

CRANBROOK,
MICHIGAN

By Matthew Biro

RONA PONDICK: SCULPTURE, 1992—2003 (*Cranbrook Art Museum, September 20—November 30, 2003*) is a mid-career look at an important artist. Since the mid-1980s, Pondick has made sculptures and installations that focus on the body and on corporeal signs of psyche (nipples, for example, as well as mouths, feet and ears). Like Robert Gober, Janine Antoni and Charles Ray, Pondick creates sculptures that are both humorous and terrifying, and much of the power of her work comes from its integration of the comic with the grotesque.

Mary Jane (1992), the earliest work presented, stands about four feet tall and hangs from wires attached to the ceiling. Made out of a pair of stockings stuffed with polyester and hardened with an acrylic medium, it simulates the bottom half of some strange humanoid with two elongated, boneless legs and a dimpled, slightly protruding crotch. The figure's yellowish white legs terminate in a dainty pair of white Mary Janes that rest on the floor. Its legs bulge where they enter the shoes, as if the flesh was being pulled down by gravity. An eerie meditation on childhood and development, *Mary Jane* reveals Pondick's debt to Louise Bourgeois. Its appropriated commercial materials bind together a series of disturbing oppositions including sensuality and decay, liquid and solid, and childhood and old age. It makes us think of how our bodies grow and decline, and how they are shaped by the products—fashionable or not—in which we house them.

Dirt Head (1997) is an installation of consisting of hundreds of iterations of Pondick's most famous sculptural element: a sphere that sprouts a mouth complete with teeth. Four hundred brown wax and thermoplastic mouth-spheres

lie scattered on a pile of dark earth that reaches its apex in the room's corner. Some of the spheres lie on top while others are partially buried. They look like a huge scattering of potatoes or bodies in a mass grave. Pondick's spheres are so disturbing because they suggest severed heads and, at the same time, complete creatures. Because of their freakish hybrid forms, they appear to be mutants frozen in a process of either growth or decay. *Sourballs* (1995) presents these monsters differently. Here smaller versions are cast in green, yellow, and orange plastic, wrapped in Mylar, and housed in a large glass jar like taffies at a candy store. Both deadly products and preserved specimens, Pondick's oral and seemingly sadistic spheres raise questions of the body's relation to technology and mass reproduction.

Dirt Head is the masterpiece of the show as well as its only installation. This is a shame, since Pondick's best works are generally her environmental ones. Instead, the second half of the exhibition focuses on a new series of sculp-

tures that Pondick has made since 1998: cast stainless steel multiples representing human-animal hybrids, whose mismatching body parts are depicted with different degrees of realism. This focus is not a large problem, since many of these new works are provocative and interesting. Among the stand-outs are *Fox* (1998—99) and *Monkeys* (1998—2001). *Fox* is typical of Pondick's new sculptures in that it merges a smooth, shiny, and somewhat abstract animal's body with a darker self-portrait head that is both hyper-realistic and minutely textured. *Monkeys* is much more elaborate: eight quicksilver monkeys with textured human arms swarm over one another in a pile. Two of them bear Pondick's visage instead of their own. These works splice mythic themes—chimeras, animal deities and the like—to questions of genetic engineering. In addition, they show Pondick to be moving from a formal language inspired by surrealism and post-minimalism to one that suggests Hollywood special-effects films like *Terminator II* or *Mars Attacks*.



Rona Pondick, *Dog*, 1998—2001, stainless steel, 28 by 17 by 21 inches (courtesy Sonnabend Gallery, New York).