

ART

Artists armed with body parts

Exhibits look at statements made with human forms

ART REVIEW

BY ROGER GREEN
Ann Arbor News Bureau

BLOOMFIELD HILLS – Since Paleolithic times, representations of the human figure have been a staple of Western art. Today, the tradition continues at Cranbrook Art Museum, in two engaging exhibits.

“Rona Pondick: Sculpture, 1992-2003” is a survey of provocative, three-dimensional works by the internationally acclaimed New York artist. “Transfigurations: The Body in 20th-Century Art” brings together paintings, sculptures and other items from Cranbrook and local private collections. Both shows were organized by Cranbrook’s curator of exhibitions, Joe Houston.

Pondick’s sculptures and installations in diverse materials re-create, then repeat or combine anatomical parts with disturbing effect. Her earliest works wed sculpted body parts to found and discarded materials. Her more recent, cast-metal pieces join human heads and appendages to animals’ bodies. Throughout, Pondick aims to probe human psychology and primal drives in compelling ways.

To achieve that end, she casts a wide stylistic net, drawing on three competing sources. Classicism, surrealism and minimalism are strategies Pondick adroitly exploits.

“Ear,” a nightmarish heap of outsized, cast-plastic ears, is classical by virtue of materializing anatomical perfection. But by fragmenting, enlarging and repeating the ears, Pondick exploits surrealist tactics aimed at evoking dreams. “Sourballs,”



Rona Pondick’s “Ear” is on display at the Cranbrook Art Museum.

her most flagrantly surrealist work, is a canister containing plastic spheres, each with teeth, colored yellow, orange and green. For Pondick, accompanying text explains, the disembodied mouth with teeth symbolizes the ravenous impulses underlying human behavior.

The more recent pieces, cast in stainless steel from models created with a computer’s aid, combine minimalism with classical realism. Those portions of the sculptures portraying animals’ active bodies are simplified and highly polished, evoking minimalism’s industrially perfect, elemental forms. By

contrast, the human parts – they re-create Pondick’s head, hands and arms – are matte-textured and hyper-realistic, showing wrinkles, stray hairs and pores.

Pondick’s hybrid creatures address innate, continuing fears of half-human, half-animal monsters – witness mythological beasts and the specter of genetic engineering. Displayed on the floor, the sculptures of animals with human parts include “Fox,” “Cougar,” “Dog” and, most effectively, “Monkeys.”

“Monkeys” portrays a gaggle of simians, gracefully interacting and seemingly supported by

outstretched human arms hugging the floor. Provocative for the reasons noted above, “Monkeys” also is the boldest manifestation of the artist’s distinguishing all Pondick’s creations – that is, the unerringly elegant placement of component parts.

The complementary exhibit “Transfigurations” is noteworthy in two respects: It shows what a wealth of modern and contemporary art lives in Michigan, and it demonstrates how over years artists have used the human body as a vehicle for addressing a variety of issues.

Take George Grosz, whose 1933 lithograph “The Heroes” portrays a broken-down veteran begging in a street, and was meant as an anti-war protest. Or consider Jean Dubuffet’s 1974 painting “Promenade a Deux,” whose doodle-like composition imitates a children’s drawing, which Dubuffet believed to be more honest and direct than mainstream, gallery and museum art.

Other works include Marshall Frederick’s classically idealized “Torso of a Dancer,” carved from black marble in the 1930s. It contrasts dramatically with Dennis Oppenheim’s 1970 exercise in body art, “Reading Position for Second Degree Burn (Stages I & II),” comprising color photographs documenting the artist’s intentional, bare-chested interaction with the sun.

Plenty of visual pleasure and food for thought awaits Cranbrook visitors. Many may even leave the museum perceiving their own, familiar bodies in unaccustomed ways.

Cranbrook Art Museum is at 39221 Woodward Ave. in Bloomfield Hills. Hours are 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. For more information, call (248) 645-3323 or access www.cranbrook.edu