

Ladies' Rooms

BY ELIZABETH HESS

ART

RONA PONDICK. fiction/nonfiction, 155 Avenue B, through May 22.

Rona Pondick's work is scatological in nature and much of it actually looks like shit. There's no way to avoid this conclusion, but the extraordinary thing about her sculptures is that they're not repulsive. Pondick presents a bundle of material contradictions that instantly muddles our senses, reminding us that we have them. This exhibition, her first one-person show in New York, has a peculiar authority in areas usually labeled crude and rude. It's concocted out of a ticklish chemistry of substances that pricks our most private thoughts.

Despite the impure subject matter, Pondick has the sensibility of a purist rooted in post-Minimalism; these are formal objects that sit reverently and alone, on the floor. The artist often adds a surreal twist by combining familiar, domestic items, a pillow or a pair of shoes, with the "abstract" forms made out of plastic or wax. The latter are incontestably fecal, refusing the status of sign or symbol or to be distanced in any way. The second-hand objects all look like they were once user-friendly, but now their prior lives are relegated to the background, like irretrievable thoughts.

In *Angel*, a white mound of turds covered with shreds of white nylon sits on a

stack of once-white cushions; the piece looks as if the dealer picked it up at the Salvation Army. Everything white here is dusted with dirt, and the notion of creating a bed, or a pillar, for the artist's excrements to rest on is too strange to be funny.

Pondick is no angel. She allows her working materials to be read at face value, yet she also puts them in new contexts, where they are able to cast aspersions on the viewer's projections. *Puddle* is simply a cast-iron stream of liquid spilling on the floor; placed next to *Mine*, a large, brown pile of fecal wax, the liquid turns into urine, maybe semen—your guess, if you choose to think about it. One person's pornography is another's art.

A pair of suede high-heels, inappropriately filled with liquid plastic (a type called Black Magic) and covered in flax and steel wool, sits on a piece of crumpled aluminum foil; nearby, another pair of men's shoes pokes through a mess of substances spewing from their insides; tiny patent leathers—the kind a little girl wears to a party—are also filled beyond their limit with queasy, yet colloquial, ingredients. This nuclear (shoe) family is stepping out into a new dimension where issues like style or gender no longer fit. Our immediate responses are blocked and treacherously left hanging. Pondick attracts us with items from ordinary life, but repels our gaze once she has it.

Her most realistic piece is an ascetic bed, covered with a seemingly light, but actually lead, sheet; a piece of bronze feces lies on top of a satin pillow at the head. She's obviously made a bed no one can lie in, forcing the function out of an object that has no other options. The piece is meant to be deadly (lead is poison) serious, but the facsimile on the pillow is the kind a child might buy in a joke store to shock the grown-ups when they go to bed.

Pondick's sculptures present us with a dilemma by rejecting our natural assumptions; a bed is not for sleeping, shoes are not for walking, excrements are not to be flushed away. She emphasizes the objectness of these items, not out of affection but out of disaffection with their civilizing drives. It's madness with an integrity that trips our desires to locate our fears. ■