

# RONA PONDICK

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF AN OBJECT MAKER

Octavio Zaya



Untitled Animal. 2001. Carbon steel. 16 x 113 x 55 cm.  
Courtesy Sonnabend, New York.

**F**OR THOSE WHO followed the work of Rona Pondick from the mid-80s and through the '90s, the pieces that she is showing for the first time at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris (February-March), and at Sonnabend Gallery, New York (March-May) might be seen as an unexpected departure from the signature objects and elements that populated her previous installations. Instead of body parts integrated in a landscape of beds, bottles, teeth, ears, furniture, clothes, and newspapers, this time she has gone further, using animals and hybrid creations to keep on poking our psyche. Those interested in her new venture have an opportunity to evaluate these new pieces as the exhibition travels to the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Bologna, Italy (opening in April), the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, in Lincoln, Massachusetts (opening in July), the Groninger Museum, the Netherlands (September), and other museums throughout Europe.

**Octavio Zaya:** *How did this new work emerge?*

**Rona Pondick:** I wanted to work with new images and new materials. Since I didn't know how to start, it made sense to begin by saying what I wouldn't do. I wouldn't use repetition, proliferation, or scatter; nor would I use funky materials or found objects. I turned to modeling and carving, old forms of making sculpture, but new to me. I began working with 3-D computer scanning, modeling and casting in materials like stainless steel and silicone rubber.

**OZ:** *Did you think you were breaking with your past?*

**RP:** Absolutely.

**OZ:** *So this was a trying and experimental time?*

**RP:** Of-course.

**OZ:** *Besides the ongoing material and technological development, what cultural references or stories were you dealing with while creating these new pieces?*

**RP:** When I combined my head with the animal body of a dog my first thoughts were about mythology. The animal/human hybrid and monsters have a long presence in art. You see them starting in Neolithic times, and they turn up throughout Egyptian, Greek, and Roman periods. It doesn't end there; you see these monstrous hybrids in work by individual artists like Goya, Redon, and Bosch. And now filmmakers create characters like Dracula, Frankenstein, the Fly, Alien, the Terminator. Why this fascination and why for so long? What does it mean?

**OZ:** *Pieces such as Dog, Fox, Cougar, Marmot, and Monkeys are indeed hybrid compositions, mutants of sorts. I know your reluctance to explain or characterize your work. And yet, I would like to know*

*what made you go in this direction — cloning, the genetic revolution of late?*

**RP:** You can go into more transgressive, more emotional, more "off" subjects with an animal than you can with humans, so I combined them.

**OZ:** *How long is it taking you to do these pieces? You are still working on Monkeys and it seems it won't be ready for a while longer.*

**RP:** I think I'm on the fourth year now. It has become a very complicated structure. I want it to feel fluid and frenetic in energy and to move like a baroque sculpture. It took me two years just to work out this relationship. At the same time I have also been modeling the animal bodies. I attached two of my own heads to two of the monkey bodies. These heads needed to be in scale with the monkey heads and feel totally integrated into the mix. I needed my head to be six inches tall and feel like a life cast with skin texture and detail, like a death mask. With 3-D computer scanning and printing I could take a life cast of my head and reduce it to any size I wanted.

**OZ:** *While you use cutting-edge technology and address current and pressing issues, the appearance of the work propounds compositions and many sculptural production problems of centuries long past. How do you handle this balancing act?*

**RP:** The balancing act is part of the subject.

**OZ:** *In your previous installations, even if the piece was very repulsive or arcane, you managed to bring the viewer in by staging or creating an inviting and challenging environment to be explored. Now the focus is exclusively on the object.*

**RP:** In the past I was interested in how a person moved through a room and how I could affect them with vast numbers of things scattered all around. I made meaning in the past by creating, repeating, and scattering a proliferation of images that surrounded and engulfed the viewer. Now I want to do the exact opposite and make self-contained objects. Now my sculptures are either walking, reclining, seated or climbing. They claim their physical spaces like animals that are territorial. The human skin texture merges naturally into the highly smoothed and polished animal bodies as if these two extreme states have collided in one body. The physical posture of each animal and the human gesture merge these two foreign bodies. Although I want my sculptures to occupy a room in a different way than I did in the past, I still want my work to be about a kind of emotional and psychological state that makes you aware of your own body.

**OZ:** *I recall you mentioning The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters, by Goya. When I saw your new work, I thought you were probing and questioning our technological and scientific advances and the direction they were taking us. When Goya*

*created this piece, in 1797, the Enlightenment in Spain was coming to a crashing end. Are your irrational mutations, which seduce us with their repelling beauty, trying to foretell something?*

**RP:** I think we have to have another interview in about four years for me to really answer that.

**OZ:** *This new work, for the first time, uses images of yourself. It is, in a certain twisted way, the portrait of a nightmare.*

**RP:** From the beginning, my work has been about a metamorphosis. It brings me back to Kafka, the idea of transformation, something in flux. The imagery was as much about me then as the imagery is now. In my previous work the sculptures were more internal; now the sculptures are more external. My new work can be read more easily as a self-portrait. I think my work has been and will probably always be about a metamorphosis. Sometimes I think what you do is spiral around and say the same thing over and over again; even when you try hard to say it differently, you're saying the same thing.

**OZ:** *Borges?*

**RP:** Exactly. I don't think an artist ever goes in a linear direction, nor is life linear. Look at history. We are in an endless spiral. We think we are moving forward, but we are repeating and going around and around, thinking we are moving forward. In my new work I'm stepping back into history, and I'm also stepping forward. I'm doing both simultaneously.

**OZ:** *You are projecting the nightmarish genetic-scape of our imagination to come as much as dealing with Bernini's compositions and Donatello's sculptures.*

**RP:** In our last interview when you asked me who my influences were, I said Kafka and my mother. Now I would add Bernini and Donatello. ■

*Octavio Zaya is a critic and curator based in New York.*

**Rona Pondick** was born in Brooklyn in 1952. She lives and works in New York.

Selected solo shows: 2002: Sonnabend, New York; GAM, Bologna; DeCordova Museum, Lincoln, MA; Groninger Museum, Groninger (the Netherlands); Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris; 2001: Patricia Faure, Santa Monica; 1999: Kunst Salzburger Landessammlungen, Salzburg (Austria); 1998: Howard Yezerski, Boston; 1997: Sidney Janis, New York; 1996: Brooklyn Museum, New York; Susan Inglett, I.C. Editions, New York; Patricia Faure, Santa Monica; Howard Yezerski, Boston; 1995: Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati; Jose Freire, New York; 1992: The Israel Museum, Jerusalem; Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris.

Selected group shows: 2000: "Sculpture," Sonnabend, New York; 5th Biennale de Lyon; "Acts of Resistance," Koldo Mitxelena Cultural Centre, San Sebastian (Spain); "Blondies and Brownies," Torch, Amsterdam; 1999: "Calendar 2000," Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY; "The Body in Question," The Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky; 1998: "What Remains 1997," Groninger Museum (the Netherlands); "Mirror Images," M.I.T., Cambridge, Massachusetts/Miami Art Museum/SFMoMA, San Francisco; 1997: 2nd Johannesburg Biennale; 1996: "California, Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History," Armand Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; "Home/Salon," Clocktower Gallery, New York; 1995: "Altered and Irrational," Whitney Museum, New York; "Intersections," MoCA, Los Angeles.