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PONDICK ▶





Rona Pondick:

Civilizing the Self

by Hall W. Rockefeller

Floating Green
(detail),
2015.

Pigmented resin
and acrylic,
8.375 x 17.125
x 17.125 in.



When asked about her influences, Rona Pondick tends to reply succinctly. “Kafka and my mother,” she will often state, but when pressed further she has only been known to elaborate on the former. In looking at the hybrid metal creatures for which Pondick is perhaps best known, Kafka’s influence—from *Metamorphosis* to his letters to his fiancée Felice—is not hard to see. The artist is drawn to the writer’s creativity, born from the mind of an emotionally troubled man: “His fantasy life was so great that he could describe America having never been here...he could understand emotional things and be so emotionally damaged,” she marvels.

But on the topic of her mother she is more reticent, held back by a deeply seated, complex feeling of what I suspect to be both love and fear for a woman with little love to give her children. Pondick’s mother, however, died in October of last year; and for the first time, the artist has been able to feel free of her shadow. Holding the mirror of influence up to her body of work, it becomes clear that the relationship between Kafka and Mother is closer than it initially appears.

Considering Pondick’s decades-long career, which

began at the Yale School of Art in the 1970s and has been punctuated with successes like a Guggenheim Fellowship, awards like Anonymous Was A Woman, 47 solo exhibitions in museums and galleries, and over 200 group exhibitions across the globe, one might wonder how necessary it is to probe this piece of her psyche. After all, it is not difficult to ascertain ripples of trauma in the disquiet of her work, even if we are not exactly sure how to articulate it, and yet we cannot shake the profound sense that we are missing something when coming up against her work.

For anyone who has encountered Pondick’s sculpture in person, describing the bodily sensation it conveys is no easy task. The closest most come is in calling the encounter a “déjà vu moment,” a description that does nothing to identify the *when* or the *where* we feel we have seen her work before. It cannot be that our memories reach for anywhere commonplace, because Pondick’s oeuvre is populated by strange animals that meld the “factual” nature of the human form—often complete with the pores and wrinkles of human skin—with shining chrome bodies belonging to cartoonified fauna. If we’ve seen these creatures before it was only in our dreams.

But what dreams are these? And how has Pondick found a way into our unconscious minds? The answer might lie in probing her work from the perspective of biography. To justify such a Postmodernist’s nightmare, Pondick herself has said it best: “I have read books on certain subjects to convince myself I wasn’t nuts...I read psychoanalytic theory to comfort myself and to help me understand my own impulses and desires.” To hear Pondick outline the gestation and birth of these creatures is to have her convince us that we, too, are not crazy for identifying with them. Knowing the dark places in which these creatures dwell means pinpointing the seed of our disturbance—and maybe even understanding it.

In the beginning of her career in the 1980s, Pondick’s work focused on the charged locus of the bed, where we are born, procreate, and die. That a third of our lives is spent in this place of both comfort and of nightmares makes any artistic interaction with it an emotionally rich exploration of the fundamental elements of living. Pondick engaged with it by piling pillows and

OPPOSITE:
*Upside Down
Yellow Green*,
2018.
Pigmented resin
and acrylic,
15.625 x 18.625
x 8.75 in.





Red Platter,
1995.

Wood and resin,
8 x 17 x 17 in.

mattresses, sometimes silky ones, high on the gallery floor and then placing on them, like one might place a crown on a coronation pillow, a cast object with a distinct fecal presence. “I remember when the first person who came to my studio to see these pieces said, ‘It looks like your studio is full of shit.’ It scared the living daylights out of me,” she admits. “Clearly, I saw it was a transgression, and I thought it was interesting that I wanted to do this whether it was conscious or not.”

Unlike Louise Bourgeois, who was famous for her repeated return to her domineering father, Pondick does battle with the Mother with variously different weapons. In the early '90s, baseball-size objects proliferated in her work, each embedded with a full set of human teeth. Sometimes they were scattered on the gallery floor, at the base of a tree, or, as in the brightly colored grouping *Red Platter* (1995), collected into a wooden bowl as if they were (poison?) apples.

The *vagina dentata* may be a common motif through modern art history, but for Pondick, it seems to have more to do with birth than sex. The gnashing teeth may be the gates to the hostile womb of the emotionally unstable mother, through which Pondick entered this world. The teeth in her work were cast from her own mouth, so that anger is also the artist's to bear: “I did have an obsession where I'd be talking to someone, become angry, and would want to bite them.” Instead of acting on such a “socially unacceptable” impulse however, she sequesters it in her work. Like dynamite tamped before detonation, the teeth works teem with energy. As Roberta Smith pointed out at the time, in “repeating [the heads] in absurd numbers...extreme states of appetite and need are revealed.”

Through sheer drive, Pondick has replicated herself and her traumas. Through the repetition of her chosen forms—casts of her teeth, ears, hands, and head—she insists that a small power, multiplied, grows into a force. Her works require no signature; a simple look declares from whose hand they were fashioned. They are seeds on the wind, the sloughed-off skin that we

leave in a trail behind us, the physical assurance of having made a mark.

From the early days when Pondick would escape her house and lose herself in the collections at The Met, art has been her means of coping. The way that she speaks of her work declares it: “I think our fantasy life keeps us from killing people...keeps us civilized. I think the ability to imagine...makes someone wake up and feel a sense of hope...of possibilities. And I think as an artist, my fantasy life has made my ability to get up the next morning and face life.” It is not surprising that she expresses admiration for Hieronymus Bosch, whom she may have encountered on those youthful trips to The Met—his elaborate imagined landscapes are awash with the most disturbingly phantasmagoric creatures that art history has ever seen. The meaning behind many of his paintings remains unknown, but as in Pondick’s works, the significance is corporeally understood. The intricacy betrays him: we know it must mean something, because someone with this much to say must have a reason for saying it.

These days, proliferation and excess have faded from Pondick’s sculptures (the result of a self-imposed mandate against them); instead, the impulse toward repetition is transposed across works, by means of replicated forms. She began to make reproductions of her head beginning in the late 1990s, a practice that she continues today by casting her head in pigmented resin, sometimes encasing the result in transparent acrylic blocks.

To stand amid Pondick’s most recent body of work, which has been in development for the past five years as she familiarized herself with the sometimes finicky nature of her new material (she began working with acrylic and resin in 2013), is to see an expansion of the world that she has been constructing since the beginning of her career. While these works play with a new set of sensations brought forward by color, so often absent from her sculptures, they build off of the same particular strain of *unheimlich*, which we might call, after 40 years, a Pondick signature.

Though the new works appear to be a departure from the chrome hybrids, Pondick doesn’t quite see it as a shift. “For me, it all makes perfect sense...Across time, when the work looked like it would physically

Magenta Swimming in Yellow, 2015–17. Pigmented resin and acrylic, 14 x 17 x 17 in.



“ The resin works are prenatal, awash in the atemporality of amniotic fluids before our time as individuals begins. ‘It’s like I had to give birth to myself again,’ Pondick explains. ”



change, to me it didn't. It was moving, it was growing, it was evolving." These works, after all, emerge from the same body and the same mind—a mind, as always, concerned with existence and survival. Despite the fact that she has materially departed from her earlier body of work (the only material she kept in the studio was her modeling epoxy), both chapters are about coming to terms with existence through art. "I do love fantasy," she repeats, "It gives us a sense of home." But in 2019, we must ask, where is "home" on an increasingly inhospitable earth?

On a visit to Pondick's studio, a young art student once asked if her works were archival, which begged another question: For what are we preserving them? (The answer to the first question, incidentally, is yes.) "I don't even know if New York City will be here in 150 years," Pondick says, "[The work] may exist longer than humans. That [fear of environmental catastrophe] has come into the work...I am seeing it more and more." These works are not post-apocalyptic, however. They riff on what "home" can be. They are not primordial like the scatological pieces of the early '80s, nor are they futuristic like the sleek chrome works from the first decade of the new millennium. The resin works are prenatal, awash in the atemporality of amniotic fluids before our time as individuals begins. "It's like I had to give birth to myself again. Here I am, my head is turning into an egg," Pondick explains.

It's not only the baby-size heads that bring to mind the womb, but also the fetus-like bodies attached to them, as well as the fluids in which they are encased, from which they seem to draw breath. Those pieces without scrawny fetal appendages have the soft bodies of toy animals, which slump and flop as if full of sand. They're almost tender, and I resist the impulse to pick them up and hold their heavy fleshiness like I might an infant. Pondick has remarked that her work "has always evoked responses that include viewers' feelings: both their own strong desires and a protective tenderness toward the sculptures."

"I have always been imagistic, and I think with my hands," Pondick continues, but this does not mean her work is driven by narrative; it is driven by impressions. And these heads, though they are her own, are "not about likeness," but about presence. "Philip Guston said



FROM OPPOSITE:
Pine Marten,
2000–01.
Stainless steel,
9 x 18.875 x 6.75 in.

**Orange Pink
Green Grey,**
2015–17.
Pigmented resin
and acrylic,
19 x 17.75 x 17.75 in.

that everything we do in the studio is just an extension of us," Pondick explains. In some ways, she uses her body "like a dancer," that is, simply as a tool, marked by practicality, not laden with significance.

That being said, it is a strange thing to stand in the middle of the studio and have the animated, living Rona Pondick speak amid a multitude of scattered casts and modeled copies of her sleeping head. Every once in a while I catch a glimpse of the cast in her moving head—when she falls into silence or closes her eyes—and her work snaps into focus. Is she herself—the "real" Rona Pondick—just another one of these heads?

The titles of these works ("flat-footed" according to Pondick) certainly don't help ground us—they are purely descriptive, citing color and simple forms in works like *Upside Down Green* (2018) and *Curly Grey* (2016–18). The silverizing, an element that began as

an accident, but which Pondick painstakingly learned to perfect, adds another element of remove; the light not only obscures the true colors beneath, but also gives the effect of otherworldliness, recalling solarized Surrealist photography.

And while bright colors like cobalt and lime green seem to be new elements, Pondick insists that she “was trying to marry color and form like this at Yale as a graduate student in the ’70s,” though she had little success back then. “I like the color to be in the material, not applied. For me, there is something very different between color that sits on something and when it appears as the integral essence of the material.” The effect is largely psychological: the candy-colored translucency of a magenta head communicates its features in a radically different way than one cast in a misty lavender. “It’s so unbelievably rich...[the potential] makes me high as a kite,” Pondick thrills.

When considering her options after 20 years of using her head as the basis of her work, she is open-minded about its place in the future of her oeuvre. “I [will] just keep using it and see if I feel like I’ve exhausted it and *then* I can ask that question.” So what is her conclusion as she embarks on a new chapter of her career? Does she feel like she’s ready to move on? Not even close. “I don’t even feel like I’ve scratched the surface.”

As our conversation winds down and we begin to talk more broadly, we touch on our preference for the New York art scene over ubiquitous art fairs. Pondick’s biggest qualm about fair-goers hopping between booths is how little they learn of an artist’s development. To appreciate an artist, “you need to see bodies of the work evolve for 10, 20, 30 years and then you start getting a sense of who the person is and what makes them tick.” In saying this, I suspect she is talking about artists like herself. For Pondick, art is a lifelong love, something, like life, that gathers significance across time.

Some 20 years after working with Pondick in the 1990s, a curator marveled at the longevity of her career. Thinking back to the time they had met, he mused, “Who would have thought you would still be standing as an artist with a professional career?” Nevermind the retroactive callousness of this statement, for he had it all wrong, of course. It was art that saved Pondick, and it is the reason she is still standing. ■

**Yellow Blue
Black White,**
2013–18.
Pigmented resin,
acrylic, and
epoxy modeling
compound,
20.5 x 17.75 x
17.875 in.

“ I think our fantasy life keeps us from killing people... keeps us civilized. I think the ability to imagine...makes someone wake up and feel a sense of hope...of possibilities. ”





HALL W. ROCKEFELLER

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