

Sculpture

September 2003

Vol. 22 No. 7

A publication of the
International Sculpture Center





Rona Pondick's

MONSTERS
OF FEAR & DESIRE

by George Fifield

She gives them simple titles: *Dog*, *Fox*, *Marmot*, or *Cougar*; but the sculptures are only distant reflections of those creatures. In an amazing new series of works, Rona Pondick has made a substantial leap from her previous sculpture in process, subject, material, and meaning. The new work recently toured both Europe and the United States in a series of simultaneous exhibitions that opened at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris and at Sonnabend Gallery in New York. It was also presented on the outdoor Sculpture Terrace of the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park in Lincoln, Massachusetts, through this past May. The Cranbrook Art Museum is presenting "Rona Pondick: Sculpture, 1990–2003" through November 2003. Pondick

Ram's Head, 2000–01. Yellow-blue stainless steel, 8 x 24 x 10.5 in.

starts with a life cast of her head. She then sculpts animal bodies to it, sometimes adding casts of her hand, arm, or leg. She works the casts and body together, making them into a complete creature, but something is not right about the animal shapes themselves. They have a fetal feel. She works the resulting sculptures, building them out in places then carving them further until the beings are perfect portraits of sleeping monsters, with Pondick's head.

Pondick's sculpture has always been about fragments: body parts such as teeth and objects associated with bodily functions such as baby bottles are transformed through juxtaposition and repetition into charged, sometimes dangerous works. In many ways, her earlier work seems to be a Freudian catalogue of excreta, infantile desire and psychosexuality. Critics have made much of its physiological intent.

Pondick was trained by Minimalists. She studied at Yale with Richard Serra but became frustrated with the Minimalist tradition. She explains, "There was a strong taboo against any kind of use of metaphor or bodily representation. Anything figurative or historical was forbidden. I felt I had to consciously sever my ties with Minimalism mainly because metaphor was so important to me."

Beds were a favorite early subject. In a series of bed sculptures including *Angel* (1987–88), she combined soiled pillows with white animal scat. These gave way to overstuffed chairs. In the early '90s she placed high-heeled shoes on the feet of obese seats, giving sex and personality to neutral furniture. She made piles of breasts with baby bottle nipples (*Milk*, 1989) and long dangling legs of indeterminate form stuffed into baby shoes (*Baby Fat*, 1991). Though

she rejected Minimalist ideas, these works have a strong tie to Minimalism in their use of materials, for instance the long sensuous sheets of lead in *Beds* (1988). Asked about this she replies, “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 are just like them? It’s pretty humorous.” Using casts of her own teeth, she embarked on a series consisting of many small rough balls with gaping mouths and sharp teeth, which, in turn, are made out of mud (*Dirt Head*, 1997), bubble gum (*Pink Treats*, 1995), and aluminum (*Untitled Tree*, 1997). She has recently returned to trees—in the form of bonsai (*Chinese Elm*, 2002–03).

These works are not the outpourings of psycho-sexual angst, but darkly humorous constructions of what that angst might look like. In an *Artforum* review in 1993, Keith Seward wrote: “You get the sense that Pondick’s humor serves less to reveal the unconscious in jokes than to play jokes on the (viewer’s) unconscious.” The horror writer Peter Straub wrote a short story, “The Buffalo



Hunter,” dedicated to Pondick, about a very disturbed young man who makes spontaneous installations of baby bottle nipples. Straub has said that he wrote the story because he wanted to understand what someone who wasn’t an artist but who made one of Pondick’s sculptures might be like. In the same way, Pondick’s early sculptures are wry

explorations of someone else’s madness and obsession. When publicly asked why she used teeth in her work, she explained that when she was mad she wanted to bite people and thought it would be interesting to take that impulse and put it into her work. One evening, a conservatively dressed woman in her 60s approached after Pondick spoke and explained how well she understood that impulse. The woman said that after she had given birth to her child she wanted to eat it, so she went out and bought a suckling pig the size of her baby and ate the whole thing. Pondick’s work makes concrete the same impulses and desires described in Straub’s short story and the woman’s confession.

In this new series, she has traveled from the soft and dirty to the hard and clean. The bodies of these creatures are hairless and smooth. The steel is polished to look like quicksilver. The human parts are cold and lifeless in comparison with the animated liquid bodies. The heads, arms, hands, and feet maintain an incredible amount of detail, down to individual pores.

Pondick explains their genesis: “It started when I combined my



Above: *Untitled Tree*, 1997. Cast aluminum and tree: 15 x 15 x 14 ft.; 60 objects scattered under tree, each approximately 3.5 x 3 x 3.5 in. **Left:** *Untitled Animal*, 1999–2001. Carbon steel, 6.5 x 44.5 x 21.5 in.

COURTESY, SONNABEND, NEW YORK

Right: *Fox*, 1998–99. Stainless steel, 14.5 x 8 x 38 in. Below: *Untitled Animal*, 1999–2001. Stainless steel, 6.5 x 44.5 x 21.5 in.

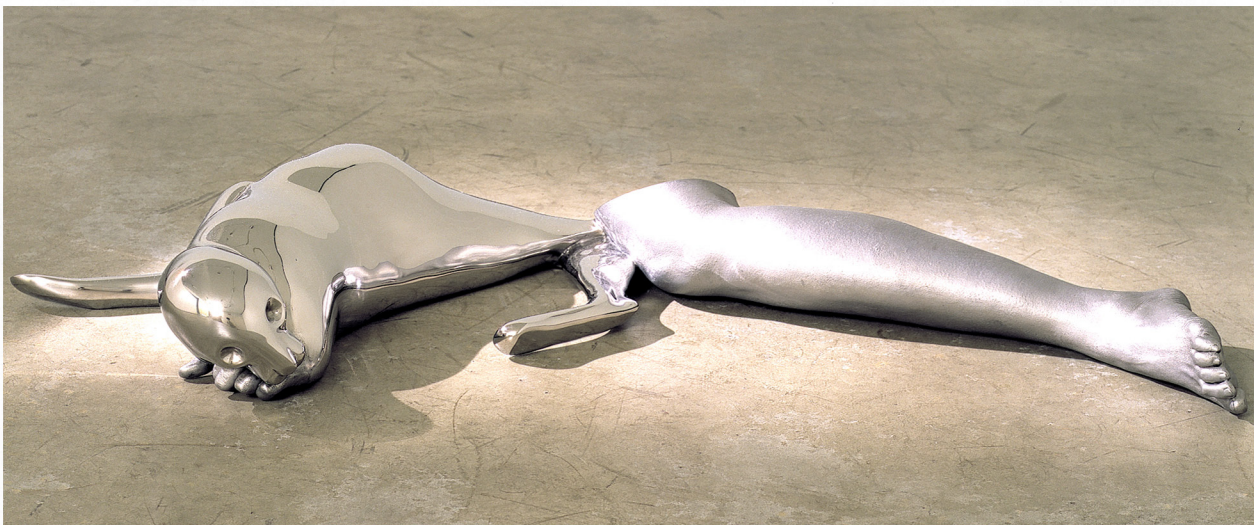
head and arms with the body of a dog and then with the bodies of a cougar and fox. These pieces immediately made me think of mythology, science, and an image of a mouse I recently saw in the newspaper. This mouse had an ear growing out of its back. I had two immediate thoughts: that the image looked just like my work and that the mouse photograph was of something real. This was produced in an actual scientific experiment. How interesting, exciting, and terrifying. Biological experiments raise so many important philosophical questions. Cloning, for example, redefines the question of self. These experiments provoke lots of fears and desires.”

FEAR AND DESIRE ARE
TWO WORDS I’VE
ALWAYS THOUGHT
DESCRIBE MY WORK.

Pondick’s creations are monsters in the original sense of *monstrum*, an omen or dire warning. The work embodies cultural fears of experimental mutation and genetic manipulation. Rational biological research today can produce exactly the

chimerical creatures that mythology created to terrify and titillate. Yet there is strong sensuality at work here that outweighs our pity. Pondick herself says, “Fear and desire are two words I’ve always thought of to describe my work.”

The materials are commercial and technically very difficult to work with. Each sculpture is cast in highly polished stainless steel, aluminum, bronze, or industrial rubber. Recently, using 3D digital technology, Pondick has been shrinking her life cast, keeping



COURTESY SONNABEND, NEW YORK



Chinese Elm, 2002–03. Bronze and rocks, 29 x 22 x 14 in.

the incredible detail, making six-inch and even smaller reproductions of her head.

Pondick models the animal bodies out of clay, using the life-cast head and body parts attached to the wire armature. She wanted all the human elements in these sculptures to be life-like in a way that she couldn't achieve by modeling them. She even wanted the human parts to have the texture of actual skin. This was how she made the first pieces. But when she started to make a large work called *Monkeys* (1998–2001), she found that she needed the heads to be six inches tall to fit properly on the animals' bodies.

She discovered that this could be done using rapid prototyping technology and worked with Emil Vicale of BBC Design Group in Connecticut. Vicale was able to scan the life mask and, with the computer, reduce it to any

size. BBC Design then output the heads on a Sanders Design rapid prototyping machine in wax, with a resolution of .0005 of an inch. This allows the human elements to continue to show the finest detail. At that resolution, the resulting miniature likeness captures every pore and follicle. "I really wanted all the human elements in these sculptures to be life-like. This meant all the human parts of these sculptures had to have skin texture."

"The good news," Pondick says, "was that we did cast a six-inch head. The bad news was that it took a year. The level of detail I wanted made this very difficult. Each time we would scan my head the computer would crash. In the end, we needed three-quarters of a million dots (cloud points) to create my head. The file was so big the computer was always crashing. What was supposed to take a week took six months."

This led to a new work in bronze called *Worry Beads* (1999–2001). She printed her 3D head at different sizes: two inches, one and one half inches, and an inch and three-quarters. Then she strung them up like a headhunter's rosary. In *Ram's Head* (2000–2001), her life-size head is equipped with ram's horns and wears earrings made up of four increasingly smaller heads. She describes the creation as a "marriage of processes, for example the carving of Brancusi with the modeling of Giacometti, with another marriage of modern computer technology."

Pondick's adventures in cutting-edge technologies did not stop there. She also wanted to try casting in new materials, especially stainless steel. She met with Dick Polich of Polich Art Works in Rock Tavern, New York. What Pondick wanted for the work was difficult. The animal parts of the creatures were to be highly polished stainless steel. In fact, they look like liquid mercury. The human parts of the creatures are meant to have a matte finish, reflecting the incredible surface detail in the life casts and subsequent digital reductions. When shown the first models, Polich said he thought it might be impossible. Going from a completely matte surface to a mirror finish in any metal is hard enough but next to impossible in stainless steel. His solution was for Pondick to resolve the surface transitions in the original perfectly.

Upon first coming to the foundry, she thought she had completed *Dog* (1998–2001) and was ready to cast *Cougar* (1998–99) and *Fox* (1998–99). But then *Dog* was cast in metal, and it was not what she had in mind. It needed to be re-worked. At this point, she had been working on these three pieces for two years, and nothing was finished. It took her three years to complete the first four sculptures. The golden color of the stainless steel for *Dog* and blue cast of *Ram's Head*—perfectly maintained throughout the edition of six (plus one artist's proof)—are closely guarded secrets of the foundry.

Always looking at new materials, Pondick had *Marmot* (1998–99) fabricated in silicone rubber. She describes

it as looking like a cartoon figure that was dropped off a rooftop and went splat. "I thought it wouldn't look right in a metal. I kept thinking about these cartoons and realized the piece should be in a soft material. I thought it might be interesting cast in rubber. Everyone said I couldn't cast such a complicated, seamless form in rubber without imperfections. It wasn't easy but I eventually worked it out." The black rubber texture looks at once scientific and fetishistic.

With this new work, Pondick has left the psychological discussion and entered into a mythical one. Her previous work spoke of the body metaphorically through baby bottle nipples and ladies' shoes. Now she is incorporating her own cast and manipulated body parts into the works.

The first of this series, *Dog*, is telling. It resembles a classical statue of a god: a shiny animal body in a formal motionless stance, with the artist's life-cast head and hands. With its golden cast, it could have been made for inclusion in a temple. The eyes are closed as if the creature is asleep. "The sleep of reason produces monsters," Goya wrote. But here, it is the monster that is doing the dreaming. And as Jorge Luis Borges says in the *Book of Imaginary*

***Monkeys*, 1998–2001. Stainless steel, 41.25 x 66 x 85.5 in.**

Beings: "A monster is no more than a combination of parts of real beings, and the possibilities of permutation border on the infinite. In the centaur, the horse and man are blended; in the Minotaur, the bull and man (Dante imagined it as having the face of a man and the body of a bull); and in this way it seems we could evolve an endless variety of monsters, combinations of fishes, birds, and reptiles, limited only by our own boredom or disgust."

This is mythology in the making. But Pondick goes beyond the mere joining of animal bodies with her own. In *Untitled Animal* (1999–2001), the animal parts have eroded to near abstraction and Pondick herself is represented merely by a severed human leg presenting its wrinkled sole. Pondick says that while working on this piece she thought often about Giacometti's *Woman with her throat cut*. "I wanted a disconnected, jarring connection between the animal and human parts both physically and emotionally."

Monkeys was the final work to be cast and the culmination of the series. It is a jumble of seven distinct creatures, which share the same liquid metal bodies. Some have skull-like macaque heads, and some have the artist's reduced face—the closed eyes and firmly set mouth seem stoically anguished in this tangled chaos. Most

of the monkeys have one human (matte) arm, one has two, and one hand is clenched into a fist, perhaps to strike out at some deity. This is a creationist's nightmare. In *Monkeys*, humans are not evolving out of a lower species. Nothing here is "lower." Primate genes, theirs and ours, have leapt their tracks and crashed together. The monkey and human parts melt and fuse into one another in a rugby scrimmage of evolution gone wrong. Perhaps not wrong, for the biological sciences are consistently demonstrating the precarious nature of species. Precarious in the razor-thin genetic variation that separates us from our kin and precarious in the sense of each species standing on the edge of extinction.

A close friend of Pondick's, Lucy Shapiro, head of developmental biology at the Stanford University School of Medicine, visited the artist's studio while she was working on the first of these sculptures. Pondick recalls that when Shapiro first saw these pieces, her response was immediate. She said, "Oh my God, this what people fear science will produce. This is my work."

George Fifield is the founder and director of the Boston Cyberarts Festival. The festival can be found at <www.bostoncyberarts.org>.

COURTESY SONNABEND, NEW YORK

