

RONA

In conversation with
Nneka ANOZIE

Edited by
Emmeleia DALIWAN
and Alberto CALABRESE

Photographer
Tarik ATALLAH

Special Thanks to
Irene DEL PRINCIPE
and Thaddaeus ROPAC

Rona Pondick observes, learns, experiments, and implements in cycles. As a child who took on drawing and painting by reflex to becoming an internationally acclaimed sculptor, known for her hybridized, metaphorical, and shifting approaches to the human body. Pondick challenges herself to make her mark on classic world sculpture through contemporary aesthetics and forward-facing techniques. The consistent essence behind her work is to “become a mirror of what it’s like to be alive.” With ODDA, Rona shares her interpretation of time, reflects on varied aspects of human nature, and explains her view on our world being an ongoing evolution with familiar twists.

PONDICK





RONA PONDICK. When I read your questions, I thought they were really challenging. Interestingly enough, when you asked, could I predict the next 10 years of either imagery, or what's culturally important, and what would happen moving forward? I was like, "Oh, my God, this is one of those questions where I don't know how to answer that." I can't figure out what's going to happen the next day or the next year, let alone 10 years in advance.

NNEKA ANOZIE. We found that question really intriguing because we know that you're interested in "The Metamorphosis" by Kafka, which came out more than a century ago.

R.P. The thing about Kafka's work is that it's about emotions, and emotions are not time bound. Whenever I think anyone's going to read it, if they let themselves, they're going to be able to connect to it.

N.A. I haven't had a chance to read the book, but I know the plotline is along the lines of a man suddenly waking up and realizing he's turned into some kind of vermin. In modern day, it could be compared to a cockroach. I can't even imagine experiencing a brother, son, or someone who I was fond of turning into that. Also, being that person whose body has changed — having to deal with that rejection just because of how they look.

R.P. Which you can easily connect to so many things we're experiencing right now. "Other" is something that is a very interesting and central topic. Emotionally, we probably all feel alien, different, separate from each other. I know when I'm making my work, that's something I'm thinking about all the time. I can't control my viewer. But it would be great if they felt and thought exactly what I'd like them to, but people bring their own histories to what they're looking at.

N.A. Do you remember any very extreme, visceral reactions people have had to your sculptures?

R.P. Yes, this is something I embrace so happily because I'm trying to make objects that are layered, so that their meaning unfolds in time with each person differently. I have stood in front of some pieces, and I've been amazed because I find them hysterically funny. Then, someone's telling me it's so disturbing [that] they need to leave the room. A half hour later, somebody looks at the same piece, and they're laughing. How is it possible that one person is put off and feels so on edge with it, and another person feels the exact opposite? I realized very early as an artist that I wanted my work to deal with impulse, desire, and with contradiction.

N.A. When you think about creating, how do you go into thinking about what's going to initially catch someone's eye?

R.P. I am probably one of the most unconscious makers on the planet. Sometimes I have to wait 10, 20, or 30 years to figure out why I've made something. Other times, I can never figure it out. Often, in the plethora of criticism written about my work. I'm reading what someone's written, and I see exactly what the person is saying, [but] I didn't see it [at the time I made it.] I'm thinking, "How is this possible?" But it happens over and over again. I'm interested in work that's metaphorical, that's symbolic. And, honestly, where the meaning shifts. If someone says, "Oh, I get it, it's this!" I think to myself, I failed miserably. I made a piece called "Dirt Head." It is made of round forms with teeth, and it sits on 10

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tons of earth. The piece has traveled to so many parts of the world. Every time it's been shown, depending on the history of that place it's been talked about as if the piece is a completely new and different sculpture. There are some things I think are consistent that are talked about in terms of the work looking at life and death, but it's amazing when I think about the range of interpretations that this piece has had.

N.A. What first drew you to the arts?

R.P. When kids were playing with their dolls or pickup trucks, I was drawing and painting. I can't even remember when I started, honestly. When I was as young as nine years old. I would take the train from Brooklyn to Manhattan on Sundays, and I'd go to The Met. I'd wander the halls with sheer amazement. My eyes would be popping out of my head, my mouth would be dropping. I couldn't believe what I was looking at. When I got to college, it immediately made sense for me to study sculpture. In a museum where it says, "Don't touch," that sign was made for me. I walk in and I want to touch everything. "Is it soft? Is it hard? Is it cold? What does it feel like?" I want to understand it. So I started making sculptures, and I have not stopped since.

N.A. Once your pieces are finally completed, and you think back to a new material that you have experimented with, are there any moments that surprised you in how it presented itself at the end?

R.P. The most recent pieces I've been making are in acrylic, aliphatic resins, and an epoxy compound material that you can model with. People were telling me they could taste the color. That's something I never thought was attainable in sculpture. This is [called] synesthesia — vision becoming taste — it's crossing their senses. Also, acrylic is a material that has such schlock connotations, used in trinkets and souvenirs. [I thought], "Can I take this material and transform how it's seen and used?" Using these materials for their sensuous presence, trying to make these pieces into edgy, complex sculptures is a huge, interesting challenge to me.

N.A. It seems that, over time, you went from, as a child; drawing and painting because you liked it to now as a professional; who wants to challenge not only yourself, but the viewer and really have things, transcend sense and be remembered for a long time.

R.P. I have had such interesting exchanges with viewers. I can't be with my work all the time, but there are specific moments where I've watched with amazement how someone has responded to my work. There was a time where I made a piece called "Double Bed." It's a very long, 20-foot, bed-like form made of soft pillows

that are white, and strung across it like a blanket is a rope grid with baby bottles and nipples. A mother walks in with her child in a stroller, and the kid bolts out of it, runs over and starts sucking on one of the baby bottles in my sculpture. The mother says, "Oh my God, that's exactly how I feel!" and bursts out laughing. Once I was sitting on a panel at The Whitney [Museum], and someone asked me why I was using teeth in my sculptures, and I panicked. Before I knew it, I shared with 200 people that when I'm angry; I want to bite them. At the end of the lecture, this very prim, blue-haired woman in a suit walks up to me and says, "I understand exactly what you're talking about. When I gave birth to my child, I wanted to eat it, so I went out and bought a suckling pig the size of my child and ate the entire thing." I sat there scratching my head and said, "They say artists are weird?" [Another time], I was standing in front of the sculpture "Monkeys." This collector walks up to me and says, "Your work's kind of like my experience with oysters. I hated them at first, and once I acquired a palate, I couldn't get enough of them." Talk about extremes — something I've loved and embraced in my work, and still do.

N.A. With your inspiration from Kafka and "The Metamorphosis," you've made sculptures, like "Monkeys," that are part-head, part-animal body. Looking back at it, what do you find interesting about humans' relationship with nature? How do you think it's evolving now that there's discourse around climate anxiety and climate justice?

R.P. I did this piece called "Head in Tree." [It came to me] while I was in the hospital recovering from two massive surgeries, and I was hallucinating. I was on a lot of drugs, and I had this image of my head, leaving my body floating up, and ending up in a tree. It gave me such inner peace. Once I got out of the hospital, I had to make this piece.

I look at that same piece now — with what's going on with the environment, and worrying about [questions like] is the planet going to exist? Will we survive? What's going to be left? The meanings [that people see in "Head in Tree"] have altered, transformed, changed. When I started using the hybrid animal-human, tree-human forms, something I realized immediately [is that] these hybrid forms go back to cave paintings and the earliest sculptures, and they've repeated throughout history. I got very, very connected to those forms, and thought, "I want to make this feel contemporary and feel like it's my own."

N.A. When it comes to technique, really getting imagery down, and choosing the right hues and colors, what accomplishments are you proudest of?

R.P. Nothing ever looks the way I expected it to. Since cell



Rona PONDICK, Double Bed, 1989
Plastic, rope, pillows, baby bottles, and wax
9 x 162 x 73 in / 22.86 x 411.48 x 28.74 cm
© Rona Pondick



“Work In Progress” © Rona Pondick

phones have had cameras, I’ve constantly taken photographs of my sculptures as they evolve in my studio. What I’m shocked by is where something started, and watching its evolution, and where it ends up. “Monkeys” is a sculpture that I look at and think, “How could I have made this?” I have pieces that span five to seven years so it’s hard to remember each decision in the making of a piece. I have a tree that I’m about to bring to the foundry right now that I’ve been working on for 15 years and it’s hard to remember how I made it.

N.A. What other recent pieces, or cultural works in general — maybe it was an album, or a book — that were made super

recently that have moved you?

R.P. All I like to do is come to the studio and work. If I lose a day or two in the studio, I get so depressed. When I’m not there, I want to look at art. I tend to look at more historical work. I really want to look at things that are unknown to me, that are either so culturally different, or from such a different time period. [It’s] not that I’m not interested in things within my own time, but I don’t think I understand my own time. Like most artists, I’m narcissistic. I’m so in my own head and in my own thoughts that it’s hard for me to get into another headspace. As I’ve grown, I think I want to look back even more. And as an artist, we’re always looking for

material. Not only masterpieces, failures too. I say, sometimes, the most amazing artists are anonymous.

N.A. We're interested in what you think would be next, but it seems that you prefer to look backwards. Which is completely cool. Are there any technological techniques that play into art that you found really interesting?

R.P. I take life casts of my head, hands and arms, scan them, [and] reduce or increase the size of those forms. I'm drawn to the life cast because it functions like a death mask. It's so physically and factually you. The other part — the animal or the trees — are total fictions that I make by hand. Technology is a tool for us to use, to be able to do things we haven't or couldn't do before. I know as a culture, what's new is sexy, but the truth of the matter is that technology is not replacing hand making. It's adding other ways of making. In reference to me looking back, everything that I'm interested in historically repeats itself. We, as humans, on a certain fundamental level, don't change. We always try to put ourselves in art. We want to reflect what it's like, what we look like at the moment. What we're thinking and feeling spirals around and around. I know, everyone wants to tell you art moves in a linear development. That's ridiculous. I think what happens is the work that's most interesting for me is work that mirrors the maker. They bring something of themselves that is so specific, and they make what they're doing so much their own, that it feels like they've invented something. There are artists that I look to that are more of my time, like Louise Bourgeois or Philip Guston who I feel real affinities with. When I look at their work, and look at what they're looking at, I see similarities. We're attracted to similar ways of thinking and making. I remember the moment where I was looking at Louise Bourgeois and realized she was also looking at Giacometti, Egyptian art, and Etruscan art. I'm looking at all the connections between us. And I'm thinking, "Well, of course." We have the same ancestral tree, we're relatives.

N.A. We've spoken around how you don't have boundaries when it comes to material. But I'm also thinking technologically — bringing in some real and virtual blending of boundaries together. Do you think that would be possible?

R.P. I started using computer technology around '98. I met a lot of people researching in the field and connected to people at MIT. They were as interested in trying to figure out how to use things in the future as I was. I was able pretty early on to get a 3D scan of a cast of my head. But hair is virtually impossible to scan. I got interested in how hair translates in sculpture — not just now, but through every period in history, and in every culture. Look at how hair is translated in Western sculpture, look how hair is translated in Eastern sculpture, and look how it translates into African sculpture. It's all hair, but it looks completely different. How will it exist at another time? I have no clue. Sculpture has to deal with physical reality, so they have clear physical properties. A sculpture has to stand. When, historically, different materials were being used to make them, there were certain structural things that had to exist that don't have to now. For example, if you look at historical stone sculptures, where the arms are separate from the torsos, there would be these weird struts connecting the arm to the body, because

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the arm would break off if it didn't have this support. We don't need that now because we have materials like metal, where we've been freed from needing that kind of support. Right now, I'm having a blast playing around with encasing acrylic pieces that I've made. I'm watching how the properties of these materials change everything, making my images so different, because they look like they're floating, swimming; are they dying, suffocating? Are they embryonic? Are they giving birth? The range of metaphors feels so different. It's a material change filled with possibilities that I'm able to explore in a way that wouldn't have been possible 1000s of years ago. I don't know what's next, but it's going to be exciting to find out.

