

New Art

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Rona Pondick



Cincinnati Art Museum



April 6 through July 16, 1995



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▶ This exhibition is the fourth in an ongoing series of small contemporary art exhibitions organized by the Cincinnati Art Museum. Entitled *NEW ART*, this series features the art of emerging and mature artists working in a variety of styles and media to various and divergent ends.

A Conversation Between Rona Pondick and Jean E. Feinberg

This exhibition includes eleven sculptures and eight drawings by Rona Pondick. They date from 1989 to 1994 and are a representative selection of her art from this time period. The following conversation, which is intended to introduce visitors to the art of Rona Pondick, took place on January 18, 1995 in the artist's Manhattan studio.

Jean E. Feinberg: *Your art has been associated with that of other contemporary artists who choose as their focus the exploration of the human body. Could you explain how the subject of the body, per se, differs from what generally has been labeled figurative art?*

Rona Pondick: It's hard to think about that question considering my background and the fact that I was trained by minimalists. There was a very strong taboo against any kind of use of metaphor or bodily representation. Figurative art was a no-no, any reference, anything figurative or historical was forbidden. As a result I felt I had to consciously sever my ties with minimalism mainly because metaphor is very important to me. But strangely enough, I now see my work has a relationship to the minimalist tradition.

JEF: *In your own work you never reproduce the entire body. You always focus on body parts. You're interested in fragments. Could you tell us what it is about fragments that appeals to you?*

RP: Well, this goes back to metaphor again. I don't want to describe or use a narrative. I want to suggest things. By using the fragment I'm showing part of the whole. The mind makes a leap to fill in the rest. The viewer is engaged in a more active way than if everything were laid out in front of them. A dialogue is set up.

JEF: *In addition to using the fragments you very often use multiple numbers of those fragments: many heads...many shoes...many limbs. What*

appeals to you about repetition? And also in your drawings you repeat the same phrases over and over again. It makes them more powerful.

RP: Repetition satisfies a couple of urges in me. On a formal level it is a way to create structure—repeating certain images, stacking, or...

JEF: *By stacking you mean, for instance, in the Mound piece the heads are stacked one on the other.*

RP: Right.

JEF: *Or in the bed piece, the pillows are piled up or shoes are strung together, many of them.*

RP: Right. It makes structure. Ironically, I am able to see the minimalist reference. You know how you say you want to be nothing like your parents, you want to move as far away from them as you can, and then you get older and you turn around and you realize you sound just like them? It's pretty humorous.

JEF: *So in other words, you think your stacking is like Donald Judd's stacking? Even though your work has no relationship to his in content, you ended up using his forms.*

RP: I feel closer to someone like Eva Hesse—who always used repetition within her work and still had bodily references—than I do to Donald Judd. The taboos of minimalism made using objects difficult. The metaphoric object is key in my work. Every time that I'd be using something that had a clear reference to an object, like a bed or chair, I remember thinking, "Oh my God, what a transgression."

JEF: *Actually, this takes us to the fact that, in addition to the fragmentation of body parts, there are the direct uses of furniture elements. You have beds. You have chairs. But then you turn the chairs into bodies by literally having the seat actually being your rear end, and the chair leg really being a leg and the chair foot really being a foot. Would you talk a little about the way you transform one found object into something else?*

RP: When I dealt with the bed first...

JEF: *The beds came before the chairs?*

RP: The beds were the first object-like forms that came into my work.



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JEF: When you say object-like forms, you mean forms that were...

RP: Clearly recognizable...

JEF: ...clearly recognizable and had a function in the world outside the definition of non-functional sculpture.

RP: That's right. I started using the bed as an image because it's so potent: you have sex there, you dream, it's where you're born and it's where you die. More happens to you there than probably anywhere else in the world. It's a springboard for so much interpretation. I started immediately collecting objects and throwing them into the middle of my studio to see if there were comparable objects with metaphoric possibilities, and the next thing that clicked were shoes.

JEF: Shoes are clearly loaded with sexual symbolism.

RP: Exactly. If you put a pair of shoes out in the middle of the room you can guess the age, the profession, but there's no person—it's a stand-in. The more I collected the more I noticed they were gender specific. Some looked more male, some looked more female. And then I looked at a chair and it was totally neutral. There were neither male or female qualities.

JEF: In *Fallen*, you turn that chair into a female chair by putting spike heels on the chair.

RP: Right.

JEF: What made you feel that was a female chair, because in other chairs you have men's shoes?

RP: I wanted to make some female and some male. With the use of shoes, the "seat" of the chair and the "skin," I create chairs of sex that are kind of funny. I began to look at chair upholstery as a skin, so in the female chairs I used lace to underline their female qualities and in the male chair I used Spiderman comics as a kind of tattooing.

JEF: Why do you think you turned *Fallen* upside down?

RP: Because there's something pathetic about it when you do that.

JEF: Well, is there any reference to the "fallen woman"?

RP: Not directly.

JEF: Because if the chair is falling, and we know that the chair in a sense is a stand-in for the woman, then the woman is fallen also.

RP: You could read it that way. I don't want to...

JEF: You don't want to be too specific about the meaning.

RP: Yes.

JEF: Well, that kind of leads us into a question which I always feel is important, given that this exhibition is the first time that most viewers at the Cincinnati Art Museum will learn about your work. If you were asked to provide the viewers with some starting points or approaches to keep in mind as they look at your sculpture, what would be the first things you would say without having to actually explain each sculpture?

RP: In my work I don't think I have to explain anything. Anyone can relate on their own to the subject within each of my pieces.

JEF: Is that because there is the starting point of recognizable forms like chairs and beds and baby shoes and breasts and teeth? You can't say that about all art.

RP: That's true. By using recognizable objects I give viewers a starting point. But I think it's also because I am dealing with some base urges and desires that we all have. If you look at my work and allow yourself to just get involved with what's in front of you, you can't help but read into it.

JEF: So in a way, though, you're asking the viewer to put aside any intimidation he or she might feel because they think they do not know contemporary art language and deal with your art on a base human level as an individual. Viewers need to let themselves respond, regardless of what their knowledge is of contemporary art.

RP: Exactly. I don't think you have to know about contemporary issues in art to understand my work. If you look at one of my drawings where you have "mine, mine, mine, mine" written with a set of teeth with a bubble coming out of the mouth, I think that's fairly direct.

JEF: Well, what about the idea that some people are so shocked or put off by the unusabness of the work? They may actually find some of the images unpleasant, feeling the work is so provocative that they're intimidated. How do you help viewers get over their initial responses and continue to explore the imagery? Or perhaps you don't think of your images as being unpleas-



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ant. I know you've talked a lot about the fact that you think some of them are funny, but other people think they're macabre.

RP: What's provocative or disturbing to one person can be enticing and pleasing to another.

JEF: *And it obviously doesn't bother you that peoples' responses to one work of art can be very divergent.*

RP: That's right. In my work I need to do something so that it has more than one reading. If someone looks at something of mine and finds it hysterically funny at first, and later finds a darker side, with a continual flipping back and forth, in my eyes I've succeeded. It reminds me of Kafka, whose stories have an unbelievable black humor and are deadly serious at the same time. Kafka has been an important influence.

JEF: *So, it isn't just that different viewers have different responses, but you actually like the idea of having a single viewer find that his or her response changes, so therefore the experience is more multilayered.*

RP: Yes, exactly.

JEF: *In terms of influences, you have talked about minimalism and have mentioned Kafka. What about surrealism as a movement earlier in the century, involved as it was with dreams and the unconscious and those issues tied to your work?*

RP: I know it's a question that I get asked a lot, but I never really said to myself, "I am interested in the unconscious," nor have I looked at surrealist work and said, "This is something I feel a bond with."

JEF: *How would you explain the relationship to the unconscious in your work?*

RP: When I was in graduate school, an art history teacher, Robert Herbert, came to my studio and started talking about scatological references. I'm standing there shaking my head. I didn't have a clue what he meant by scatological. I went home and looked it up in the dictionary, and I thought, "Oh my."

JEF: *When you say oh my, you mean you were distressed by his interpretation?*

RP: You bet. I wanted emotional content and I wanted something that had a visceral feeling to it, but scatological references were not what I wanted. When I left school, I thought the last thing I wanted was to have this subject in my work. I went many years trying very hard not to have this dark, heavy side come out. But I couldn't help myself.

JEF: *Well, it sounded like you had this idea of the type of work you were supposed to make and it wasn't Rona Pondick.*

RP: Right.



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JEF: *So you had to reach a certain place where you could be comfortable with being who you were.*

RP: Right.

JEF: *But it sounds as if you're still a little uncomfortable with putting this out into the world and having it have these interpretations.*

RP: No, I don't feel uncomfortable with it.

JEF: *I've noticed the colors you use are baby blue and baby pink and the yellow used when you don't know whether the baby is going to be a boy or a girl. Or else it's shocking red, which is considered very sexual. Might you comment on your color choice. I mean, do you think of the soft blues and pinks as being male/female baby colors?*

RP: Actually, I was working almost exclusively in black, white and brown for years.

JEF: *So it was only with the beginning of the work that is in the Museum's exhibition that you started introducing colors other than black, white and brown?*

RP: Yes. It was around 1990. Someone took me to see a show of Renoir's *Bathers* and I hated it. There's this use of pink and it's supposed to be seductive and sensual and it put my teeth on edge.

JEF: *There's the teeth again.*

RP: Yes, I was gritting my teeth looking at this. I thought, "I'm going to do a piece that captures this" and that's where *Little Bathers* came from.

JEF: *And that piece is very similar to *Treats* which is in this exhibition.*

RP: Yes.

JEF: *The newest piece in this exhibition that has teeth is the piece called Red Platter. Now the fact that you piled the heads—I don't even know if you should call them heads—in a bowl suddenly turns them into apples or luscious, forbidden fruits. Would you comment a little more on the metaphor of the forbidden fruit?*

RP: I think it is pretty clear. Don't you?

JEF: *Some sculptors make drawings that are sketches for sculptures, but yours aren't. Yours are independent works of art. In the show we have drawings of chattering teeth, and we can see what the teeth are saying.*

RP: For me drawings are things in themselves, and I also use drawing as a way to work out ideas. I'm not interested in making a plan for a specific piece. I like starting out not knowing what my sculptures will look like.

JEF: *Could you talk about how you first began using stockings as a sculptural material?*

RP: Uh-huh.

JEF: *Where did the idea come from? You've done other pieces where you hang things and they're long legs. Do the legs turn into phallic symbols?*

RP: I actually don't go through this in my head, so it's hard for me to talk about the images in this way.

JEF: *OK, you don't want to give specific interpretation. When the sculpture is finished, you just know that it's extremely provocative and that's good enough.*

RP: No. I am not just looking for a provocative solution. I find it difficult to describe the way I work or how I am thinking about the body. But I do know I am not interested in an explicit interpretation of the body. I want something with many readings within it.

JEF: *And now let's move to another piece that you aren't going to want to interpret for me, which is the piece called Milk. It is composed of two mounds of sagging breasts with nipples.*

RP: Uh-huh.

JEF: *And because there are two of them, the breasts reference is even stronger.*

RP: Right. Do you really want me to describe it?

JEF: *No, but could you at least talk about the process of making it. I know it's made out of paper towels which I wouldn't have known unless I was told.*

RP: Uh-huh, it's made of paper towels and baby bottles. I'm a collector of materials: baby bottles, shoes and teeth—materials which deal with base desires or urges...

JEF: *Instead of the word base, because that sounds kind of negative...*

RP: Right.

JEF: *...could we use shared? In other words, desires and urges that all human beings share.*

RP: Yes. I remember recognizing that everyone has the desire to want everything—for example, to experience being male and female. At the same time we're not suppose to admit that we have these urges, that we want it all.

JEF: *And then you went from baby bottles to a repetition of breast forms.*

RP: Right. I can't help myself. I'm very obsessive, so everything becomes a proliferation.

JEF: *You can't have one nipple, you have to have two huge breasts become dozens and dozens of breasts.*

RP: Right. I like to drive a point home.

JEF: *But you also realize that in driving a point home, it leads to people being uncomfortable. Because there are so many nipples and so many gaping mouths, it becomes difficult sometimes for people to take all that in. It's as if you have made it impossible for them to avoid the sexual references because of the repetition.*

RP: You're talking about sexual references and people being disturbed by the proliferation of breasts, nipples.... A friend of mine had given me some writings by Melanie Klein. She says that an infant's first sexual experience is when they are nursing. I started thinking



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about this and took it a step further: I eat when I am frustrated, and socially I want to drink, and I notice my friends chain smoke. And I realized it's all sexual.

JEF: *In a way you could say that all of your sculpture is about exploring taboos. Would you agree with that?*

RP: Yes, on a certain level. I think my work's about saying I can do anything I want.

JEF: *But you're doing it in the studio, you're not doing it in life.*

RP: Well, thank God. Guston said an artist goes into their studio and they can rape, steal and be anyone they want or do anything they want.

JEF: *How does that extrapolate for the viewer? The viewer then also, by experiencing your work, gets to share in this experience which is difficult for the individual to get access to in everyday life.*

RP: Yes, I think that we all have desires that are not socially acceptable. I did, at one point, have an obsession where I'd be talking to someone, become angry, and would want to bite them. That's how the teeth came into my pieces. But it's not socially acceptable to walk over to someone I don't like and take a chomp.

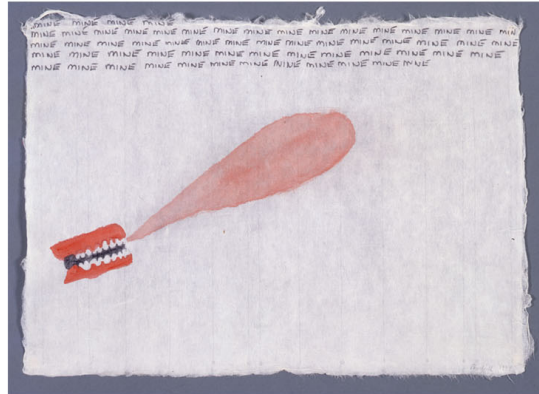
JEF: *In this exhibition, with the exception of the Red Platter, which is on the pedestal, all the sculptures either hang from the ceiling or are on the floor. Would you talk about why you like the work to be seen on the floor and how it affects the way the viewer sees it?*

RP: This is true. Years ago someone happened to point out to me that the vertical was not present in my work. That almost all of my work was on the floor and sprawling. So I said to myself, "Dammit, I'm going to make a vertical piece," and I made *Baby Blue*. At that time everything I did was on the floor. Maybe this goes back again to my minimalist roots.

JEF: *Before we conclude the interview, are there any other aspects of your work that we haven't touched upon that you'd like the first-time viewer to know?*

RP: The thought I'd like to conclude with—because it's something that I encounter a lot—is that when people are looking at art, they are always thinking in the back of their minds that there is a right or wrong interpretation. And there isn't one.

JEF: Thank you. ◀



▲ *Catalogue #5*

▶ Rona Pondick was born in 1952 in Brooklyn, New York. She received a BFA in 1974 from Queens College and her MFA in 1977 from Yale University School of Art. Since the mid 1980s her sculpture has been shown extensively in international group exhibitions. Since 1988 she has had fourteen one-person exhibitions in commercial galleries and museums in this country and Europe. This is her first solo museum exhibition in the Midwest. Her sculpture, installations and works on paper are in the permanent collections of The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; The Brooklyn Museum, New York; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and The High Museum, Atlanta, among others. Pondick is represented in New York City by Jose Freire Fine Art, in Los Angeles by Patricia Faure Gallery, and in Paris and Salzburg by Thaddaeus Ropac. Pondick is married to painter Robert Feintuch. They live and work in Manhattan. ◀

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