

NEW YORK

Rona Pondick

Sonnabend Gallery

When Rona Pondick's sculptural installations first appeared in the mid-1980s, their raw expression of abjection, feminist rage, infantile greed, and intimations of mortality was startling. Roughly made, her unsettling works were ambivalent, psychological, and completely uncanny: elongated lead beds, beds protruding baby bottles like teats, weird agglomerations of children's shoes and pillows, mounds of pink skull-like balls with casts of the artist's biting teeth that might have emerged from a catacomb.

Then, just before the turn of this century, her work morphed into equally uncanny metal hybrid beings—as sleekly polished and precisely modulated as her former work was grungy. Melding casts of her own face and hands with the forms of trees or small animals, she began to make polymorphous half-human mutants. In 1997, she planted her first aluminum tree outdoors and surrounded it with a scattering of fallen apple-teeth. With *Dog* (1998–2001), she sculpted herself as a sphinx-like creature, part human, part dog.

In her first New York solo since 2006, Pondick continued to refine these mutant sculptures. A painted bronze tree sprouts minuscule gilded self-portrait heads as buds, while a stainless steel *Ginko* grows from a shiny steel globe to blossom as a cluster of outstretched human hands, her own. Balanced on a swirl of roots, Pondick's life-size head nestles in the branches of another steel tree. The animal mutations are even stranger. A hunched, painted bronze *White Beaver* sports Pondick's head, while a chrome-like prairie dog with a tiny head is supported by life-size



Rona Pondick, *Ginko*, 2007–12. Stainless steel, 57.75 x 33.75 x 41 in.

human fingers that serve as legs. A sleek, shiny *Wallaby* with a long tapered tail has the clawed feet of a bird and one heavy dangling human arm. Made with the latest 3-D computer scanning technology and the utmost attention to detail, these works are eerily beautiful, pristinely perfect, and quite monstrous. Their shape-shifting forms, material transformations, and contrasting surfaces—sliding suddenly from matte to shiny, from skin-like to preternaturally smooth—are unnerving and inscrutable, yet somehow make perfect sense.

Most powerful are two deceptive, white-painted bronzes: *Pillow Head*

and *Navel*, which seem as soft as balloons yet as fragile as porcelain. The first gathers itself into a tiny head strangled by billowing folds, while the latter has a miniature head that protrudes neckless from the globular navel like a tit. Squeezed to bursting, these two pieces are visceral metaphors of birth, death, or something equally intolerable and narrowly escaped.

Also, for the first time, Pondick showed drawings: a series of delicately colored, collaged works on mulberry paper, titled “Small Heads.” Each one is made up of layered tissue-thin drawings pulled, stretched, and glued together,

superimposed invisibly one atop another. Their recurrent image is a strange pointy-nosed head, alluding perhaps to Commedia dell'Arte, Pinocchio, or Giacometti's *Nose*.

Formal and primal, tactile and personal, the contradictory metaphors and symbolic subtleties of Pondick's oeuvre can suggest Neolithic artifacts, the hybrid creatures of Greek mythology, Hieronymus Bosch's demons, Gregor Samsa's transformation, Brancusi's streamlined bird, or the latest genetic manipulations of experimental science. They also manage to look excruciatingly unique.

—Kim Levin