

KERI GUTEN COHEN | GALLERIES

Sculptor puts herself into her work



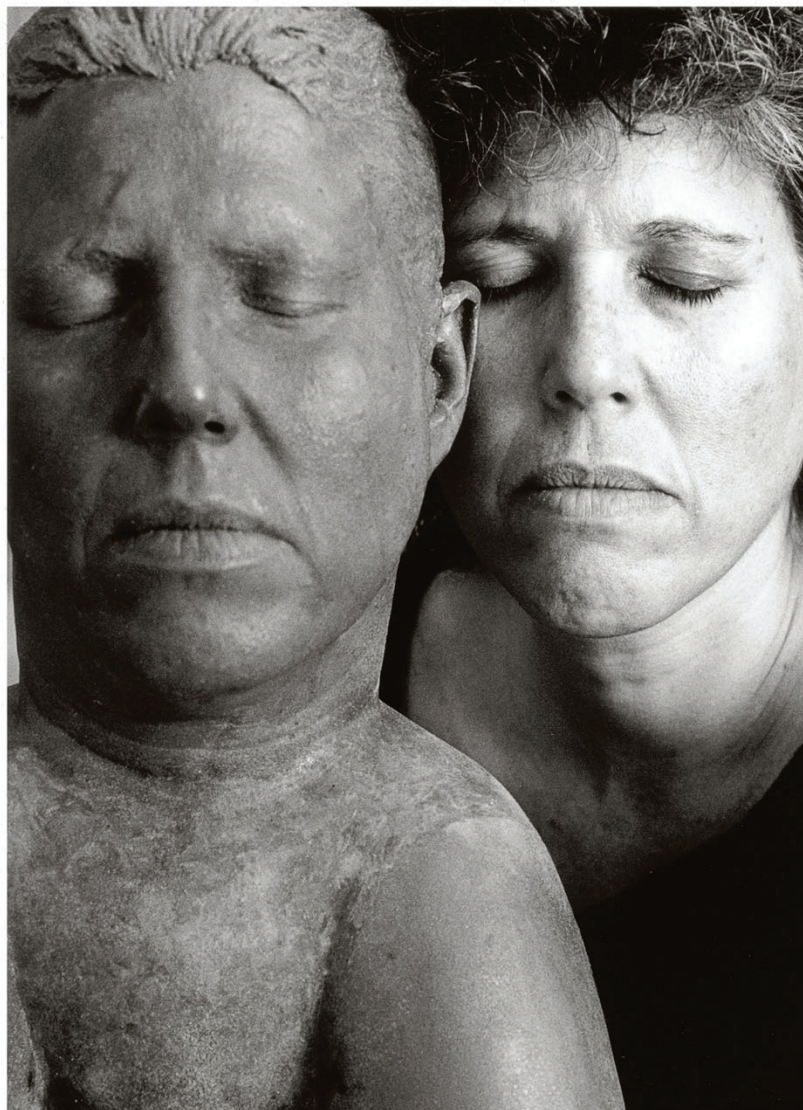
In her first Michigan exhibition, New York sculptor Rona Pondick has put together a mid-career survey.

Spanning 1992-2003, the show at Cranbrook Art Museum offers a fascinating look at an artist's evolution. Though the work is varied, what remain constant are her use of fragmented body parts, her uncanny sense of scale, her love of materials and her blending of craft with 21st-Century technology.

Pondick is a participant in prestigious group exhibitions such as the Lyon, Johannesburg and Venice biennales and the Whitney Museum of American Art's biennial.

The Cranbrook exhibition, curated by the museum's Joe Houston, features more than 15 works, including two room-size installations and a site-specific outdoor installation. The show moves chronologically, allowing viewers to see the progression of her ideas.

The earliest piece plays with sense of scale and mutability of body parts. In "Mary Jane," a pair of white children's shoes is anchored on the floor, while stretched and painted stockings bulging with stuffing at the ankles reach impossibly high toward the ceiling.



NANA WATANABE

Rona Pondick in her studio with her part-human, part-animal "Dog."

Detroit Free Press

SUNDAY

Section E | Sept. 28, 2003

Nearby is "Sourballs," a large glass jar filled with fist-sized neon-colored candies wrapped in Mylar. On closer inspection, the candies are spheres with cast impressions of Pondick's teeth. Are they benign or dangerous?

The toothy spheres appear again in "Dirt Head," but are drastically altered by context and material. A massive mound of dark brown dirt slopes from one corner down toward the center of the room. Lying in groups, some half-buried, are hundreds of grayish-brown spheres with teeth — made of dirt, wax and plastic — that look much like skulls littering a graveyard. It's meditative yet haunting.

This piece has been shown in several countries, and the meaning differs in each one.

"In South Africa, where earth is a material used in so much African art, I didn't anticipate they'd be terrified," Pondick said. "They wouldn't touch it and

**'Rona Pondick:
Sculpture, 1990-2003'**

Through Nov. 30
11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tue.-Sun., 11 a.m.-9 p.m.
the fourth Fri. of each month
Cranbrook Art Museum
39221 Woodward, Bloomfield Hills
\$6 adults; \$4 students, teens and seniors; free,
children 12 and younger with adult admission
877-462-7262

thought it was black magic or voodoo. In the Netherlands, it reminded people of death associated with dams breaking. In Austria, people thought of the Holocaust. In France, it was genetics. Context has a strong impact on how we read things."

For "Ears," Pondick cast her own ears out of urethane resin and paper pulp and artfully piled 300 of them in an installation. They are more than life-sized and look heavy, though they are actually very light. Pondick and her husband, painter Robert Feintuch, designed them to be used in a performance of music and dance.

"We made meaning by multiplying a body fragment and intensifying it through repetition," Pondick said.

Pondick began casting her own body parts — teeth, hands, legs and head — to use in her art in 1987. She uses medical silicone for detail, and the parts must be encased for two to three hours. It's dangerous, so she decided she could use only herself as a guinea pig. She admits she lost her eyelashes and eyebrows many times to the cause.

"I've used my body parts for so long, I think of them as tools, not as self-portraits," she said.

But surrealistic self-portraits they are, especially her newest body of work, in which she creates

hybrid creatures that are part human, part animal. The human characteristics — usually head and hands — are Pondick's.

"Dog," for example, is an arresting piece in gleaming golden yellow stainless steel. Like an obedient pet, the dog sits at attention. Pondick's hands, rather than paws, rest on the floor. Her head — eyes shut tight and hair slicked back — sets squarely on the dog's shoulders. Her hands and head are in hyper detail, while the dog's body is smooth, hairless, cartoon-like. The sense of scale is skewed because her hands and head are so large. These contrasts, which appear in all her new sculpture, add to the intrigue.

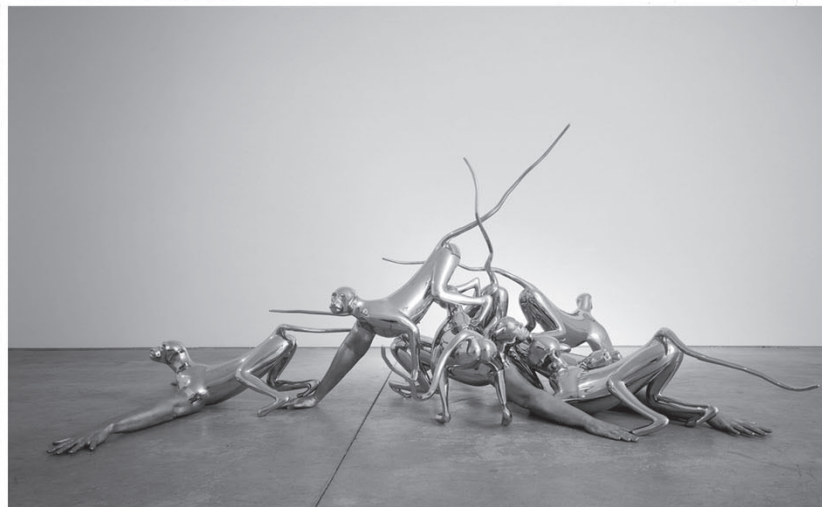
"Monkeys" is a masterful sculpture of playful, intertwined stainless steel monkeys, some with Pondick's arms, hands and head. In other pieces, the perfectly detailed heads are used as dangling earrings or buds on a tree and scaled down to one-quarter of an inch.

In various graceful, but animal-like, postures, you'll find other hybrid creatures, such as a fox, a cougar, a squirrel — all genetically bred by Pondick to be her descendants. And the telling features are quite apparent.

"These are my children," said Pondick, who has no children or pets at home in New York. "I don't feel like God, but, as Philip Guston said, in your studio you can do anything you want."

Reactions to Pondick's "children" are varied. Some find her sculptures creepy and disturbing, others think they're fresh and humorous.

"They start dialogue and I'm very interested in that," Pondick said. "The animal-human monster is the most timeless image that ever existed. It's very rich to work with. But it's also current because of genetics. It allows me to straddle history and be in our own time simultaneously."



RONA PONDICK

"Monkeys, 1998-2001" by Rona Pondick.