

# RONA PONDICK



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*tree*

*head*

*room*

*Opening Saturday September 27th 5 to 7 p.m.*

*Through October 25 1997*

**SIDNEY JANIS GALLERY**

110 WEST 57TH STREET NEW YORK 10019



# RONA PONDICK

## *tree head room*

A soiled pillow lies thrown on the floor. It appears wet. Something has just happened. Have we interrupted an intimate skirmish? The pillow, in fact, is not wet. It is fiberglass and covered with the repeated hand-written phrase, "I want." This object of comfort has been armed for assault. In a Pondick installation normal situations and ordinary objects become distorted and threatening: the marriage bed becomes a battleground, the child becomes a captor, the lover, an enemy. Pondick aims to provoke. She creates images of fantasy, fear and displaced desire. She selects common objects—shoe, newspaper, pillow—then wrenches them from their familiar environment by combining them with body fragments and incongruous materials. Pondick employs devices from both Surrealistic and psychoanalytic theories to probe the human psyche. She does not intend a fixed interpretation of her work. Once a receptive, free-associative environment has been established, she proceeds to encode each object with dissonant layers of meaning culled from myth, literature and the history of sculpture and painting.

The installation *tree head room* presents a dreamscape. A trail of dirt sculpts the terrain and leads to a single tree that has already dropped its fruit. Something is not right. Pondick's materials belie our logic: a cast aluminum tree has yielded metallic *fruit*. These polished egg-like forms have teeth, but the metal coating appears to have frozen a grimace on each *fruit*, rendering it benign. This primal landscape presents a barren Garden of Eden, or more darkly, a medieval alchemist's attempt to imitate Nature and create pure matter. We begin to detect a presence within the contours of dirt and see that the dreamscape is protected by a legion of biting *Dirt Heads*. Unlike the *fruit*, these dark, animated creatures are the embodiment of fear and death—a devouring fetus, a vagina dentate—and most threatening of all, they thrive in the same soil that nurtures the treasured fruit. What has caused these golems, so similar in anatomy, to develop such opposite natures? What event has unleashed the *Dirt Heads* upon the *fruit* of this possible Family Tree? Are these heads the surrogates for good and bad children, or do the *fruit* possess the potential to revert to a destructive dimension and later become *Dirt Heads*?

The primitive texture of the hand-wrought *Dirt Heads* evokes the ritual and Shamanism associated with tribal objects. In particular, Pondick says that she is making references to the Boliw figures worshiped by the Bamana people of Mali, West Africa. The Boliw are shaped from repeated layers of dirt, bone, spit, blood, and excrement to crudely resemble either an animal, humanoid or sphere. Each tribesman contributes to the materials and ritual that endow these figures with judicial authority over the prosperity and punishment of the entire tribe<sup>1</sup>. The organic materials that shape and empower these figures are both life-sustaining and poisoning. Pondick is fascinated by the simultaneous sacred and profane context that excrement-like materials bring to her objects.

The image of the disembodied head that recurs throughout Pondick's work suggests both *Ka*, the Egyptian winged-head symbol for the soul, and Odilon Redon's devouring *Cyclops* (1914). Pondick shapes her head forms from a cast of her own teeth actually biting into the soft wax. The

disturbing ambivalent identity of these heads is informed by the relationship of the elemental shapes in Alberto Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* (1930-31). In this work Giacometti presents an open cage, a platform and two objects: a suspended ball above a wedge. The ball has a mouth-shaped cut across its lower section. The implied mechanical relationship between the two forms is that the pendular swing of the sphere over the wedge has caused this gash. An erotic interpretation of the situation projects alternating roles onto the two objects. Is the aggressive movement of the ball causing the cut to appear? Or is the wedge so sharp as to cause the slicing of the ball?<sup>2</sup> What is the nature of the contact between Giacometti's objects? Is it caressing or aggressive? Pondick raises similar questions of determination by presenting us with both *Dirt Head* and *fruit*.

In her drawings Pondick reduces the head to its most aggressive part, the mouth, which is always depicted with clenched teeth. For the preverbal child, the mouth is the focus of nourishment and pleasure, and its only means of expressing resistance. For Pondick, the mouth is a hieroglyph for the infant needs that underlie adult desire. But what happens when a need is in conflict with a desire? If the original object of desire has been repressed, it is no longer available to be fulfilled. The need can be satisfied, but the desire cannot. Pondick uses the mouth to portray all roles in the psychological dramas staged in her drawings. A mouth may appear alone as a spoiled child, or with the repeated phrase "No" or "I Want" written across the paper. Sometimes several mouths compete for attention in the same drawing, with one of them engulfed and silenced by the repeating text.

To disarm and intrigue the viewer, Pondick continually shifts imagery, scale and point of view from the adult to the child. *Aaron's Third Ear* addresses a symbolic dialogue between a father and son, Aaron. The main suspended figure consists of an agglomeration of giant red ears that are joined to a spinal cord structure wrapped in torn newspaper. It is an alarming red that signals imminent danger. The form is bulbous and cumbersome, spiraling down and ending in two biting heads. A section of heads appears to have separated off and dropped to the floor on top of a pair of tiny blue sneakers. The ears, despite their exaggerated scale, are misdirected and cannot hear the laughing heads that have been partially wrapped and muted by the newspaper. According to Pondick, the title reference to a "Third Ear" is a metaphor for aural telepathy, a special talent for communication which Aaron apparently possesses or needs. The situation is both comical and poignant: each object attempts to function—read, speak, or hear—but is preempted by the overwhelming structure that only permits a dysfunctional system of communication. By linking the hilarious and horrific nature of these burlesque "Chattering Teeth" Pondick has intensified their threat as they pursue the blue sneakers like mythical harpies retrieving their prey. There is no escape from the family ties that bind.

The deepest recess of the installation is reserved for a tryst. Standing vertically in the shadows, *Mattress* waits like a watchful lover. The buttons that bind the layers of fabric resemble the navel and muscles of a torso. Across its entire surface the hand-written phrase "I want" repeats, shifting in color until overlays of silver appear to dissolve like the rising perspective of an Oriental landscape. The continuous writing of the phrase constructs the obsession. It expresses an act of palpable longing, a need to cover the amorous history of stains that lie beneath the silver script on the raw surface of the mattress. But there is only room for one person, and the defi-



ant, upright stance of *Mattress* does not permit reclining. The initial seduction implied by its materials has been betrayed, revealing *Mattress* to be a phantom Thanatos of unobtainable desire.

Across the room two unused *Pillows* are formally placed on a platform. They appear to be the dislodged headboard of *Mattress* for they are also inscribed with the continuous "I Want." But the phrase in *Pillows* is interrupted to allow a window view of their cloudy interior. Instead of the anticipated soft contours, these rigid and unresponsive pillows evoke both libidinous and destructive impulses. Pondick discloses that both *Pillows* and a related work, *Pillow Book*, are inspired by the erotic memoirs of Sei Shonagon, a Tenth Century female courtier at the Japanese Heian Dynasty Imperial Court. The desire implicit in erotic literature is to join sex with text. In Pondick's work the text is hand-written and is repeated so often as to achieve ritual proportions and become a fetish. Once this is accomplished, even the most mundane object can be erotically transformed.

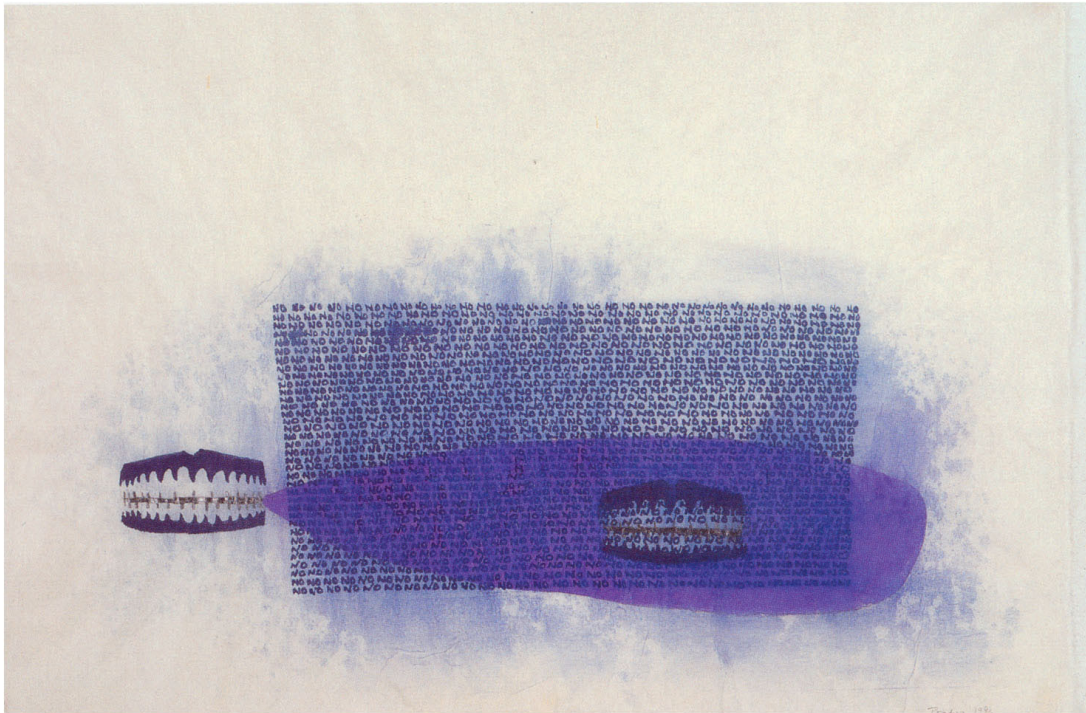
Throughout Pondick's work the image of the bed symbolizes the arena of human relationships. Pondick has explored the sexual signification of placing excremental forms on pillows (1987-88), draping seductive materials over rigid supports (1988), and strapping baby bottles to an inflated, double, raft-bed (1989). This earlier work describes issues of nurture/independence and roles of passive/aggressive behavior. With *Mattress* (1997), Pondick seems to shift the focus of her investigations from the social relationship to the public/private boundaries of the self. On a formal level, Pondick's transformation of a domestic object employs the subversive "anti-art" strategies of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917/1950) and Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955). With Duchamp's readymade, the function of the urinal undermines the "high art" status of the work. Rauschenberg's approach to desecrating the object is to pour paint over a freshly-made bed. Pondick combines both methods with fecal forms and compulsive handwriting to "defile" her beds and undermine the authority bestowed upon the object of desire. These objects of defilement signal discomfort as we realize the possibility of being both aroused and repulsed by what we desire.

The installation *tree head room* is constructed as a life journey from the birth of the headforms to the solitude of death with the single mattress. In order to exit the installation we are forced to retrace our steps and re-experience each work in a parody of Psychoanalysis. Pondick's phrase "I Want" presents an emotional conundrum, an emphatic statement of unqualified desire which cannot be fulfilled. As an open-ended statement it is read as a desire to possess and control. Because the desire is unnamed, it remains insatiable. Even if we were able to name our desire, we might need to leave it unfulfilled.

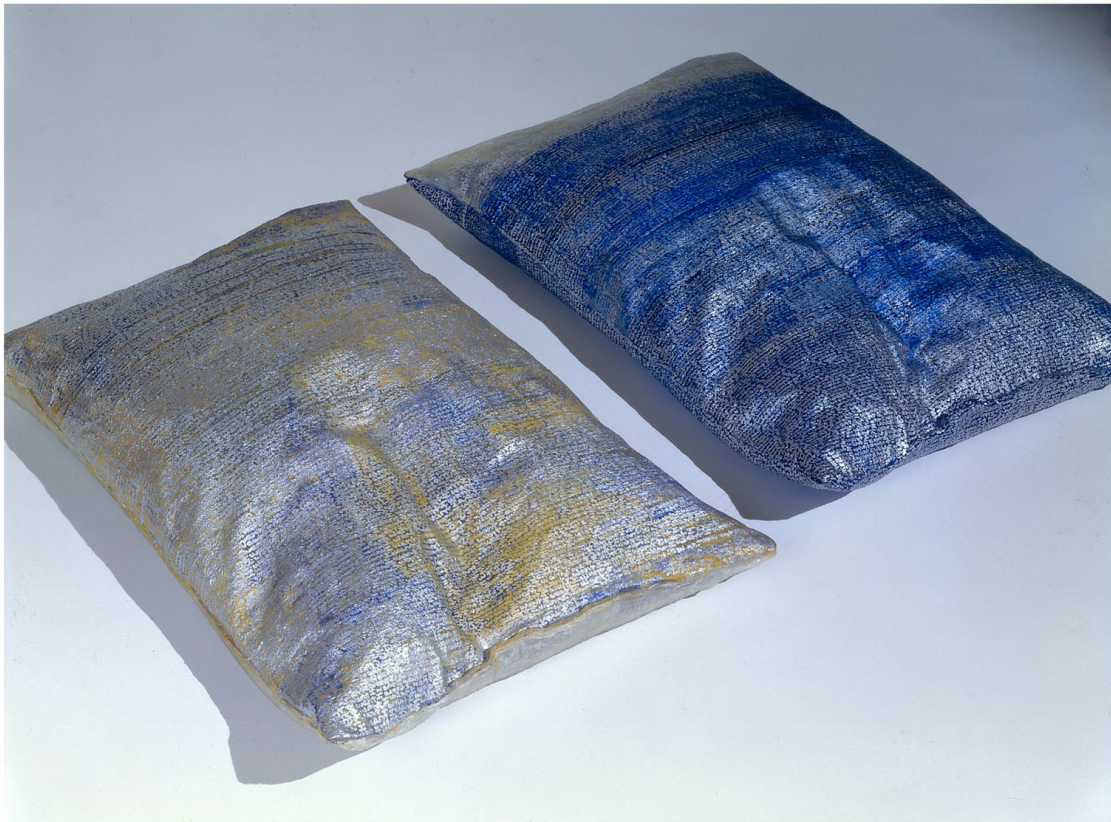
JEANIE DEANS 1997

Sarah Brett-Smith, "The Poisonous Child", RES, Autumn, 1983.

Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, The M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, MA, 1993, pp. 166-167.



MOUTH # 70 1996



PILLOW BOOK 1997



# CATALOGUE

1. **PILLOW**, 1997, fiberglass, acrylic and silver pigment  $7\frac{3}{4} \times 27\frac{3}{4} \times 21$  inches
- 2. **TREE**, 1997, tree: aluminum and steel plates,  $119 \times 64 \times 47$  inches; 58 cast aluminum elements,  $3 \times 4 \times 4\frac{1}{2}$  inches each; 150 elements: dirt, wax, plastic,  $3 \times 4 \times 4\frac{1}{2}$  inches each  
Private Collection
- 3. **AARON'S THIRD EAR**, 1997, chattering teeth, shoes, wax, plastic, newspaper, wire, (three parts); floor element:  $9\frac{1}{2} \times 16 \times 15$  inches; first hanging element:  $55 \times 15 \times 5$  inches; second hanging element:  $29\frac{1}{2} \times 13 \times 13$  inches  
Collection of William Ehrlich and Ruth Lloyds
- 4. **MATTRESS**, 1997, canvas, horse hair, acrylic and silver pigment,  $74\frac{1}{4} \times 37\frac{1}{4} \times 6\frac{3}{4}$  inches
5. **PILLOWS**, 1997, fiberglass, acrylic and silver pigment (two parts), each:  $6\frac{1}{2} \times 27\frac{3}{4} \times 21$  inches, both pillows:  $6\frac{1}{2} \times 56\frac{1}{2} \times 21$  inches, base:  $12\frac{1}{8} \times 21\frac{1}{2} \times 58\frac{1}{2}$  inches
- 6. **PILLOW BOOK**, 1997 fiberglass, acrylic and silver pigment (two parts) each:  $6\frac{1}{2} \times 27\frac{1}{4} \times 20\frac{1}{4}$  inches, both pillows:  $6\frac{1}{2} \times 27\frac{1}{4} \times 41\frac{1}{2}$  inches, base:  $18\frac{1}{8} \times 29 \times 45\frac{1}{8}$  inches
- 7. **MOUTH #70**, 1996 mixed media,  $12\frac{3}{4} \times 18\frac{3}{4}$  inches
- 8. **TREE**, (model), 1995 mixed media,  $23\frac{1}{4} \times 26 \times 26$  inches
- 9-19 Selected works on paper

•Illustrated

Cover **Mattress** (Detail) 1997

Backcover **Mattress** 1997

Photo Credits: Liz Deschenes

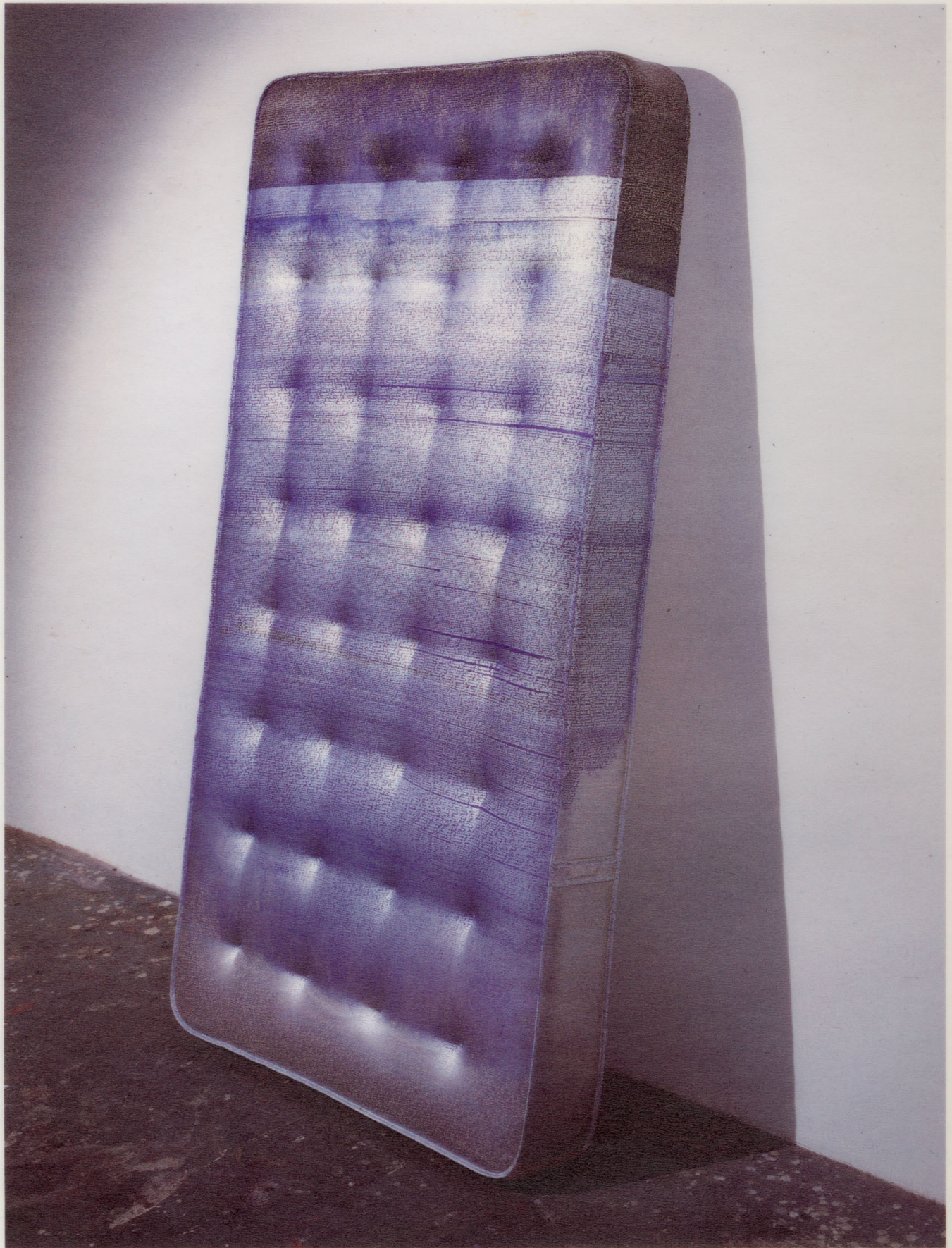
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