

# THE METAMORPHOSIS

"I don't think there's an absurd reading, nor do I think there's a wrong reading," says sculptor Rona Pondick of her work. "When I say that metamorphosis is central in my work, Kafka's a hero. And what I love about Kafka's writing is that he embraces polarities within the writing: At the same time that something is absurdly funny, it's dead serious."

It shouldn't be difficult for anyone to establish a link between Franz Kafka and Pondick — she's been dealing in metamorphoses for years, and, like Kafka, there's something nightmarish in her work that flashes with the first glance, then disappears, but creeps back in long after the sculpture is out of sight. Pondick's allusions to Kafka are little more than theoretical, though — some of almost infinite strains of meaning that collide at the surface.

Born in Brooklyn in 1952 and based in New York, she began making art practically at birth, but the figurative ambiguity of her work is a more recent evolution, her emancipation from the ascetic Minimalist maxims of her art education. *Rona Pondick: Sculpture, 1990-2003*, at Cranbrook Art Museum, is Pondick's first Michigan exhibition, and the first major retrospective of her work anywhere. And since it opened it's met with the same confusion that's trailed her around the world. There are a few consistent readings that correspond to her own visual consistencies: Fragmented and transmogrified figures are invariably aligned with genetics or science fiction, and words like "fetish" and "Freudian" lay in wait. As Pondick says, there are no wrong readings. Yet there are no right readings, either, and that's where the work becomes a little mystifying. "When I realized when I was younger that as much as I want to control my viewer, I can't," she says. "I thought, why not engage this aspect and look for highly charged images or materials that let you springboard? When someone says to me, 'What do you want your work to be about? How do you want to read it?' my initial response is, 'How do you see it?' I don't want to answer that question because even though I have specific reasons, as soon as I say that, as the artist, it stops the reading and it becomes one-dimensional."

Her recurring motifs — teeth, shoes, her own head — are disembodied, displaced from their points of origin and presumably primed for reanimation in some shadowy laboratory. These are survivors of the past and the future, disfigured but functioning, and perhaps unaware of their own aberration.

The pieces in *Sculpture* symbolize a transition in Pondick's aesthetic — from the organic to the synthetic (think *Terminator*) — but they're bound by a syntax of fragments and ruins: The grandeur of art is inevitably razed before it's reincarnated. Pondick's ultimate psychological trick is that her objects are subjects, and even in perpetual stasis, they initiate a dialogue that keeps the audience rapt, reiterating it with the same strange shapes.

"I'm interested in how the form, color and material affects the reading of an image," she explains. "If you look in the show, the first piece when you walk in is called 'Sour Balls,' and it's the same form as the hanging piece called 'Untitled (Shoe),' and it's the same form as the earth installation, 'Dirt Head.'"

The form is a ball (in varying sizes) with its own set of clenched teeth — in any context, the visceral implications are evident. In "Sour Balls," confections in green, yellow and orange are wrapped in plastic and locked in a glass jar. They're trapped, but they're not dead yet, and the comic appeal of the piece absorbs the menace. "Untitled (Shoe)" portrays the forms in a mass at the calf on a hanging, high-heeled leg, like creatures eating away at the Wicked Witch of the East. Only "Dirt Head" casts a somber veil across the form.

It's literally a mountain of dirt — 12 tons according to Cranbrook exhibitions curator Joe Houston — installed inside the museum and layered with more than 400 forms, themselves cast in a gray, coated dirt that appears to be held together by will more than anything else. The subtext of death isn't hard to determine, but Pondick's work never clings to a single extreme. The atmosphere of myth and magic is thick throughout the exhibition — in Johannesburg it insinuated voodoo — and with "Dirt Head" it evokes life in the pathos of figures that can't use their teeth for talking.

Her most recent works are aliens in her own realm, cast in a lustrous stainless steel over the past five years. The Sphinx-like "Dog" (in a newly developed golden steel) is the most prominent of the pieces — and in a perverse sense, it's the most familiar. Pondick's head, arms and hands are grafted onto what roughly resembles a dog's body, thus reinventing man as his own best friend. Genetic engineering is the topical allusion, but it's also the most circumstantial — the sculpture preceded the genome.

History is easily obscured by technology, but Pondick's animal-humans haven't abandoned the past; they're relics of mythology in millennial dress. "It's like quicksilver — it looks like it's melting right in front of you the way mercury does," she says. And her oeuvre of stainless steel works — "Dog," "Fox," "Pine Marten," "Unidentified Animal" and the maniacal "Monkeys" — materializes the mythological theme, though the ahistoricity of pop culture does its best to subvert it. Twenty-first-century zeitgeist is inconsequential in Pondick's constructions; the mythological creature is a vehicle for immortality, and all those extemporaneous interpretations are just passing.



**Rona Pondick:  
Sculpture 1990-2003  
at Cranbrook Art Museum**

by Natalie Haddad



Reasonably, the environment is never far removed from the sculpture. For the site-specific "Crimson Queen Maple," the Arcadian grounds of Cranbrook emulate the landscapes of children's fantasy — Wonderland, Narnia, etc. — and therein establish a climate in which improbable creatures aren't that improbable. Named for the tree from which it was cast, the stainless-steel piece sits in a bronze pot with a black patina that's weighted with onyx stones from Japan. Its matte silver branches that taper into soft points are no brute match for Cranbrook's soaring wood models, but it's made to outlast them all, with its tiny, chromed fruits — miniatures of Pondick's own head — forever clinging to it.

"I don't know if it's possible to make a universal image," she says, "but I'm really interested in the challenge, and the one thing that we, around the world, share is our body. From country to country, if you present the body, it's something we all know, we don't have to explain. And a fragment is something — whenever the mind is presented with a part, it immediately wants to complete or try to resolve what the hole is, and [the fragment] is a way to engage the viewer in a very direct way. If I showed the entire human figure or the entire animal, it would engage the viewer in a very different way."

Illusion clearly substantiates the works. The discrepancy between life and art, in effect, is unsettling, but it's the architecture of fantasy, and illusion arises from those elements that are missing — conventional reason no less than an arm or a torso. Analysis, therefore, can qualify Pondick's aesthetic insofar as it can broach the surface; however, an infrastructure of evidently paradoxical metaphors will inevitably return all that ascribed meaning to zero. These are images that come from Pondick's gut — hermetic to the world — and the gut reaction occasionally is to laugh. Keep digging deep — there's a rhinoceros waiting. | **RDW**

*Natalie's gut reaction is always to laugh. Email [natalie@getrealdetroit.com](mailto:natalie@getrealdetroit.com).*

*Rona Pondick: Sculpture, 1990–2003 runs through November 30 at Cranbrook Art Museum. For more information, call 248.645.3323 or visit [www.cranbrook.edu](http://www.cranbrook.edu).*

