

Art in America

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Rona Pondick at fiction/nonfiction

Over the last few years, Pondick has been busily redirecting Arte Povera's scavenger hunt for esthetically potent discards. In a 1988 Sculpture Center installation, she made lumpy logs of wax so convincingly fecal that viewers instinctively held their breath, and presented them, as if they were crown jewels, on great satin-covered cushions or on sandbags draped in lead. With this installation, Pondick contended that the human body, and not the industrial or natural worlds, produces the most humanly engrossing raw material.

The symbolism of those cod-dled-turd sculptures was strongly Surrealist; this affinity is even more pronounced in Pondick's new work. "Bed Milk Shoe" is the title of her recent exhibition, and it names the themes of the six sculptures shown. The largest and most complex is *Double Bed*, in which, as in Rauschenberg's 1955 *Bed*, primed surface is made to pun with primal scene. Instead of painting on it, Pondick has lashed the bed with a grid of ropes, from every intersection of which protrudes a plastic baby bottle. The dreamlike conjugal bed—actually two mattresses yoked together—is preternaturally long. It is symbolically distended by its affective weight and narrowed by the constraints of procreation and maternal sustenance. But it is also buoyant, with its vinyl covering and dense proliferation of bottles suggesting a life raft; and, like a water bed, it seems an instrument of sensuality.

Milk bottles figure in three other sculptures, two of which also involve shoes. In *Milkman*, half-filled bottles are shoved into a pair of men's shoes, which rest on a soiled canvas pillow. The white buckled loafers are those of an old man at leisure—they are a virtual talisman of Miami Beach—and, in conjunction with the baby bottles and the dirty little bed, suggest sordid alliances and a doomed longing for second youth. Conversely, in the diminutive, wall-hung *Ballerina*, two well-used little ballet slippers, pressed demurely together, are the bearers for two empty nursing bottles, making a deft, age-collapsing joke about the creative life young girls are encouraged to pursue, and the maternal responsibilities urged on them as adults.



Rona Pondick: *Pump*, 1989, shoes, paper and plastic, 29 by 33 by 37 inches; at fiction/nonfiction.

The last sculpture to refer to nursing, and also the most insistent, shares its general form with the two remaining shoe sculptures. *Milk* is two roughly spherical agglomerations of heavy, drooping breasts made from plastic-impregnated paper towels and rubber nipples. Like *Pump*, a ball of black high-heeled shoes held together with laminated layers of newspaper, and *Soles*, a similar construction using black oxfords bound with steel wool, *Milk* is an organism at once germinative and malignant.

By turning from the scatological ambiguities of her previous work to these more explicit narratives, Pondick has embraced a more literary sensibility, bringing her work closer to, say, Louise Bourgeois's than Eva Hesse's. And like the original Surrealists, who shared this literary predilection, Pondick is both appalled and fascinated by Freud. Particularly compelling to her is the Freudian premise that the life of the psyche is as much a biological story as a social one.

—Nancy Princenthal