

Startling works evoke buried memories

REVIEW/by Joanne Silver

"Rona Pondick: Sculpture and Drawing," at the Howard Yezerski Gallery, through Nov. 2.

Out of the mouths of Rona Pondick's art, stories unfold, haltingly, like tales of childhood abuse or adolescent shame.

Lurid fruits with gaping mouths look ready to bite; printed dental patterns streak loops of blood-red paint; well-worn ballet slippers nestle two empty baby bottles; a pair of Mary Janes, holding two more bottles, sit on a stained canvas cushion, unable to cover the spot.

The artist understands the strength of fetishes and buried memories — fragments allowed to fester until they take on a power and life of their own.

Drawing upon this power, Pondick constructs sculptures and works on paper that initially startle with their graphic references to the human body. Before long, however, the true source of the discomfort becomes manifest: It lies in the invisible, not what is seen in Pondick's art.

By calling upon images as commonplace as baby bottles and sofa pillows, shoes and plates of food, Pondick places her work in the midst of human experience. From there, it isn't far to the unspoken particulars that accumulate in a person's life, giving it meaning and emotional resonance.

Pondick deftly navigates her charged terrain. She can suggest the secrets lurking within the everyday, and the universal forces uniting even the most hidden events from childhood.

Other 20th-century artists, from Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse to Kiki Smith, have found in body parts an artistic avenue to issues involving sexuality and gender. "Corporal Politics," last year's MIT show that created a furor within the National Endowment for the Arts, featured several pieces by Pondick, similar to those in the current exhibition.



'BALLERINA' is among the sculptures by Rona Pondick on view at the Yezerski Gallery.

Where Pondick differs from some of her peers is in her desire to go deeper than the physical, to a region explored by Freud, Jung and Kafka — a psychological realm in which bodily attributes serve as signposts.

"Red Platter," the most visually arresting work in the show, offers 41 unnaturally red balls that look like pomegranates with teeth, stacked on a big wooden serving dish. The disembodied headlike forms call to mind figures from religion and art — Adam, John the Baptist and Orpheus, among others — as well as private impulses rearing their ugly teeth.

A 19th century version of an ancient fable has the wolf saying to the lamb: "Your guilt consists in this: I want to eat you up." Pondick acknowledges that when she was younger, "I would be talking to someone and get this tremendous urge to bite them." Now she makes art that bites back.

Pondick's palette becomes much more muted in the quietly terrifying sculpture "No,"

the piece with the Mary Janes, baby bottles and huge soiled cushion. Here, the bite is internalized. Minimal in its construction, the work has the power to suggest thwarted dreams — in the bottles plugged with milk-white plastic, thrust into the girl's shoes — and sordid moments from the past. The pillow's gray stain, so nondescript as to be almost invisible, calls out silently from recesses far darker than any bodily orifice.

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