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RONA PONDICK



Fox, 1998–99
Stainless steel, 37 x 9 x 14 in (94 x 23 x 36 cm)

Beauty and disgust also mingle in the work of Rona Pondick, which is deeply indebted to such Surrealists as René Magritte and Salvador Dalí. Pondick creates strange and disturbing sculptural fusions—breast-like bottles, piles of cast ears growing from clumps of paper pulp, heaps of small balls outfitted with yellowed and sometimes chattering teeth, and weird shiny stainless steel creatures that merge the artist's head or limbs with parts of monkeys, dogs, foxes, marmots, or cougars. *Fox*, 1999, presents a cast of Pondick's head attached to the body of a fox. The oversized head rests on the floor, seemingly pulling the lithe animal toward the ground as it bears the physical and metaphorical weight of human consciousness. Pondick's mutants point inward, suggesting manifestations of internal psychological conflicts. Some of these works seem to allude to the consequences of abandoning oneself to one's appetites, others to the conquest of our supposedly more refined sensibilities by an animal self.

Annette Messenger works with mutant forms as well, employing diverse media, including photographs, found objects, drawings, taxidermied animals, and handmade dolls, and presenting them in accumulations—they may be impaled on spikes in the middle of the gallery, hanging in clusters on the wall, or suspended from the ceiling. While full of pathos, the work often has an air of black humor, as in *Articulés-Désarticulés* (Articulated-Dislocated), 2002, in which pulleys raise and lower soft sculptures of dolls and body parts from the ceiling in an unmistakable and carnivalesque parody of sexual activity. On the floor, other organic forms lie inert, apparently spent. Messenger's materials and techniques (which include knitting, embroidery, and sewing) are drawn from the domestic and stereotypically feminine sphere, but express contrastingly desecrated subjects, once again upsetting the feminine/masculine dichotomy.

Like Smith and Messenger, Petah Coyne traffics in expressions of femininity. She builds sculptures around clusters of artificial flowers, lace, hair, birds, ribbons, and plaster figurines of the Virgin Mary, but removes them from their normal decorative functions. Covered with wax, tar, or horse hair, they are transformed into symbolic objects that are at once vital and elegiac. Coyne's sculptures are full of such deliberate contradictions. Materials that evoke living flesh play off others that suggest cinders and ashes. The purity of white wax and plaster is a stark foil to the black sand, wax, and tar that conjure up associations of death and decay. Objects resembling pods and roots evoke natural life forms, but they are suspended from the ceiling like severed trophies. Stuffed birds reference the freedom of flight, but they are encrusted with wax and frozen in amorphous lumps like artifacts preserved in mounds of cooled lava. *Untitled #820 (MIT Peacocks)*, 1992–2001, embodies all these contradictions. This white wax sculpture hangs from the ceiling by a chain wrapped with white satin. Bows and flowers are partially submerged in the ungainly wax form, while swooping peacock feathers attached to doves conjure an impossible dream of entrapment and escape. Despite, or perhaps because of their strangeness, works like these have an undeniably organic quality; in fact, Coyne calls them her "girls" in homage to the complex internal states they represent.

Helen Chadwick, who died prematurely of a heart attack at the age of forty-three, expressed internal states quite literally. Chadwick began her career creating performances and photographic tableaux that used her own nude body, much in the manner of Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke. Eventually she moved on to making photographs in which she used various materials as surrogates for the body