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# HIT THE ROAD

PHOTOGRAPHER ANNIE LEIBOVITZ AND SCULPTOR  
RONA PONDICK LURE ART FANS TO CLEVELAND BY MELISSA STARKER

## EVOLUTIONARY SHORTCUT: RONA PONDICK'S "DOG"

It's hot. You're bored. You're sick of your apartment, your neighborhood, maybe even your pets or some of your friends. As P.W. Herman said, that ol' highway's a-callin'. And perhaps like a lot of people in this city, you're saving your vacation time for an extended trip during August's dog days, but that seems like an eon from now. A short scenery change would probably do you good in the meantime, regardless of which way you head once you get the car started.

For art lovers, the right direction for the next few weeks is toward Cleveland. As is the case in most places, the city's arts community doesn't experience peak activity in the summer, but a couple of shows currently on display there are worth the trip, especially if you have a hankering for outlet bargains at the Lodi mall or an up-close encounter with a very large body of water. If you're lucky, maybe you'll get to watch an *Animals Gone Wild!* encounter between two angry Lake Erie seagulls, like I did this past weekend.

The bird fight took place in the shadow of the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, and if you've ever thought of indulging a desire to see a pair of Sid Vicious' leather pants from Malcolm McLaren's Sex shop, a Booji Boy mask from Devo's heyday or the



actual guitar being broken on the cover of *London Calling*, now's the time to get the most out of the museum's steep admission price. Through early September, the venue presents the added attraction of *American Music*, a show of photographs by internationally renowned portraitist Annie Leibovitz that were first seen last fall in a book of the same name.

The circular gallery holding the pictures opens up right next to the display on teenyboppers through history, where flame-appliquéd jeans from Britney Spears and a beige and Scottish plaid jumpsuit from the Bay City Rollers co-exist, hanging lifeless despite the constant cycle of hits like Hanson's "MmmBop" and Andy Gibb's "Shadow Dancing" playing. The music follows you through the beginning of the show, but is quickly drowned out by a selection of songs from the more enduring artists Leibovitz chose to shoot for this series, like Lucinda Williams, Bruce Springsteen, Iggy Pop and the Stax Records stable.

A retrospective of Leibovitz's work for *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair* and other publications was the original plan for the exhibit, but the photographer opted instead to create a new body of work that has captured musicians mostly in their natural habitats. With a few exceptions, such as a tender moment between Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson on the Coney Island boardwalk and a portrait of Aretha Franklin at her most statuesque, both caught in 1993, the selections were shot in the last three years.

The subject-specific theatricality that's distinguished some of Leibovitz's better known work (the blue Blues Brothers) comes out in the show's signature image, the White Stripes as a knife-throwing carnival act. But in most pictures, natural poses are struck by musicians who seem immensely comfortable with the photographer, if they even notice she's there (only Eminem tries to stare her down). In individual shots, DJ Shadow and Tom Waits are too lost in their work to pay her any mind.

The individual traits Leibovitz plays up in her portraits add an interesting flavor to each public persona. She grounds the Roots in their Philadelphia neighborhood, presents George Jones as a formidable old master in black resting against the sea of beige leather in his tour bus, and shows Mike Ness the family man, his wife and greaser kids wrapped around his tattooed arms.

Using black and white, a natural bling deflector, Leibovitz hones in on the beauty of Mary J. Blige and Missy Elliott, making the latter look like a stand-in for Diana Ross in *Mahogany*. In a backstage shot of Mos Def, the room's red color scheme, the light bulbs circling the mirror behind him and the subject's facial angle form the picture of a classic screen idol caught in an unguarded moment. Johnny Cash fans will find themselves caught even more off-guard by a heart-

squeezing portrait of the artist with June Carter.

Equally compelling, but in a much weirder way, is the exhibition filling the main space at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, *Rona Pondick: Recent Work*. After establishing her reputation nationally in the 1990s with sculpture incorporating beds, shoes and body parts like teeth and nipples, the New York-based artist has recently entered new aesthetic territory, while maintaining consistency in her underlying concerns: the human body, its potential for metamorphosis and its connection to the shape and nature of animals.

In the 10 breathtaking works taking up floor space at MOCA Cleveland, Pondick has seamlessly grafted casts of her own face and anatomy onto sleek animal forms, realized mainly through stainless steel. The long, uncomfortable process the artist endures for these works betrays itself in the grimace often seen in the cast of her face as it appears on top of dog, fox and marmot bodies, in poses that echo Egyptian art and classical reclining nudes.

Animal parts are smooth, shiny and in an incomplete stage of formation, bringing to mind the evil cyborg in *Terminator 2*. In contrast, the parts that clearly belong to Pondick have a matte finish and a strong realism—shaving bumps and all—in their simulation. In her combination of human and animal matter, the artist explores what separates the two, suggesting with the difference in texture and form that humans see a harsher, more solid reflection, perhaps through the mixed blessing of self-awareness.

Though strangely beautiful, each piece has a disquieting effect, as in *Monkeys*, in which Pondick creates her own two-way shortcut through the evolutionary process. Human arms and hands extend for purchase on the floor amid a tangle of sleek, scurrying monkeys, some taking on the artist's face.

In addition to these extraordinary works, MOCA Cleveland also hosts locally grown installations—one on cultural and sexual commodification by Carmen Ruiz-Davila, *Everywhere and Here*, and another by Jason Lee that creates a contained semblance of a perfect outdoor landscape.

Plus, the gift shop has the only "Art-o-Mat" in the state of Ohio. A Winston-Salem arts collective has given old cigarette machines new life as a vendors of creativity, offering a chance to start an art collection for only \$5 and a pull of the handle. As the machine's signage insists, "Don't go 'round artless!"

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**"ANNIE LEIBOVITZ: AMERICAN MUSIC" hangs through September 6; click to [rockhall.com](http://rockhall.com) for details. The current shows at MOCA Cleveland will close August 8; for info click to [mocacleveland.org](http://mocacleveland.org).**