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Carly Berwick



LEFT The artist with the artist as art. OPPOSITE *Muskrat*, 2002-5.

Self-Portrait as Muskrat, Monkey, and Mouse

Mixing animal body parts with her own, genre-bending sculptor **Rona Pondick** makes hybrids that unite the emotional and the intellectual, the sublime and the grotesque

'YOUR WORK IS kind of like my experience of oysters," an admirer once told Rona Pondick. "On first viewing, it's really repellent, but then you can't have enough of it."

Pondick has been teasing and provoking audiences since the '80s with her eccentric, unnerving sculpture. She boldly explored the figure when abstraction was the rule, used dirt and faux feces as materials when a purist minimalism prevailed, and, perhaps strangest of all, she imbued her creations with a contradictory elegance. Her work has never quite fit.

Marrying classical mythology with sci-fi—body of a fox, head of a Pondick—the artist makes seamless mergers that unite the improbable and the impossible, the emotional and the intellectual, the sublime and the grotesque, the aggressive and the pathetic, the rough and the smooth, tradition and technology.

This plays out in her large (about seven feet wide) Bernini-esque sculpture *Monkeys* (1998-2001). A lively tangle of shiny

stainless-steel simians, it compels viewers to follow the action in the curves and the intertwining figures, but also to participate in the wild rumpus as our own reflections in the surface make monkeys of us all. The simians, many with Pondick heads, appear in continuous motion, neither coming nor going. And reaching out from the chaos—like a controlling tail, or an appendage to tell the tale—is the artist's long, skin-textured arm and big hand, trying to hold everything in place or commanding both monkeys and viewers to pay attention.

And they do. Once, at a Whitney Museum panel, Pondick says, "I got asked by someone in the audience why I was using teeth in my work." The artist answered, "It's because when I was angry I wanted to bite someone, and I wanted to see what would happen if I put that into my work."

For her, she says, what's important is not only the content but also the fact that "the work embodies a visceral connection; you feel it with your own body. How something is made

BY BARBARA A. MACADAM

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really affects how people experience it, how the making disappears and the effect is magical." She recalls "trying to figure out how to move a surface the way Donatello does, to make it perfectly smooth with no rippling." When she was making her first human-animal pieces, she says, and was trying to resolve where smooth meets textured, "I would close my eyes and use my hands. You can't do it visually." She likens her process to Brancusi's. "When he was working on his *Sculpture for the Blind*, he was touching it, not seeing it—not conscious."

The comparison of *Monkeys* to Bernini applies not only to the composition and the sense of movement, but also to the way

the material itself communicates. When you look at a Bernini sculpture, Pondick says, you sense that the material is alive. In *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, for example, you can feel the saint's orgasm in the marble. "It's about how to make something feel materially so sensuous that you feel it in your body."

Observes Mary Ceruti, director of the SculptureCenter in New York, "Rona works with the figure and with realism, but she isn't really interested in any of those things. She's like a visionary in that she draws on her own sense of the world." Unlike such predecessors as Hieronymus Bosch, Gustave Moreau, and Ernst Fuchs, a founder of the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism, Pondick explores genetic engineering and its potential to create a new reality.

How else to account for a sculpture like *Muskrat* (2002–5), a balloon-shaped, mirror-finished stainless-steel animal? It stands like an Al Capp '50s cartoon Shmoo and is topped by a tiny stern-looking and inscrutable Pondick face. The artist's disproportionately huge skin-textured thumb is where one appendage should be, and a malformed hand appears in place of another. The liquidlike metal surfaces are seam-

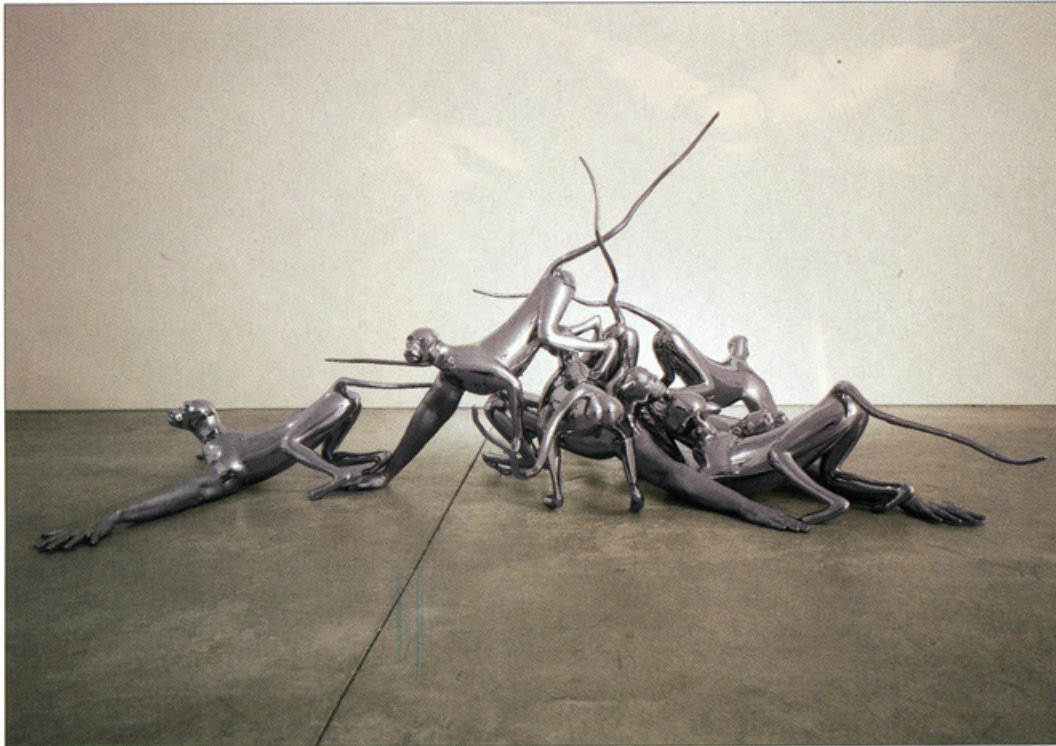
lessly connected to the textured ones, keeping in perpetual play the parts and the whole, and suggesting endless metamorphosis. The artist's human-tree hybrids are also visionary in their way. Pondick has been working on these delicate-limbed metallic trees since 2001. They have been exhibited indoors and out, on tabletops and in nature, and, most dramatically, reflected in ponds. Some are bonsai; others are full size. Realistic in execution, with miniature, often golden Pondick heads dangling from their graceful branches, or with hands reaching out like buds, they have a meditative and unsettling effect. Transformation has always been at the core of Pondick's work: she blends genders, posits impermanence as a permanent condition, and blurs myth and reality, all the while using technology to concrete, traditional ends.

Today she is known for these unearthly human-animal and human-flora hybrids, which she began making in the late '90s. Ceruti recalls first seeing these composites and finding them "disquieting" and "somehow shocking at a moment when you didn't think art could shock you."

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Monkeys,
1998–2001, with
Pondick heads
and hands (detail
left) asserting
control over the
wild rumpus.

THE 57-YEAR-OLD Brooklyn-born New Yorker has been speaking the language of the body since she emerged, in 1977, from the Yale School of Art, where she studied sculpture with Richard Serra, among others. She distinguished herself early on with a quirky vocabulary of anatomical parts and body-related objects that had some of Louise Bourgeois's oddity and near-surrealism and Philip Guston's poignant, ambiguous symbolism.

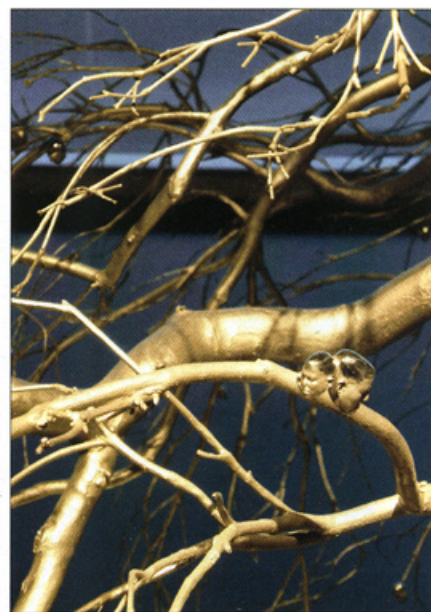
She became known for teeth embedded in mouths made of dirt, wax, or resin; beds composed of lead, wood, and satin; a canvas cushion topped by a pair of shoes with baby bottles nestled in them; and long dangling stockings with shoes hanging from them. Her fascination with materials and their effects was evident from the start. Using bronze, wax, canvas, and nylon, she let the quixotic materials—baby bottles, nipples, fecal-looking matter, lead—achieve an ambiguous emotional reach, from warm to funny to disgusting. In one work, she provocatively put a wax turd on a bed, partly, she says, in reaction to “the taboo in the '70s and '80s against dealing with figuration.”

Then, in the late '90s, she began exploring not only new techniques, such as digital prototyping, but also new content, moving from the transgressive and scatological to the mythological and scientific. The digitization enabled her to make the hybrids with that one constant throughout, Pondick herself—her head, arms, legs, hands, and feet, tiny to huge and in various textures. She could cast these in many sizes and mediums.

Besides incorporating the heads into pastiche figures, she also let the heads go solo, making bronze worry beads out of them in graduated sizes, affixing ram's horns to them, and turning them into jewelry—earrings, necklaces—and big sculptures, conjuring antiquity.

In 2002 Pondick started showing the stainless-steel hybrids at Sonnabend Gallery in New York and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris and Salzburg, which represent her, as well as at Howard Yezerski Gallery in Boston. The small ones sell for between \$30,000 and \$40,000, and the large outdoor and commissioned pieces for several hundred thousand dollars.

But in 2006, she suffered a devastating neurological disorder, a spinal injury that left her partially paralyzed for a year.



***Crimson Queen Maple*, 2003, at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo (detail right).**



She recalls, “I lost everything I knew how to do. I forgot how to use my body.” Repeated surgery, intensive physical therapy, and a brutal exercise regimen enabled her to continue working, but not as she had before. “I can’t lift anymore, so I move differently,” she says. “I had to learn how to use my hands again.”

In 2009 Pondick got the opportunity, after seven years in the planning, to test her ideas about process and to examine where and how her own work fits into the larger history of art and culture. It reinvigorated her.

Susan L. Stoops, curator of contemporary art at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts, suggested she assume a



COURTESY SONNENBEND GALLERY, NEW YORK AND GALERIE THADDEUS ROPAC, PARIS, SALZBURG

curatorial role and choose works from the museum's encyclopedic collection that she felt resonated with her own. It would be "an alternative kind of Pondick exhibition," says Stoops, like "two exhibitions in one: a solo show introducing visitors to Rona's hybrids—14 works from the past decade—and a group show in which she was one of only two artists we could identify by name." The other was Auguste Rodin, represented by his small, dramatic, black-painted bronze *Head of Sorrow* (1882).

The show, "Rona Pondick: The Metamorphosis of an Object," included works from 2000 B.C. to the present, and from worlds as distant as ancient Greece, Angola, India, Egypt, and China. Guarding the entrance to the gallery was Pondick's huge, yellow stainless-steel *Dog* (1998–2001), presiding, with the artist's inscrutable face, like a Great Sphinx, both welcoming and defying anyone to enter. On one side of it sat a meditating Thai Buddha; on the other, a 1,000-year-old squatting ceramic figure from Mexico; and beside him, an implacable Egyptian statuette from the second millennium B.C.

Stoops discovered, she says, how "each of the groupings had its own personality and dynamic—a bit like a dinner party that yields surprising conversations." The resonances were uncanny. A second-century Roman bronze, *Portrait of a Lady* (Possibly a Daughter of Marcus Aurelius), featuring an extraordinarily precise

hairdo with a braided bun in the back and a part down the middle, shared the striking textural detail of Pondick's *Mouse* (2002–6), a tiny, pathetic animal body with a huge Pondick head and as-if-wet combed-through hair. The attention to detail in *Mouse* plays in counterpoint to its affecting aspect.

IT'S THAT INTERPLAY that fascinates Pondick, who lives with her husband, the figurative painter Robert Feintuch. They have been together for 35 years, sharing an East Village loft where they also have their studios. The living area is tidy, minimal, and art free; the studios, in the back, are darker and well ordered, with computers and materials carefully set out on shelves.

The two have sometimes collaborated, as in a 1996 performance, called *MINE*, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. "We were trying to put the subjects in our work into a performance with music and dance," Pondick says. Appropriately, it featured the obsessions of each, including Pondick's teeth and Feintuch's huge sculpted ears. And the artists also serve as in-house critics and advisers to each other. "Robert's art," Pondick says, "is more cerebral than mine. I'm more emotional; when I see something that excites me I respond by smelling it, feeling it." For his part, Feintuch says, "I see Rona's art as more cerebral than mine." He adds, "We both rely on intuition. Rona begins by

manipulating with her hands; for me it's more like a novel."

Describing her working habits, Pondick says, "I'm a New York farmer. I wake up at five, swim and exercise, and I'm in my studio by nine. I have three assistants, and we work until six thirty, then I eat dinner and am in bed by eight." Tall, often jeans-clad, with short curly gray hair and a no-nonsense manner, she even has something of the air of a farmer. But her appearance is as deceptive as her work is, with its severity and pristine craftsmanship playing in counterpoint to its playful, witty, and sometimes angry nature.

In her studio, Pondick is fueled by a continuous stream of music—from Beethoven and Mozart to salsa and Ray Charles—programmed into her iPod by her husband. Out of the studio and not "farming," she travels seriously and reads widely. On her shelves are biographies, such as *The Unknown Matisse* by

OPPOSITE *Head in Tree*, 2006–8, at Sonsbeek Park in Arnhem, the Netherlands.

RIGHT Stainless-steel *Pondick-headed Mouse*, 2002–6, with ancient sculptures, including a second-century Roman bronze bust (left), from the Worcester Art Museum's collection.



Hilary Spurling, and art-history texts, including a collection of essays on the 16th-century German sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider, one of her favorites, edited by Julien Chapuis. And then a range of fiction that not surprisingly includes Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (it touches, she says, on "the fear of losing control, waking up a monster, and inspiring disgust in people"), Vladimir Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* ("for its dark humor and wordplay"), and Will Self's *Cock & Bull* (which features a man with a wound on his leg that turns out to be a vagina). Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the encyclopedia of mythic transformation, presides.

In the meantime, other changes are imminent. Pondick, whose exhibition "Metamorphosis" is at the Nassau County Museum of Art through May 23, plans to move shortly into her long-in-renovation new studio, located in the late Pat Hearn's legendary East Village storefront gallery. The studio will be filled with light and spacious enough to allow Pondick to see her sculptures in groupings as she works on them.

And, as feeling and mobility have been returning to her arms and hands, she has begun experimenting with the process of drawing. "spontaneously seeing where the imagery leads me," she says.

Wherever it leads, the artist will still be present, if not in the almost-flesh, then in the powerful, controlling head. ■