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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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Rona Pondick

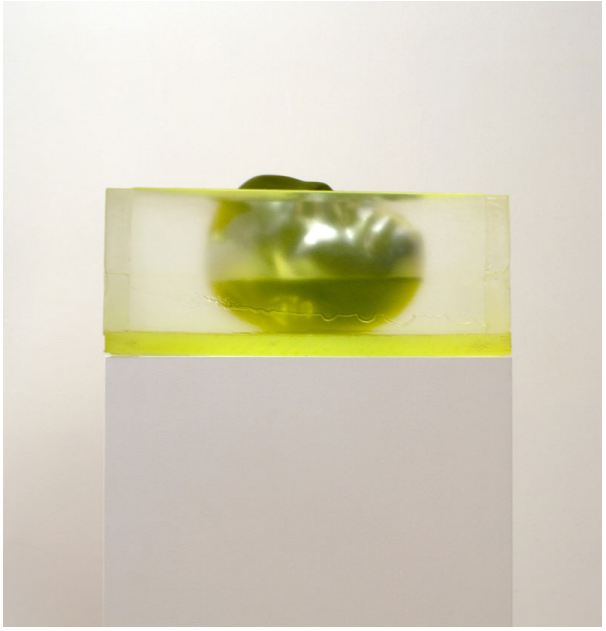
by Pac Pobric

MARC STRAUS GALLERY | OCTOBER 24 – DECEMBER 16, 2018

Installation view, *Rona Pondick* at Marc Straus, New York, 2018. Courtesy Marc Straus Gallery.

The distended head that rests on a small rectangular base on the floor is polished and smooth. From behind, the elongated form and vaguely twisted neck look entirely alien but for two clipped human ears that perch on either side, just where they should be. Slip around to the front, and now it's a human head for sure, with a closed mouth and eyes and a sharp nose that cuts into a slot below the brow. Is it asleep? Is it dead? Where's the rest of its body? Across the way, there are three more human heads, including a tiny one with a demented little animal body that's encased upside-down in a block.

What's happened here? It's tempting to psychologize these tremendous new sculptures (*Tilted Yellow* and *Upside Down Green*, both finished in 2018) by Rona Pondick, especially because each head is a depiction of her own, which has long been her practice. Then there's the artist's biography. "In 2006," Lynn Zelevansky writes in the catalogue for this exhibition "while on a plane returning to New York from Europe, Pondick discovered that she couldn't move her right arm or head." The diagnosis was cervical spondylotic myelopathy—a compressed spine—which required two complicated and risky surgical procedures. "Afterwards," Pondick later recalled, "I had to endure a long and challenging recovery. I learned how to walk and use my hands again." In the meantime, while in intensive care, she "would lie in bed and create sculptures in [her] head."



Rona Pondick, Floating Green, 20152017. Pigmented resin and acrylic, 8 3/8 × 17 1/8 × 17 1/8 inches. Courtesy Marc Straus Gallery.

So perhaps *Tilted Yellow* is indeed asleep, dreaming of things to come, all that potential filling the head so full that it's about to burst open. That would be in line with how Pondick's work has progressed in the past. Even before her surgeries, she had visions she had to realize. And even then, they involved a degree of self-portraiture. Asked about her sculptures of trees, which go back as early as 1997, she told an interviewer: "I dreamed that my head was the size of a tiny bud on a tree, and I had to make it." The result was *Pussy Willow Tree* (2001), a stunning steel sculpture with hundreds of spindling branches, many of them covered in fledgling Lilliputian heads, the entire work now planted in a field on the grounds at the Fondation Salomon in Annecy, France.

Rona Pondick, *Encased Blue Blue*, 2015-2018. Pigmented resin and acrylic, 11 1/4 × 7 3/8 × 11 1/2 inches. Courtesy Marc Straus Gallery.

Are the buds on the tree Pondick's imagination of the many strands of her personal and artistic lives, some of which will flower as others wither? The Marc Straus works (twelve are on view and other, related objects will be at the Zevitas Marcus gallery in Los Angeles in February) raise exactly such questions about potential and its potential evaporation. Is the head in *Floating Green* (2015 – 17) sinking or rising? Will it emerge from the void in which it's encased, and does it even want to? Whenever it seems momentarily clear what's happening in these sculptures—surely some of these figures have their eyes closed because they're at peace!—another look at the work disintegrates any certainty. Maybe the closed eyes are a way of avoiding the unavoidable mire. Who can say? Which is what we have in Pondick's work, a continual deferral, a refusal to settle or to imbue art with false clarity; precisely why the impulse to read her life through her work will ultimately be frustrated. Are these figures content and peaceful, or discontent and quietly tortured? Are they surfacing from some trauma, or sinking more deeply in? On some days, Pondick might dismiss such questions entirely. Where I may see derangement, she may see joy, in the Kafkaesque sense. "I remember reading that when Kafka read *Metamorphosis* aloud, he would howl with laughter," she told one interviewer. But to another, she admitted that his work is at the same time "deadly serious." This is classical psychoanalytic ambivalence: not mixed feelings, but a deep sensitivity to two opposing realities, both of which are true. Is there anything richer?