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ArtSeen

Rona Pondick

By Susan Harris



Installation view: Rona Pondick, Marc Straus, New York, 2022. Courtesy Marc Straus.

A blast of color from sculptures with titles such as *Small Green Pinks* (2020–21), *Small Yellow Ochre Green* (2020–21), and *Small Green Yellow Reds* (2019–21) greets viewers entering the intimately scaled gallery that holds Rona Pondick’s exhibition of new sculptures and drawings. At first glance, the room looks like a minimalist installation of sculptures dominated by cubes of pigmented acrylic resting on white, rectangular pedestals. On closer inspection, the acid green plinths and their glossy surfaces resonate as highly charged spaces on which configurations of human and non-human forms play out heartrending tableaux.

ON VIEW

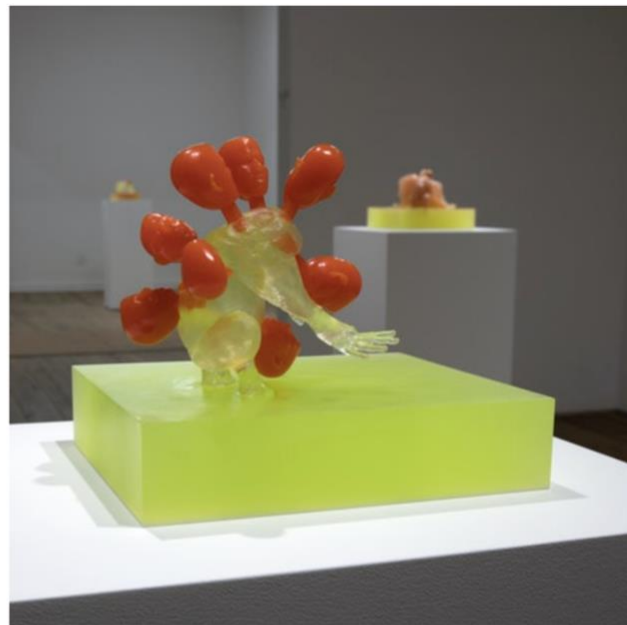
Marc Straus

March 2 – April 16, 2022

New York

This is Pondick's second show at Marc Straus. The first, in 2018, astonished her followers of three decades when she introduced color along with resin and acrylic as new materials for her ongoing sculptural explorations into metaphor and metamorphosis. A self-avowed material-holic, Pondick became known in the late eighties and early nineties for disturbing and menacingly humorous installations of beds, shoes, pillows, scatological forms, and teeth heads—objects that were pliable and often grungy that addressed issues of sexuality, gender, and identity. After a lengthy gestation period, she evolved a completely new way of working that involved hand modeling, carving, and casting, along with 3D computer scanning to achieve a body of highly refined sculptures in stainless steel, aluminum, and bronze. She worked with these materials and processes for over fifteen years creating bizarrely beautiful and unsettling hybrids using casts of her own head and hands that she melded seamlessly with cast forms of animals and trees. (All of the heads and hands in Pondick's sculptures are cast from her own original 1998 life casts.) Tracing the fascination for the human/non-human hybrid back to the Neolithic age that continued through modern times with Goya, Redon, and Bosch, Pondick has made a significant contribution to the genre with the transgressive addition of her own head and hands.

The disparate parts of her metal hybrids came together as unified, albeit disconcerting, wholes, but deliberate disjunctions characterize the new pigmented resin and acrylic pieces that accentuate their literal and spiritual ruptures. In *Small Green Yellow Reds*, a milky translucent, non-human body is circumscribed and punctured by eight opaque red heads at their necks—the red stems glaringly visible through the clear body. It's hard not to read the proliferation of the COVID virus and dysfunctional human relations into this piece. There is such compelling eloquence in the imperfect connections between Pondick's heads, bodies, and bases—their dispositions and shifts in relationship to each other and in space—that shapes viewers' interpretation of a given piece. The significance of these permutations is explored in depth alongside the expressiveness of surface, color, and light in the sculptures installed in the soaring height and natural light of the second gallery. In *Double Burnt Umber* (2019–21), the interaction of light with the coarse, scarified surfaces of two bulbous figures and their heads results in strikingly varied passages between opacity and translucency that evoke different states of being from mournful to demonic. *Grapefruit Platter* (20), (2019–22), meanwhile, is a tray of twenty bodiless heads that recall Pondick's nineties scatter pieces of teeth heads. It is the only non-hybrid piece in the show but completely fits in with Pondick's tribe of mutants that speak to the uncertainties and contradictions of contemporary existence.



Installation view: *Rona Pondick*, Marc Straus, New York, 2022. Courtesy Marc Straus.

As the titles denote, the sculptures which were realized during COVID-19 lockdown are smaller and more intimate than before. The shutting of the city both necessitated and gave Pondick permission to begin working on a smaller scale. The isolation also gave her time for drawing, a medium she turns to for working things out. Excited by the skin-like materiality of handmade mulberry paper, Pondick used it for making drawings of menacing heads with sharp noses that merge with, recede into, and resurface in up to 10 layers of paper. Just as the appearance of color in drawings from 2011 foreshadowed the colors in the resin and acrylic sculptures that debuted in 2018, Pondick's drawings from the early, anxious days of the pandemic feature elaborate layerings of imagery and distinctive passages of color that correspond to the subsequent sculptures.

The second-floor installation of a single sculpture with six collaged drawings is quietly revelatory in how the expression and dissolution of color and form in the sculpture is a three-dimensional translation of what transpires in the drawings. A shock of green, a muted ball of yellow and muffled passages of pink/orange in *Small Heads #42* (2020) correspond to the idiosyncrasies of color in the materials of *Small Yellow Red Orange Yellow* (2019–21). As the transparent head of the world-weary creature leans against the other's upright, opaque red-orange head, their translucent bodies seem to dissolve in the air that surrounds them while their feet melt into a red-orange ooze and their 'arms' extend towards each other in an attempt to avoid the same fate for their hands. Impressions of vanishing forms as representations, perhaps, of Pondick's own sense of mortality are echoed in the dissolution of drawn nose heads caught between layers of a ghostly purgatory. Pondick's installation on the third floor of two sculptures and two drawings underscores and illuminates the fluidity between the two mediums in capturing and sustaining ethereal qualities of space, line, and color. Magic and meaning happen in both two and three-dimensional realms at the intersection of opacity and translucency, presence and evanescence.

Contributor

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