

Visual Arts

This 'Metamorphosis' spans centuries

Sculpture exhibit juxtaposes ancient and contemporary

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WORCESTER — At first glance, it's like a cocktail party. Figures mingle in small groups. Some grin and gesture. Others look surpassingly earnest. One lolls backward on the furniture. It's a people-watcher's dream, made all the more available for studying because the figures are not actually people, they're sculptures.

The first delight of "Rona Pondick: The Metamorphosis of an Object" at the Worcester Art Museum is its immediacy. The sculptor has juxtaposed her own work with objects from the museum's collection, populating a gallery with pieces from around the world and across the centuries. Granted, she's the only contemporary artist in the bunch.

Sculptures from Ancient Greece consort with those from Angola, Egypt, and China, made in different centuries and even different millennia. It's thrilling to see them together; they look like old friends.

Most viewers respond viscerally to figurative sculptures:



Rona Pondick's sculptures, including "Dog" (left) and "Muskrat" are placed alongside pieces from other countries and centuries.

They are objects in space, and so are we. A direct body-to-body appraisal occurs when we meet up with one. Pondick and curator of contemporary art Susan A. Stoops have opted not to put labels near the art, encouraging that interaction and removing a screen of information and classification that can get in the way of it. The information is available in a brochure. I recommend walking through the show before you pick it up.

Pondick, who garnered recognition in the early 1990s for her psychologically charged installations, has in recent years turned to individual works that are hybrids of humans and animals or plants. She has organized "The

Metamorphosis of an Object" (the title draws on Ovid's story of creation and Kafka's story of inexplicable transformation) according to her own interests: gesture and posture; hair; and repetition of imagery.

Step in the door, and you'll be greeted — or perhaps confronted — by a group of four works.

One is Pondick's "Dog," with a lean, greyhound's body in yellow stainless steel, polished to a mirror gleam, seated on its haunches. It has big, human arms and hands, and a stern-faced human head. Head and hands are rough with pores, wrinkles, and other skin textures. "Dog" sits here because of its staunch posture,

alert and strong. To one side, a 15th- or 16th-century bronze Thai Buddha sits in a lotus position, and on the other squats a sturdy, ceramic Mexican figure (900-1200), his arms crossed and his jaw square. The final statue is a broad-shouldered Egyptian "Statuette of Hapidefai" (2060-1780 BCE) in limestone, also sitting.

It's a wonder to see them all together, coming from vastly different cultures and eras, but united in their stolid postures. They could be sentries, or more likely kings, or gods, each erect and imposing.

Pondick's sculptures alone provoke wild and nuanced re-

sponses. To see them among their fellows ties the contemporary fears and desires manifested in her art to those perennial in human consciousness. I love her "Muskrat," plump and shiny, with a ridiculously tiny human head, and human fingers for arms. It stands seemingly hesitant among an array of other standing figures, including an 18th-century South Indian bronze rendering of the Hindu monkey god Hanuman, another creature that appears part human, part animal. Nancy Princenthal, in her catalog essay, points out that such hybrids, which we now anxiously associate with bioengineering, go back 32,000 years to the Paleolithic era; they have often invoked the strengths of the animals they represent.

A side display shows how Pondick sculpts, with traditional techniques of carving and modeling, and with new technologies. All the human forms in her pieces were made with her own life casts used for computer scanning. The heads, in a wide range of scales, are all hers. They look pained, yearning, dour, or contemplative, depending on the context of the particular sculpture, but they are all from the same single cast.

Her exploration of hair arose from her own quandary about

how to accurately represent hair in a sculpture. An early 20th-century Angolan mask made with wood and hemp does it with tubular beads; a Chinese limestone Buddha head (550-577) features snail-like curls. Each of Pondick's two nightmarish pieces titled "Monkey With Hair" sport a glistening stainless steel face, and hair in shades of gray and black, as long as an ungroomed sheepdog's.

Repetitive imagery goes back to Pondick's unsettling early installations (one featured dozens of bulbous pink balls, like blobs of flesh, each outfitted with a set of human teeth). Here, she offers several casts of her head, in declining scale, strung together as "Worry Beads," and "Ram's Head," in which a human head wears dramatic horns and earrings made of head beads.

These two bracket the early 10th-century Japanese wood sculpture "Juichimen Kannon," a kingly figure who wears a crown populated with small people. All those figures add up to a fetishized self, which is a frightening and potent thing to look upon.

In "The Metamorphosis of an Object," Pondick invites us to our own unfiltered responses by plunging us back into history without the net of historical context. She honors a raft of unknown, long-dead sculptors by placing them beside her own work in an exhibit that is startlingly contemporary. She celebrates what they, and we, all have in common: a human body, and a desire to make sense of the unknown.

REVIEW

**RONA PONDICK: The
Metamorphosis of an Object**
At: Worcester Art Museum, 55
Salisbury St., Worcester,
through Oct. 11. 508-799-4406,
www.worcesterart.org