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## Arts & Leisure

# A Dreamlike Melding Of Human, Beast and Steel

By NANCY PRINCENTHAL

“I WILL never — please quote me on this — I will never take on a project this size again.” For a moment Rona Pondick sounds daunted. She has just returned from Polich Art Works in Rock Tavern, N.Y., in Orange County, where her latest sculptures, a remarkable group of animal-human hybrids, are being cast. The work has been in gestation for nearly five years, mostly in Ms. Pondick’s Manhattan studio. At the end, the staff at the foundry worked seven days a week, right through the winter holidays.

A little nerve-racking, too, is the new work’s emotional candor. For two decades, Ms. Pondick has made sculpture that addresses the most intimate reaches of experience: the needs of infancy, the promptings of desire. “It has been about self-portraiture from the beginning,” she says. But these recent works involve a different kind of exposure.

The last sculpture finished, and biggest troublemaker by far, is “Monkeys.” Most of the new work involves single figures, but “Monkeys” is a swarming cluster of eight composite primates, which clamber around one another with a muscular agility that extends to the very tips of their tails. As in all the recent sculptures, some heads and hands are life casts of Ms. Pondick, in which the finest details of facial features and skin texture are preserved. The monkey bodies, by contrast, are polished to a mirror finish, sleek and fluid as mercury. Managing the technical, formal and conceptual relationships among these figures required the skills of a military tactician.

But for all its complexity, what may be most confounding about Ms. Pondick’s new work (10 pieces are currently on view at the Sonnabend Gallery in Chelsea) is its perfect composure. Whenever a human face appears, it is rapt, stern; while the closed eyes and

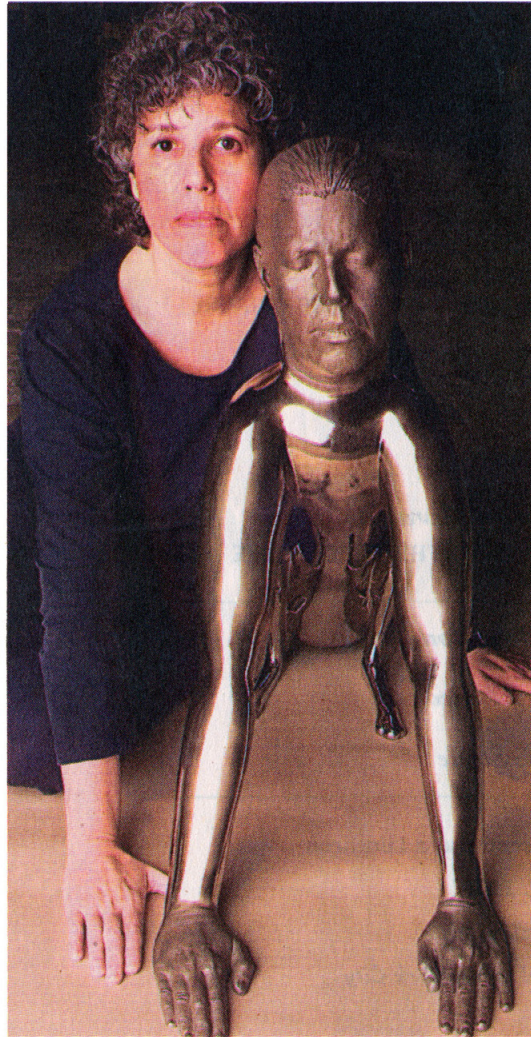


Sonnabend Gallery

tense features are results of the casting process, which is long and uncomfortable for the subject, they also form a crucial expressive constant. The animal bodies, on the other hand, tend to be engaged, open, even suggestively exposed. So simple does the arrangement seem — heads are mindful, bodies bestial — that the perversity of it takes a moment to sink in. These hybrids have the irrefutability of dreams, and the same power to disturb.

Svelte and sphinx-like, “Dog” is the first sculpture in the series that was finished, and the most iconic. Its human head is proudly erect, its arms thrust forward, palms down, with near ritualistic deliberation. “Fox,” on the other hand, is bowed down with a head that is, like an infant’s, disproportionately big and heavy. The small, slippery, large-handed “Pine Marten” bears its little frowning face aloft in something like an embodied afterthought. A regal “Ram’s Head,” crowned with an opulent set of horns, is also adorned with earrings made of graduated beads, each, close inspection shows, a cast of Ms. Pondick’s head. The smaller her head gets, the more unnerving is its spell.

Most of the new sculptures are cast in stainless steel, which can be made to flow seamlessly from a silky shine to a minutely textured surface, providing the



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Rona Pondick with "Dog" at the Polich Art Works in Rock Tavern, N.Y. Above left, "Ram's Head." Both are part of a series of animal-human hybrids.

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**Rona Pondick seamlessly fuses human heads and hands with animal bodies in sculptures that take their cue from Kafka.**

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seemingly natural transitions between human and animal that are at the crux of this work. The material's associations with precision instruments, and with applications both clinical and sinister, also matter greatly. Exceptions vividly demonstrate the rule. "Marmot" was cast in dark gray silicone rubber, enhancing the apparent heaviness of a small splayed form that is slack as a sleeping child.

Even more revealingly, "Untitled Animal" was cast in both stainless steel and carbon steel. The latter produces velvety orange rust, which lends a fleshy sensuality to the figure's outstretched leg and tenderly wrinkled foot. At the narrow junction between thigh and body, smooth human flesh gives way to an animal torso that is tough and leathery in rusted carbon steel, cruelly shiny in stainless.

These surface details are the end of a long story. Initially, Ms. Pondick worked the figures by hand, using a synthetic modeling material that can be carved when dry. The sizing down of her head — as in the earrings of "Ram's Head" — involved a computer, but this process, too, was labor intensive: composing a satisfactory three-dimensional digital image took a full year, because the quantity of data required kept making the program crash. At the foundry, several more steps preceded the final casting. And then the real work began. Stainless steel is three times harder than bronze, and bringing its surface to a mirror finish is vastly time consuming: 80 hours for finishing a single ram's head, for instance.

Dick Polich, the foundry's owner, says "stainless is fierce." Using it for sculpture is unconventional; making it yield surface color when cast is unprecedented. The subtle tints of yellow ("Dog") and blue ("Ram's Head") are achieved through a process Mr. Polich guards closely, saying only that the effects are mostly thermal. "It's a useful thing, making the color uniform and repeatable," he says. But flashy effects aren't the

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point. "No one," Mr. Polich concludes, "should know where we've been."

Eliciting unexpected reactions from fabricators — and viewers — is not new for Ms. Pondick. A lifelong New Yorker who turns 50 this spring, she early on made fecal-looking objects that were displayed like jewels on satin pillows. Other provocations have included an elongated bed lashed with rope that is threaded through baby bottles, and a beach-ball-shaped assemblage of spike-heeled black pumps. Perhaps best known is a series of installations involving hundreds of little round objects, some smooth and pink, others matted with dark hair, and all featuring, rather horrifically, cramped mouthfuls of what look like human teeth.

Surrealism is the rubric under which Ms. Pondick's work has most often been discussed, and psychoanalysis of one variety or another is the tool most widely employed to interpret it. "Pondick all but speaks the name Melanie Klein," one critic wrote, referring to the early-20th-century British psychoanalyst. "Freudian vaudeville acts," wrote another. A third said, "Reading the massive pile of critical literature on Rona Pondick is like crawling naked through psychoanalytic razor wire."

Not surprisingly, Ms. Pondick responds to the reviews skeptically. "I have never felt the connection to Surrealism that others have," she says. Instead, she cites Egyptian art — "the one thing that has always been fundamental" — and particularly the sphinx, a hybrid with a long



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*Eight composite primates: For "Monkeys" (1998-2001) Rona Pondick used her face on animal bodies.*

historical reach. The dark dreams of Goya and Redon are important to her, and for the new work she also studied two masters of Renaissance and Baroque sculpture: Donatello and Bernini. More recent artists with whom she feels affinities range from Philip Guston to Bruce Nauman. The morphed creatures of Hollywood come into her new work, too, and the brave new beings made possible (or at least imaginable) by genetic manipulation.

And instead of stream-of-consciousness Surrealist literature, it is the grim comedy of Kafka's fiction that appeals to her. It's not hard to see why. The adamancy of Kafka's

imagery can be found in Ms. Pondick's as well. She shares Kafka's taste for symbolism so replete, so clear and full, that it can scarcely be called metaphorical.

Most of all, she shares Kafka's view of logic's tyranny. What is most chilling about Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis into a beetle is the matter-

of-factness with which it is achieved and, even worse, the perfect sanity with which he considers his predicament. The nightmare, under the circumstances, is not that Gregor loses his head, but rather that he keeps his wits about him. It is a predicament to which Ms. Pondick gives flawless physical form. □