accomplished sculptors of her generation. Her practice of engaging both traditional sculptural methods and the latest computer technologies exemplifies the value of embracing history with a contemporary sensibility. Her pioneering experiments over the past decade reflect the ever-evolving role of technology in sculpture, even

as they expose technology's limitations.

It is always revelatory to view a museum's collection through the critical eyes of an artist. Artists can provide valuable insights into how they see and by extension what we can learn about the interrelated processes of making art and creating meaning. Pondick's project offers a uniquely intimate opportunity to look beyond the conventional iconography of sculpture to consider how sculptors in all periods and cultures have met comparable challenges in translating their ideas and raw materials into believable and compelling three-dimensional objects.

*I want to look at how sculpture is physical and how the physical makes psychological impact. Viewers have conscious and unconscious visceral responses to objects that they feel in their own bodies and that make psychological meaning. I am interested in looking at the way the psychological has been manifested in sculptures from all periods. When these different historic sculptures and mine are installed next to one another, there is a visual communication spoken in "body language" that needs little explanation. The sculptures start losing their historical place and take on more physical, emotional, and visceral relations with the viewer. Gestures and postures don't translate solely into symbolic interpretations particular to a culture or time period. Otherwise, why would people look at historic work?*²

The format of the Worcester Art Museum exhibition arose from a dialogue between Pondick and me several years ago concerning what people actually saw when they looked at her hybrid sculptures. Citing sometimes frustrating exchanges with visitors to the studio over recent years, she said, "When they asked, 'How did you make this?' I told them by taking modeling and carving and bringing the two together. Though I would explain a number of times I saw them looking absolutely dumbfounded because they didn't know what 'modeling' meant."³ Pondick said she would often explain by invoking the historical examples of modernist sculptors Constantin Brancusi and Alberto Giacometti.



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Fig. 1
Chinese (Henan Province)
Northern Qi Dynasty
Head of a Buddha
550–577
Limestone
17 ½ x 10 ½ x 13 ¼ inches
(44.5 x 27 x 34 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1914.24

Brancusi was a carver. He subtracted material, removing everything that was extraneous to his final form. He had to work with a clear concept of the final images because in carving there is no going back, no adding on material. And then there's Giacometti whose process was the exact opposite; he worked in clay where it is possible to move the material around, adding or subtracting it, because it's a pliable, plastic material. But people had little understanding of what I was talking about. And I felt as though something was getting lost in terms of how viewers see the sculpture and their appreciation for how it is made. As an object maker, I'm always interested in my responses to what the materials say and how the methods the artists used to make their sculptures affect their meanings.

The exchanges in the studio prompted Pondick to create an exhibition that would bring together “making” and “meaning” in a way that privileges unmediated physical involvement with the objects, with the hope that the experience might demystify “why I do certain things in my work. I'd like viewers to understand some of what I see when I look at other sculptures and give some sense of what I think about when I am making my own. I'd like this show to be an intimate experience, like reading a diary or going through my closet.”

CONNECTIONS TO THE PAST

Pondick has regularly looked to sculptors' work through the centuries for inspiration, borrowing from their compositions and methods, and learning from their solutions to production problems. “I have always looked back. Art is my history and it feeds me. I look to history to see how other artists made work. Sometimes there is a concrete problem and I want to see how another artist solved it. Material solutions, material manipulation, scale, touch, and how a sculpture makes me feel all interest me.”⁴ Brancusi is an important branch in Pondick's sculptural family tree. It has been said that his interest in ancient Asian art freed him from the aesthetic and stylistic trends of his time. Iconographically and technologi-

cally, Brancusi's sculptures are generally read as a blend of tradition and modernity, the familiar and the unplaceable.⁵ “Brancusi was studying the same kinds of sculptures I'm looking at – African, Asian, the same Gandharan heads [figs. 1, 2] that I'm looking at.” Pondick's lifelong learning from museum collections throughout the world can be traced to growing up in New York City, where she spent Sundays going to Central Park and ending up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

As a young artist, as a way of trying to understand why I liked certain sculptures and didn't like others, I spent time drawing at the Metropolitan Museum. I was obsessed with Egyptian art and was drawing from it a lot, but I also was drawing from works I didn't like so much. At the same time, I was looking intensely at Giacometti. There was always a book of his work sitting on my table. I remember the moment when I found a small Egyptian piece that looked like Giacometti's chariot. I realized that he had looked at Egyptian art and it made sense that I'd love both. I started to see and understand the connection between things I was drawn to and realized how important it was for me to understand my artistic roots.⁶

Pondick appreciates that the motivations for sculptural practice vary radically in different periods and cultures, reflecting factors such as the availability of materials and resources, the social function of art, cultural symbolism, taste, and the effect of technical innovations and limitations in each context. Nevertheless, she sees herself as part of a continuum of artistic cross-fertilization in which art and ideas travel across borders, sometimes strictly observed and at others altogether abandoned, but more often mutating gradually through artists' reinterpretations. Pondick's captivation with the phenomenon of the “metamorphosis of an object” and the fluidity of meanings over time is at the heart of her exhibition strategy. Commingling her work with the museum's holdings, she has, to use her word, “unlocked” both, if only temporarily, from the strictly historical confines in which they are usually placed.

PONDICK'S HYBRIDS

The concept of mutation has become central to Pondick's creative process and epitomizes the iconographic form her work has taken over the past decade – the human/animal and human/flora hybrid.

From the beginning, my work has been about a metamorphosis. It brings me back to Franz Kafka and the idea of transformation, something in flux . . . things mutating. . . . Each piece was about an evolution. Within each sculpture, the form would start shifting, and as the form shifted, the meaning changed.⁷

Pondick's hybrids evoke compelling parallels in art and literature of the past, from the Egyptian Sphinx and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to the dark dreams of Francisco de Goya and Odilon Redon, as well as in the disturbing promise of genetic manipulation in the future. But it was only after she added her head and arms to the body of a dog that she herself started thinking about mythology and the use of the hybrid in art. "Looking through my books, I found one hybrid image after another, from different cultures and time periods. The animal/human image was so resonant and it hasn't died." Pondick was referring not only to monstrous hybrids that have found their way into movies like *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, or *The Fly*, *Alien*, and *Terminator*, but also to recent experiments in cloning. She remembers seeing a photograph a few years ago in the *New York Times* "of a mouse with a human ear grafted to its back. It was a scientific experiment that looked just like one of my sculptures."⁸

Figuration already dominated Pondick's sculpture when she began work on the hybrids. Richly metaphoric objects and symbolic fragments – shoes, baby bottles, teeth, and ears – often appeared in installations in which she used the display strategies of proliferation, scatter, and repetition. Around 1998, Pondick abandoned what had become a mature visual language and a critically acclaimed practice, with the self-directed goal of changing "the way I was making meaning." She recalls a lengthy period of frustration and failure. "I



Fig. 2
Northwest Indian
(Gandhara)
*Standing Shakyamuni
Buddha*
3rd century
Gray schist with traces
of gesso
50 3/8 x 20 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches
(148.9 x 52 x 29.2 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1926.2



3



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Fig. 3, 4
Constantin Brancusi
(1876–1957)
Mademoiselle Pogany [II]
1920
Photograph
Musée National d'Art
Moderne, Centre Georges
Pompidou, Paris, France
© 2008 Artists Rights
Society (ARS), New
York/ADAGP, Paris
Digital Image ©
CNAC/MNAM/Dist.
Réunion des Musées Na-
tionaux/Art Resource, NY

Fig. 5
Rona Pondick
Mouse
2002–06
Stainless steel
Edition of 3 + 1 AP
6 ½ x 9 ½ x 17 inches
(16.5 x 24.1 x 43.1 cm)

made a list of ways that I wouldn't let myself work so that I wouldn't fall into old habits. . . . It forced me to work in unknown ways."

Perhaps because of her identification with the human body as fragments rather than as an entirety (both in her work and as reflected in her powerful responses to sculptural and archaeological fragments held by museums throughout the world), she thought to marry parts of bodies – hers and a dog's. Her decision to use her own body was initially a very pragmatic one. She wanted to work from life and sought the extraordinary detail that could be obtained only by using a medical silicone material. She had her head cast, undergoing the laborious and claustrophobia-inducing process of having it encased in layers of rubber and plastic for hours. For ten years now, "every single head in every one of my sculptures is from this one cast head, whether it is life size or miniature."

Pondick's first human/animal hybrid, *Dog* (p. 54), evolved over the course of almost four years and appeared in several different states (three in wax, one in aluminum bronze, and, finally, another in yellow stainless steel). As she introduced herself to the traditional processes of modeling and carving, the sculptor quickly found she was dissatisfied with modeling in wax because the medium was too soft and did not hold the form as crisply as she wanted. She took up an epoxy material she still uses, which when wet is "claylike and that lets me model. Once the material dries it has the consistency of stone so I can carve or even grind it. I can cut out whole sections and add new material; it's like a hybrid of Giacometti and Brancusi!"

When she started making her hybrids, Pondick turned to the work of master figurative sculptors, such as Donatello, to help her "resolve the surface transitions between matte and polished surfaces. I looked at Bernini's sculptures, studying their baroque movements and his mysterious and sensuous material transformations."⁹ She also cites Brancusi's *Mademoiselle Pogany [II]*, asserting that "its mirror finish is a touchstone for me." She absorbed Brancusi's lessons about the inherent properties of various materials, comparing

Mademoiselle Pogany in polished metal (fig. 3) to versions translated into stone (fig. 4). "The material determines how you see the form. When it's in the mirror finish, it reflects the environment so you see into it and through it, and you see yourself. In an opaque material, you see it."

While mastering these sculptural methods, Pondick began using 3-D computer scanning to increase or decrease the size of her head and hands from the life casts. "The 3-D files are scalable to any dimensions, and they can be 'printed out' as objects. . . . When I look back and see how big an effect this technology has had on my work I am astonished. After I had my head scanned I realized I could endlessly change its size and I did just that. Of course, once I shrank my head, the next question was what would happen if I chose another body part and made it bigger. That is where the idea for the sculpture *Cat* [p. 110] originated."¹⁰ It was four years after she first used the computer to scan her head and output it at various reduced sizes that Pondick scanned a life cast of her hand. She wanted to see what would happen if she took a life cast of her hand and attached it to a small animal body.

*Could I scan a life cast, blow it up really big and have the skin texture look believable, or would the skin texture look like moon craters? How could I alter this huge hand so that it would merge with a small animal body? Could I change the shape of my hand on the computer but still keep it looking like my hand? What could I resolve on the computer and what would I have to model by hand?*¹¹

Pondick's keen observations of surface treatments by earlier sculptors led her to conclude that although much unpainted figurative sculpture represents hair and drapery in great detail, there is a consistent omission of skin texture. She thinks it is "probably because it was not possible. If you did it by hand, you could spend a lifetime making one sculpture." She knows this firsthand from the year she spent manually applying the skin texture on a hand she scanned and then remodeled to merge with an animal body for *Cat*. In history, while polished and unpolished stone surfaces, for example, have suggested readings of "flesh" that range from the





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Fig. 6
Rona Pondick
Monkey with Hair
2002–03
Stainless steel and
modacrylic hair
Unique
14 x 41 x 32 inches
(35.6 x 104.1 x 81.3 cm)

smoothly sensual to the coarse and callused, Pondick's adoption of computer scanning technology has enabled her to translate skin texture in a way that dramatically affects our physical and emotional responses to her work. As she notes, "skin texture is unnerving at first when someone sees it." The delicate pattern on the face and hands in Pondick's work has a visceral and psychological impact that only the texture of human flesh gives.

Despite the fact that she has been using the same head – her own – in her sculptures for ten years, Pondick did not begin with the intention of making self-portraits. Rather, she recalls, "I was looking at my body like an instrument, like a dancer would use her body. I needed a human figure, so here I am." Most viewers come to Pondick's hybrids not knowing it is her body and likely interpret the human elements as she intended – stand-ins for an ungendered "every person."¹² It is notable that the historical figurative sculptures she finds most relevant to her own do not, for the most part, offer an identifiable likeness.

Pondick's life-cast head in *Fox* (p. 86) creates a provocative context for the Roman Egypt plaster *Portrait Mask of a Young Man* and Auguste Rodin's bronze *Head of Sorrow* (p. 87). Rodin first used the head, which he modeled in clay and then cast with the lost-wax process, for sculptures of male figures, but then retooled it to form a likeness of the performer Eleonora Duse. Referring to this androgynous figure with its flattened hair, Pondick remarked that "it looks and feels like my *Fox* head. But in terms of *how* they were made, the *Fox* and the death mask are closer – they were both cast directly from the body."¹³

BELIEVABLE FICTIONS

Combining life casting, computer scanning, and hand-modeling, Pondick's objects are not illusionistic or lifelike so much as they are believable fictions. They help us notice the ways all sculptors constantly navigate between representation and invention. They invite us to ask, what is the mini-

mum degree of detail necessary for a sculptor to create a convincing form? Can detail that is completely invented achieve the same level of credibility as a mimetic rendition? We discover that by virtue of the materials and processes of sculpture, the medium has always entailed invention, abstraction, and a certain loss of naturalism.

Bernini once observed that "in order to imitate the natural, the sculptor has to make something unnatural." And he also said that as soon as you remove the color from someone's face (as happens in monochrome sculptures of stone, wood, metal, or clay) a certain degree of expression leaves and it no longer looks like him or her. There is something about the color and transparency of your skin that makes you look like yourself. Many people have said to me, "That's your face in the sculptures? It doesn't look anything like you." But it's my face; it's a life cast! I find it so interesting that a factual impression taken directly from my face doesn't look anything like me.

The metamorphosis from one state to another is central to Pondick's approach to object making and is at the heart of her interest in work from other periods and cultures. In her highly stylized animal bodies she exploits the inherent properties of stainless steel, a material that can be highly polished so it "looks like mercury – it looks as if it's disintegrating in front of you, as if it were in flux."¹⁴ It is the seamless transition from one realm to another – human to animal, skin texture to mirror finish, life-size to miniature – that makes Pondick's creatures so convincing while unmistakably not of our world.

I relate to Kafka and the way his writing straddled poignant contradictions. . . . His images are in one world and in another world all at the same time. I think they are hysterically funny and absurd yet they're tragically sad. There is absurdity and humor in his darkness, like a laugh in the dark, and it's everything I want in my work.

As Pondick selected such different yet related historical sculptures for the current presentation, she recognized in the process "something I do all the time in my own work. I'm



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constantly putting opposites together, merging the human with the animal and the human with trees. I work to make transitions between mirror surfaces and human skin texture or the bark on trees so that a convincing whole is made out of contradictory parts. My animal forms are hand-modeled and stylized to the point that my animals have no gender and I combine them with factual life casts. It's important to me to see what happens when these oppositions come together in a sensate way, what kinds of meanings they suggest to viewers emotionally, psychologically, and materially." Pondick refers to the leap of faith required of sculptor and viewer alike as "imaginary. You make it up; you have to recreate a world and make it somehow believable. It's about invention for the sculptor . . . and for the viewer, a magic, something you can't really talk about. You experience it. And that's why these objects in the exhibition, for me, tell that story in a better way than if I had to explain it to someone."

Critic Roberta Smith once observed that "the best label for any work of art might be another work of art."¹⁵ This aptly characterizes Pondick's intentions and strategies in this unique look at her work. Given her history of presenting her sculptures in environments and installations, Pondick has a sophisticated understanding of and sensitivity to conditions of display, a subject that has come to dominate much sculptural discourse over the past two decades. This issue is related to her interest in how we come to "know" historical sculptures in a museum setting – objects that often have been removed from their original contexts and been subject to varying degrees of transformation over time due to decay, loss of color, or fragmentation (altered states André Malraux poetically described as "not diminished, but transmuted"¹⁶). Pondick's project not only liberates sculptures from the historical categories that guide our looking in most museum presentations but also makes the objects understood as we see them here and now rather than re-imagined as they originally were. The consequence is that their makers "come alive," as though she were in conversation artist-to-artist with remote colleagues.

While refreshingly unconventional, Pondick's reinstatement of collection objects is carefully choreographed through juxtaposition and orientation. For example, the frontal positioning of one of her two *Monkey with Hair* sculptures (p. 75) emphasizes the masklike quality of the face, which resonates with an adjacent Angolan mask (p. 74). Her other monkey (fig. 6) stands in profile next to a medieval bearded *Head of an Apostle or Saint* (fig. 7), because, as Pondick explains, the monkey's synthetic hair is "not just functioning as hair on my head and on the body, but underneath it suggests a beard, which this orientation helps you see." Sometimes her pairings offer surprising corrections to what we think we know about how works are made. At other times, she has oriented a sculpture so that the principal or familiar view is not what we first encounter. By exposing the unfinished back of a limestone first-century Chinese Buddha head (p. 74), which "was made to be seen from the front and probably sitting in some kind of a niche . . . I'm hoping you can see how the material is being transformed from raw stone into snail-shell curls. You get this sense of the stone going through this metamorphosis, being transformed into a convincing head."

REPRESENTATIONS OF HAIR

Pondick's choices throughout the exhibition reflect her particular interest in three aspects of sculpture – the treatment of hair, the communicative capacity of gesture and posture, and the effects of repetition.

Sometimes you have to translate something so it seems more believable.

When faced with the inability of electronic technology to scan strands of hair, Pondick realized she would have to carve it, and looked to the existing repertoire of figurative sculpture to consider how to represent its materiality. She examined the work of the late-Gothic sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider, especially his virtuosic *Mary Magdalene* (1490–92) from the *Münnerstadt* altarpiece in Munich (fig. 8),

Fig. 7
Southern French (?)
Head of an Apostle or Saint
First half of 14th century
Limestone with polychrome and traces of gilding
9 3/4 x 6 3/4 x 6 1/2 inches
(24.6 x 17.2 x 16.5 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1949.36





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in which he carved wood to form swirling strands of thigh-length tresses that he adapted to create a wavelike pattern for the hair shirt covering the figure's body.

Pondick explores how we experience sculpted hair differently depending on the medium and technique – whether it was modeled, carved, cast, or created with fibers. In doing so, she raises the questions, is hair that is cast from life (as it is in several of her pieces) more believable than hair that is invented?, and how can simplified volumes and patterns of stone, wood, or metal read as something as soft and multi-stranded as human hair?

For the present museum project, Pondick's *Mouse* (fig. 5) and her *Monkey with Hair* sculptures provide the lens for examining historical interpretations that engage a range of processes, materials, and degrees of abstraction, all of which we accept as codes for "hair." Originating from a life cast, the head in *Mouse* initially showed the artist's hair as it was plastered back during the casting process. Desiring a more elaborate and sensuous effect akin to that of Brancusi's *Mademoiselle Pogany*, Pondick transformed her physical characteristics and hence their emotional impact first by embellishing the cast hair with a carved cascade of invented locks and then by merging the head with the diminutive body of a mouse.

The Roman *Portrait of a Lady* (p. 82) with which Pondick's mutant self-portrait is exhibited is likewise a hybrid of likeness, invention, and contemporary taste. The commissioned head (fitted to a generic bust) has been identified with the family of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and may represent his daughter. Pondick was fascinated by the sculptor's eloquent depiction of a popular court hairstyle in which waves of hair are bound into a loosely braided knot. To dramatize her observation, in the current installation she presents the figure from the back, "so all you're aware of is *hair*."

The textured bodies of Pondick's *Monkey with Hair* sculptures depart dramatically from those of her "hairless" polished-metal hybrids. Here she adapted a practice found in certain African sculptures – the incorporation of actual hair –

by using the contemporary synthetic material, modacrylic, to simulate the individual fibers.

Sculptures look the way they do in part because of the limits of the technologies and materials. I can see that the Roman Portrait of a Lady first existed in a clay form, which was then eventually translated into the bronze. Why? Because I can look at the hair and see how fluid it is; you can't achieve this unless you are working in a fluid material. The hair in the wood Chinese Guanyin [p. 83] feels very different and I would expect it to be because it is not in a material that is easily manipulated. . . . Similarly, the basalt Roman Portrait of a Ruler [p. 74], made in a material which is very hard to carve into, has abbreviated incised lines that are shallowly etched into the stone. But you read "hair," not "lines." Or look at the wooden strands of the Angolan mask [p. 74] and the careful divisions carved into the limestone in the Egyptian relief, Ay [fig. 9]. They both form vertical, braidlike rows and feel very, very different, but both read as "hair." . . . It's not a matter of making it look like hair as we live with it and know it; it's more of an abstraction. . . . To me it's thrilling that the representation of something so universal can mutate endlessly.

GESTURE AND POSTURE

In sculpture, as in life, body language is a powerful conveyor of meaning. Pondick recognizes that through gesture and posture figurative sculptures from different eras and traditions can communicate to us, and, like her hybrids, "make the emotional and the psychological physical." With her *Dog*, *Muskrat* (fig. 11), and *Otter* (fig. 17) as contemporary points of reference, Pondick explores universal codes for the body as interpreted by sculptors over four millennia (after all, we do share the same basic body). Pondick asks us to "forget about the way we've been taught to look at things, as if to say, here's Egyptian art and here are the qualities of Egyptian art and this is what we're supposed to look at. Or here's Indian art, Thai art, or Pre-Columbian art – that is, art from a particular time period and culture – and we are supposed to look at it in *these ways*."

Fig. 8
Tilman Riemenschneider
(ca. 1460–1531)
*The Assumption of Mary
Magdalene*, from the
central shrine of the
Münnerstadt altarpiece
1490–92
Limewood
Bayerisches National-
museum, Munich

Fig. 9
Egyptian, 18th
Dynasty
Ay, Fan Bearer
Ca. 1360 B.C.E.
Plaster on limestone
with polychrome
13 3/4 x 8 3/4 x 2 1/2 inches
(34.5 x 22.3 x 5.3 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1949.42

Fig. 10
Roman
Goddess
1st century B.C.E.
Marble
14 3/4 x 6 3/4 x 7 1/2 inches
(37.5 x 17.3 x 19.2 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1914.57



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Fig. 11
Rona Pondick
Muskrat
2002-05
Stainless steel
Edition of 3 + 1 AP
10 x 12 ½ x 4 ¾ inches
(25.4 x 31.8 x 11.7 cm)

Fig. 12
Alberto Giacometti
(1901-1966)
Bust of Diego
1955
Bronze
22 ¼ x 12 ½ x 5 ¼ inches
(56.5 x 32 x 14.5 cm)
© 2008 Artists Rights
Society (ARS), New
York/ADAGP and FAAG,
Paris/DACS, London/Tate,
London

Fig. 13
Greek (Cyclades Islands)
Female Votive Figure
Ca. 2400 B.C.E.
Marble
5 ¾ x 2 ¼ x ¾ inches
(14.5 x 5.6 x 2 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1956.1

Like the majority of the Museum's sculptures she has selected, Pondick's human/animal hybrids are ultimately located in the psychological realm of human experience. However, a tension exists between the physical externality of the animal body and the psychological interiority of the human head. Pondick's eyes are shut, a product of the mold-making process that conveys introspection and removal from the external world. However, the body claims the physical space it occupies "like an animal that is territorial,"¹⁷ and reflects the surrounding environment in its mirror finish.

Pondick is acutely aware of what art historian Lucy Lippard once observed: "Our memories may be lousy, but our visceral memories are tremendous."¹⁸ Many of her juxtapositions offer compelling evidence that figurative sculptures generate visceral meaning through a direct exchange between the sculptural bodies and our own. They prompt an experiential understanding of sculpture in terms of how we communicate physically in this world. By grouping several historical seated figures from various cultures with her imposing *Dog* (pp. 54-55), for example, Pondick points to the ways physical stance reinforces psychological states ranging from serenity and composure to fortitude and confrontation. Moreover, she explains, "the posture of the *Orante Figure* [p. 58] – with its elbow resting on one hand and the other hand under its chin – that's a very natural position; it doesn't make the same impact on you as the seated Thai Buddha. The Buddha is more posed, more mannered almost. The reclining figure on the Etruscan urn [p. 59] is also in a casual position. Its posture conveys a very different feeling than the Pre-Columbian seated male, for example; it's more informal, relaxed. It's not as frozen a gesture; it's more fluid, like my *Pine Marten* [p. 58]. The *orante* and Etruscan figures communicate feelings our bodies know from daily life."

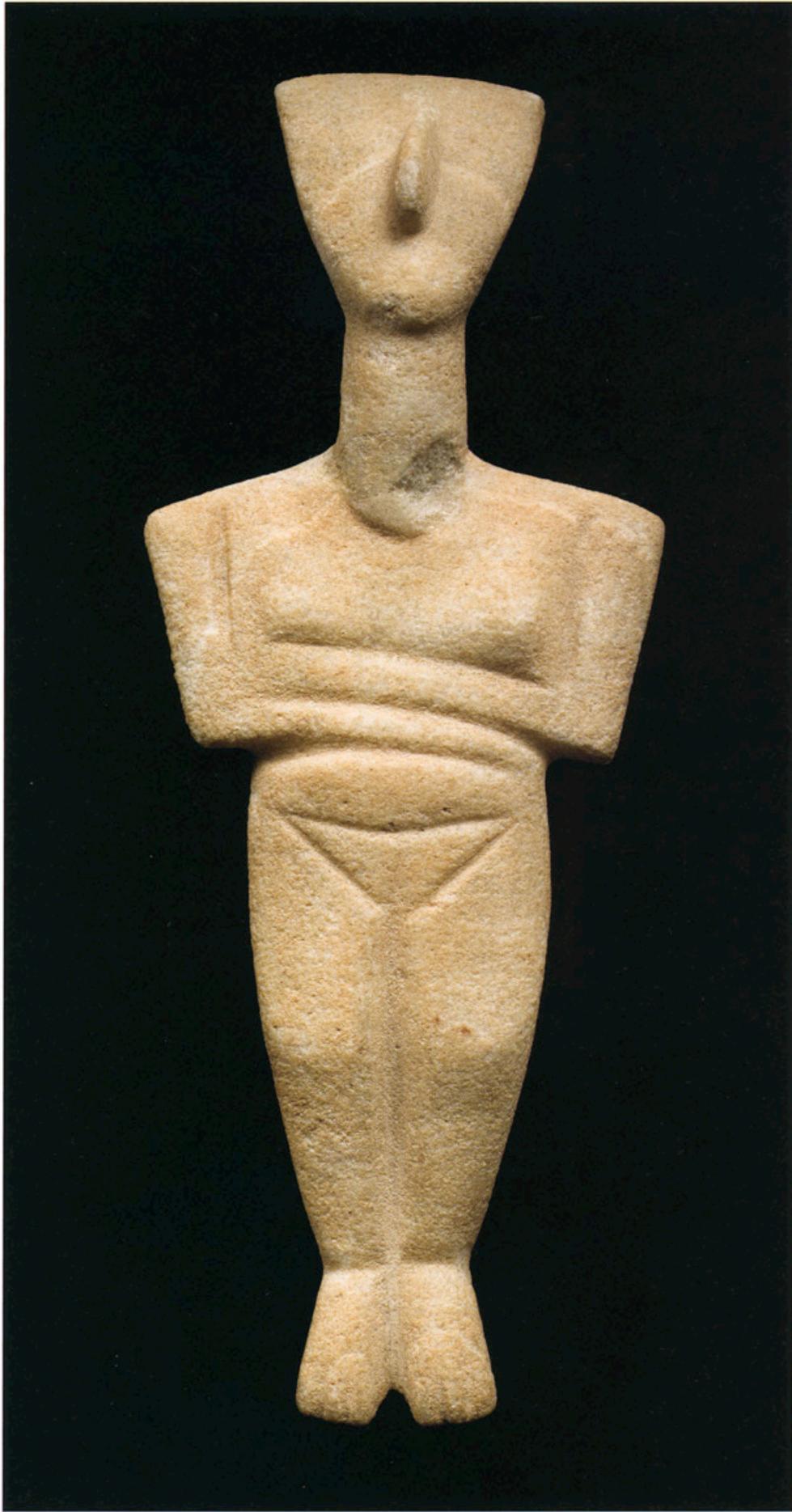
But another grouping (pp. 68-69), built around her *Muskrat*, conveys an experience of the body that is more abstracted, beginning with the radical instability in the scale of the body parts she combined to create the figure: an elongated torso, a diminutive head, and human-size fingers. Of the neighboring

objects, including the Cycladic *Female Votive Figure* (fig. 13), she asks, "I don't know a figure that looks like that, do you? And what about the strange proportions of the Mesopotamian man? The Pre-Columbian figurine is a mere two inches high and 'Gumbylike' but it is the closest in this grouping to feeling like a human figure, despite its lack of detail."

About the grouping with her *Otter* (pp. 64-65), Pondick explains that "I chose the Greek *Female Goddess with a Bird-like Face* [fig. 14] because it is one of the few human/animal hybrids in the Museum's collection, along with the Indian *Hanuman* and the Pre-Columbian *Woman in a Turtle Shell* [fig. 15]. I was thrilled when I saw the turtle-woman! She shares so much in stance and height with my *Otter*, even the way her feet come out. It's a little eerie because I'd never seen the object before. . . . There is a Brancusi sculpture that I've studied – his *Little French Girl* [fig. 16] with its helmet head and all of its odd proportions – I really can picture it in my mind with this group. . . . To go from this grouping of sculptures to the next – it's like an encyclopedia of what the figure can be and how we, as sculptors, make the translation from material to figure and how we want the object to feel in the world."

Pondick's "we" reveals her camaraderie with the historical sculptors. Despite *Otter's* technological sophistication, it partakes of an imaginative freedom found in other sculptures. Pondick's approach can be very playful, allowing for unforeseen evolutions and taking "tremendous liberties" with the animal bodies, as she did when she decided to add five inches to the otter torso. "When I elongated the torso, I thought it might be more interesting to make it asymmetrical. At first I cut a paw off simply with the idea to extend the arm so it looked like it was drooping hopelessly. But then I wondered what transformation would occur if I replaced the paw with a human hand at that scale. So I tried it. The changes fit the posture of the animal and made the sculpture feel more pathetic, more interesting."

One of the ways Pondick's sculptures engage the idea of metamorphosis is through dynamic manipulations of scale,



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14



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Fig. 14
Greek (Boeotia)
Female Goddess with a Birdlike Face
600–550 B.C.E.
Painted terra cotta
5 1/4 x 2 1/4 x 1 1/4 inches
(13.1 x 5.7 x 3.1 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1946.38

Fig. 15
Mexico (Remojadas)
Woman in a Turtle Shell
Ca. 850–1200
Ceramic with traces
of pigment
28 x 17 3/4 x 12 1/4 inches
(71.1 x 45.1 x 30.8 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1964.8

Fig. 16
Constantin Brancusi
(1876–1957)
*Little French Girl
(The First Step [III])*
Ca. 1914–18
Oak
48 3/4 x 9 3/4 x 9 1/4 inches
(123.5 x 23.8 x 23.5 cm)
Solomon R. Guggenheim
Museum, New York; Gift,
Estate of Katherine S.
Drier, 1953, 53.1332
© 2008 Artists Rights
Society (ARS), New
York/ADAGP, Paris

Fig. 17
Rona Pondick
Otter
2002–05
Stainless steel
Edition of 3 + 1 AP
30 1/2 x 6 3/4
x 23 3/4 inches
(77.5 x 17.2 x 60.3 cm)

from the miniature to the oversize, with abrupt shifts sometimes occurring within a single body (*Muskrat*, *Mouse*, and *Cat*). During the 1990s, she explored the metaphorical possibilities of scale in installations by altering the usual sizes of beds and chairs, as well as ears and teeth. Now, in the hybrids, we see how Pondick has absorbed ideas about scale from sculptors such as Giacometti (fig. 12), who abandoned classical coherence and embraced instability in his figures – with their extremes of vertical reach, thinness, and diminutive heads – confounding our learned perceptions of the human body.

Looking at sculpture of the past, Pondick asks us to consider how shifts from “life size” (whether enlargement or reduction) affect our experience of the subject: “The colossal head of *Guanyin* [p. 83] dwarfs the viewer even more because it is just the head. I think if the whole body was still there with all the parts scaled in relation to each other, the head would not feel as monumental as it does now separated from the body, where you read it as a fragment.” Another over-life-size fragment, the *Colossal Female Head* from Cyprus (p. 83), reflects – in its Assyrian curls, Archaic Greek smile, and inclusion of an Egyptian goddess in its crown – the cultural complexity and stylistic mutation that intrigue Pondick. But she is primarily interested in drawing our attention to the effects of the scale disparities between the head and the figures in the crown – dancing satyrs and maenads alternating with busts of Hathor. “The figures on the crown are so miniaturized that the oversize head feels as though it’s taking the place of the whole body. Because the crown figures are so small, you relate to them as tiny, decorative details. Scale can play a fascinating role in sculpture; how the sculptor represents a head, a body, a hand in terms of its relative size can totally affect its meaning and how you experience it.”

REPETITION OF IMAGERY

Pondick’s experiments with the computer-scanned model of her head, realized in many sizes and materials, resulted in several sculptures that include the repeated image of the form, such as *Worry Beads* (p. 93) and *Ram’s Head* (p. 92) as well as the human/flora hybrid *Pyracantha* (fig. 21). When she realized she could reduce her head to 1/8 of an inch, she imagined it first as a tiny bud on a tree – the multiple head-buds in *Pussy Willow* (2001) showed the beginning of a sustained practice of merging herself with a form from nature. Her desire to make a human/flora hybrid viable – conceptually and physically – in an indoor setting led to works like *Pyracantha*, a bonsai (dwarf tree) form in a planter with dozens of miniature heads grafted to its branches. Pondick discovered a precedent for this hybrid in the Museum’s *Tree of Jesse* (fig. 20), a medieval representation of a family tree that traces Jesus’s lineage back to Jesse, the father of David, with busts of ancestors taking the form of blossoms on the branches of a tree.

Pondick’s interest in the use of multiple heads has led her to create a complex mutant self-portraiture where faithful depiction and willful invention collide. In *Worry Beads*, small-scale heads form a strand of bronze beads that one might run through one’s hands like a rosary. Pondick thought: “What a perverse idea to be rubbing these tiny heads in your hands!” In *Ram’s Head*, four tiny heads diminishing in scale serve as earrings dangling eerily from the lobes of a life-size version inexplicably but believably adorned with a pair of ram’s horns.

Pondick has found the use of multiple heads to be a powerful symbolic and narrative tool in historical sculptures trans-globally. The works she juxtaposes with her *Worry Beads* and *Ram’s Head* include the Roman *Double Head-shaped Bottle* (p. 92) and the Japanese *Juichimen Kannon* with its eleven heads (p. 93). Together they illustrate how the presentation of more than one human head at a time can change our response from a one-to-one, viewer-to-sculpture rela-



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Fig. 18
Rona Pondick
Gillie
2006-07
Painted bronze
Unique
28 x 30 x 34 inches
(71.1 x 76.2 x 86.4 cm)
Collection of Anna and
Martin Rabinowitz

Fig. 19
Kartikeya
South Indian
Kartikeya
17th century
Granite
39 x 25 x 8 1/2 inches
(98.7 x 63.5 x 21.6 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1923.22



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Fig. 20
German
Tree of Jesse
1400–1625
Oak
19 x 52 x 2 ¼ inches
(48.2 x 133.4 x 5.7 cm)
Worcester Art Museum,
1922.191

Fig. 21
Rona Pondick
Pyracantha
2005–06
Stainless steel and rocks
Unique
39 ¾ x 36 x 22 inches
(101 x 91.4 x 55.9 cm)

tion and trigger a powerful curiosity about the interrelations among the sculpted beings, whether identifiable or not.

I put disparate fragments together in my own work to make images and I'm always interested in seeing what certain juxtapositions will do, how similarities and differences are highlighted. When I wed contradictory parts into a whole, I'm looking to see how they make meaning. I've chosen sculptures from the Museum's collection and arranged them to emphasize differences and similarities between them and my own work, and I hope that these juxtapositions are telling. I put the Roman Double Head-shaped Bottle next to my Worry Beads because both sculptures imply use but their functions are entirely different and the associations we have with their uses changes their meanings. I chose the Kannon figure because the crown is formed of dwarfed heads, and I was interested in the way it related to my Ram's Head with its earrings made of heads that diminish in size. Both pieces use life-sized and miniaturized heads but their meanings are completely different.

When Pondick looks at the twelve-armed Hindu god of war, *Kartikeya* (fig. 19), she reads the repetition of arms not only in terms of the legend (the appendages correspond to his six faces – three on the front and three on the reverse) but for their capacity to convey gesture and movement, like a flip-book. This was the thinking behind her recent human/flora hybrid *Gillie* (fig. 18), an azalea-like plant the slender branches of which mutate into miniature hands. “This movement is something that I have been trying to get in my own pieces for a while now. It's turning natural growth patterns into gestures. By putting a hand at the end of a branch, I turn the swoop of a branch into a human gesture. We think of gesture in terms of human movement – like the arms of the *Kartikeya* – but it also exists in nature.”

All this brings us back to difference and relatedness. Pondick engages her sculptures and those she has selected from history in much the same way that she brings unique universes together in her hybrids – fusing flora and fauna with the human; integrating life casting, hand-modeling,

and computer scanning; shifting scale from life-size to miniature to colossal; and varying surfaces from a lifelike skin texture to a mirror finish. In her sculptural practice she combines disparate states so they “feel like they are metamorphosing into each other and become one, but at the same time each retains its unique properties.” This principle guided her reinstatement strategy: her assembly of figurative sculpture from all parts of the world – from portraits, masks, and deities to funerary and votive figures – puts on view extremes of believable fictions while removing any sense of distance between herself, the historical artists, and us. The exhibition demonstrates how an intensive engagement with inanimate objects, however fixed they are in form and materiality, can seize us with an imaginative power that momentarily makes them come alive with newfound meaning. With Pondick as our guide, looking becomes an adventure in seeing and believing.

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NOTES

1. Rona Pondick, "Rona Pondick Interviewed by Barbara Wally," in *Rona Pondick: Works/Werke, 1986–2008* (Paris/Salzburg: Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac; Salzburg: Internationalen Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst Salzburg; New York: Sonnabend Gallery, 2008), 7–39.
2. Rona Pondick to Susan L. Stoops, 2004.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of the artist are from an unpublished interview conducted by the author, May 21 and 22, 2008.
4. Pondick, "Rona Pondick Interviewed," 19.
5. See Margit Rowell, "Brancusi: Timelessness in a Modern Mode," *Constantin Brancusi, 1876–1957*, ed. Friedrich Teja Bach (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995), 42–43.
6. Pondick to Stoops, 2004.
7. Rona Pondick, in Octavio Zaya, "The Metamorphosis of an Object Maker: An Interview with Rona Pondick," *Rona Pondick: Works, 1986–2001* (New York: Sonnabend Press, 2002), 138.
8. Pondick, "Rona Pondick Interviewed," 29.
9. *Ibid.*, 19.
10. *Ibid.*, 33–34.
11. *Ibid.*, 34.
12. Pondick considers her animal/human hybrids to be gender-neutral, despite the exclusive use of *her* body; certainly the absence of hair on her head or its plastered-back appearance contributes to this ambiguity. A relevant precedent is Brancusi, whose sculptures frequently exhibited the confusion of sexual identity and were said to be inspired by the androgyny of Asian bodhisattvas. For the animal bodies, Pondick sought a form that could be comprehended quickly, feeling that "if it does not have gender you would not look at it as closely. You would look at it like a generic car whizzing by you – you know it's a car but you don't look at it for specificity."
13. Interestingly, some historians argue that this type of funerary mask may not have been cast from life but made from a stock mold, which was individualized with eyes (often inlaid in glass or stone) and ears added separately, and other distinguishing details such as the combed hair worked in plaster and then painted or gilded (these finishes since lost). See Susan Walker and Morris Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1997), 131.
14. Pondick, "Rona Pondick Interviewed," 31.
15. Roberta Smith, "Body Heat: Mannerism and Mapplethorpe Muscles in Tight Embrace," *New York Times*, July 1, 2005, B38.
16. André Malraux, "Museum without Walls," *The Voices of Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), 47.
17. Pondick, "Rona Pondick Interviewed," 27.
18. Lucy R. Lippard, "Out of the Past: Lucy R. Lippard Talks about Eva Hesse with Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson," *Artforum* 46 (February 2008), 242.