

Features

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2003

If you can get past opening, you'll enjoy artist's exhibit

By Joy Hakanson Colby
Detroit News Art Critic

BLOOMFIELD HILLS

Where's the nearest exit? That's a typical first response to Rona Pondick's sculpture exhibit, which opens the new season at Cranbrook Art Museum.

The work is part nightmare and part myth, part genetic engineering and part digital technology. Put them all together and they add up to a field day for armchair psychologists.

But if you can get past the two installations at the beginning of the exhibit — 18 tons of dirt strewn with casts of the artist's teeth and the heap of 300 giant severed ears — you are in for a terrific experience.

Pondick, 51, who is based in New York, is building her reputation internationally with one-person shows in Israel, the Netherlands, Italy and, in the United States, at the Brooklyn Museum and Boston's Institute for Contemporary Art. She's also been represented in major group shows such as the Venice Biennale and the Whitney Biennial in New York. Cranbrook curator Joe Houston caught her at her peak career for her first survey exhibit covering 15 years.



"Dog" has Rona Pondick's head attached to an animal body. The piece was cast in yellow stainless steel.

Rona Pondick

Cranbrook Art Museum,
39221 Woodward Ave.,
Bloomfield Hills
11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tues.-Sun.
through Nov. 30
Admission: \$6 general, \$4
students and seniors
(877) 0462-7262

Eleven of the 16 works in the show fuse ancient ideas and techniques with 21st-century science and technology to create astonishing images. For instance, Pondick combines human and animal body parts to echo the chimera of classical mythology while suggesting today's genetic manipulation.

Her hybrid creatures zero in on the current fascination with aliens and monsters. In fact, her sculpture represents a more sophisticated level of the impulse that caused Steven Spielberg to turn "E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial" into a beloved film star.

Pondick casts her own head, hands and arms, using cutting-edge digital technologies to alter the size. Thus, the bronze "Worry Beads" graduates a ring of heads until the smallest only measures a fraction of an inch.

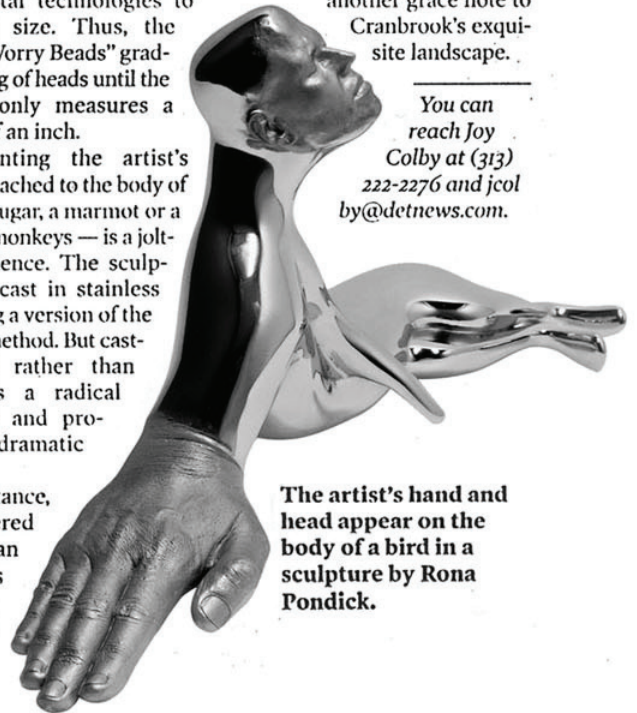
Confronting the artist's head — attached to the body of a dog, a cougar, a marmot or a swarm of monkeys — is a jolting experience. The sculptures are cast in stainless steel, using a version of the lost-wax method. But casting steel rather than bronze is a radical departure and produces dramatic effects.

For instance, she rendered the human body parts with a matte finish

and the surfaces show every pore, wrinkle and vein. In contrast, the animal forms are honed and polished to flow with a liquid grace. The tour de force here is the work that joins eight monkeys, six human arms and two of the artist's heads. These elements are cast in one piece and writhing with manic energy.

Don't miss the "Crimson Queen Maple," the dwarf tree sculpture Pondick created specially for the exhibit. It stands outdoors at the southern end of the Triton pools, adding another grace note to Cranbrook's exquisite landscape.

You can reach Joy Colby at (313) 222-2276 and jcolby@detnews.com.



The artist's hand and head appear on the body of a bird in a sculpture by Rona Pondick.