



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBIN HOLLAND

Rona Pondick: *Little Bathers* (detail, 1990-91)

Nasty Girl

By Elizabeth Hess

Rona Pondick
fiction/nonfiction
21 Mercer Street
Through May 4

Rona Pondick once left shapely piles of scatological debris in all the wrong places. These remains, however, weren't just remains, they were Art. Pondick has a menacing sense of materials that exaggerates tensions between form and content, a strategic element in her wicked dramas. Over the past few years, the surreal sculptor has moved from anal to oral fixations. Her latest works contemplate a range of private obsessions from foot fetishes to child molestation. Dark urges rise up from Pondick's current show like belches from the unconscious. Seven theatrically lit objects demonstrate that bodily fluids, among more solid parts, are still putty in the artist's hands. What is most amazing about these fairly abstract sculptures is their psychological impact. It's difficult not to take this work personally.

Little Bathers must come first. Five hundred misshapen balls, no bigger than apples, lie on the floor in an orderly rectangle. These strange fruits, all shades of pink, have not fallen from a tree, but have been carefully handmade and placed on earth. As one approaches this pink (female) bed, Pondick hits us with a new idea: a pair of old yellow teeth protrudes from each piece, turning these sweet ova into biting odd balls.

The shapes are transformed into crying heads, yet their disconcertingly small size is fetal. Pondick's objects have the ability to hold various projections; all her pieces beg for our fantasies. These *Little Bathers* suddenly become breasts and the teeth make us think about sucking or biting.

Making the unconscious visible is no mean trick. In *Baby Blue*, the deep blue and a pair of white baby shoes announce the birth of a boy. Yet, this was not an ordinary birth. The lumpy, inert body lacks any sense of proportion, not to mention a phallus. Pondick often gives our assumptions about gender a place to rest where they don't exactly fit. The headless baby, mostly two long limbs, hangs on the wall as if it has been left... dangling. Like many of Pondick's objects, this one is neither dead or alive, it's both newborn and aged. Her figurative extremities seem to cry out for attention, not unlike babies, but we never meet a whole body in the artist's work.

Comic Limb is the artist's most accessible work. A lonely female culminates in a high-heeled shoe; comic-book pages cover the skin like a stocking, yet there's nothing amusing about the awkwardness of this member, which verges on disabled. For several years Pondick has been using the shoe as a way to locate the viewer in a body of the artist's own making. Lately, there seem to be more shoes in the art world than on Seventh Avenue; nevertheless, the shoe is Pondick's signature image. It's never

removed so the foot can rest, but is usually filled with some inappropriate remains, as if the body experienced a premature cremation.

In *Tongues*, Pondick links the issues of race and gender. Sets of black laced men's shoes surround a pair of sleazy white loafers, which sit on a pillow as if it were a throne. The white ones have the cynical authority of a despot about to lose his power; two black pairs sneak up behind their leader as the coup begins.

There's never a peaceful moment in this show. Pondick's images have a vicious bite, yet there's also an erotic pull behind each one, the same kind of tug

that's involved with illicit attractions. "Foot & Mouth," the title of the whole show, is not a disease, but a knowing comment on diseased attitudes toward sex and gender. Shame is a feeling that viewers will have to contend with as they walk through this installation wearing other people's shoes.

Teeth are prominent in two works. Are they castrating teeth? The answer depends on the viewer's sex life. Pondick's creatures seem to experience life through their mouths, rather than their eyes, as if they were babies. Each bundle in *Mound*, another pile of you know what, has a set of Halloween teeth and blood-red gums; there's a chattering clicker, a me-

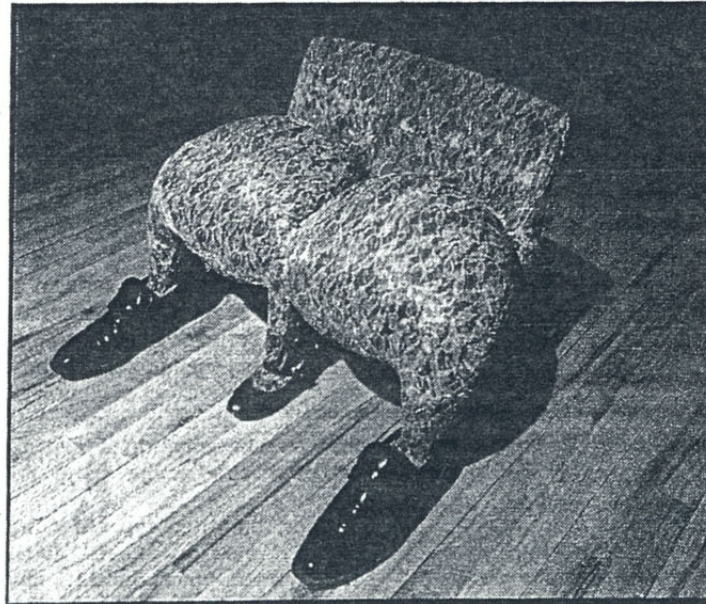
chanical tongue in every mouth. Like *Little Bathers*, this work emits a chorus of silent screams. *Mound* is covered in newspaper (the *Voice*, of course) and pieces of text ("... is like a fart") are occasionally readable. The teeth turn the forms into heads long since lopped off during some unspeakable crime. It's not an attractive image, yet it is just comic enough, just strange enough, to keep us wondering.

Loveseat, a piece of furniture that's endearing for about a second, is the artist's most difficult work. This little chair has telling legs; two of them are stuck in

Art

"Daddy's" shoes, while in between them, a little leg, hanging like genitals, wears a young girl's party slipper. Two mounds protrude from the seat of the chair like buttocks; the whole piece is covered in lace pantyhose. This object is anatomically disturbed; as a chair, it's about as functional as Meret Oppenheim's teacup. Slowly, the family drama on this couch turns out to be incest. It isn't obvious, just like the crime itself, but it becomes clear as we sink into this seat.

Pondick seems to enjoy sucking her viewers in and shoving them away. Building an affinity with her objects is like entering into a difficult relationship. The body is the issue, but because we never see it, we never form an easy identification with any piece. Instead, Pondick sends us back inside ourselves with a bundle of fresh anxieties and insights that are codependent. This is the dark side of feminism. The one that knows there has been little release. ■



Loveseat (1991)