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By MICHAEL BRENSON

Rona Pondick — 'Beds'

*Sculpture Center
167 East 69th Street
Through Oct. 1*

This is the first site-specific installation by Rona Pondick, and it is worth visiting. She is a 36-year-old sculptor who studied with Tom Doyle and Ronald Bladen at Queens College and with David von Schlegell, Joel Shapiro and Richard Serra at the Yale University Art School. Like many post-Minimalists, she wants to use shapes and materials prominent in Minimalism in ways that will arouse consuming, visceral feelings. Her installation is called "Beds." The bed, for her, is a place in which sex, birth, protection, sickness and death run together.

The installation divides the Sculpture Center into three parts. At the beginning are three long white coffin-shaped pillows stacked on a thin rectangular block of wood and crowned by a long thin gauze-wrapped object that suggests an umbilical cord and a snake. The middle consists of three beds, each one about 16 feet long, each made with stacks of sandbags and covered with a sheet of lead. At the end of the installation, concealed behind a partition, are two columns of black satiny cushions with a narrow passageway between them in which we can seclude ourselves or disappear.

Ms. Pondick's narrative is as much about repetition as progression. Although the three dimly lighted beds in the middle have the stillness and mood of tomb statuary, they are made of sand, which evokes not only sandbags and sieges, but also an hourglass and the flow of time. The lead sheets that unroll over the beds, like scrolls on which a story is waiting to be written, have also been hammered over the round bags: as a result, voluptuous shapes like breasts and buttocks seem to be bumping about under the sheets.

Ms. Pondick's narrative is also as much about the scatological as the sacred. In each stage, on top of or wedged into a stack of cushions sewed together by the artist with painstaking care, is a crudely modeled fetishistic object that suggests excrement or genitalia. This response to modeling as something that is almost taboo because it touches the rawest, most physical dimension of human existence is important. It is a response that a number of sculptors now share.

With all her emphasis on content, Ms. Pondick has a strong feeling for form and the history of sculpture. She has talked about her feeling for Egyptian sculpture and Brancusi, and both can be felt here. Her interest in stacking and in sheets of lead bring to mind Donald Judd and Mr. Serra; the way her black pillows squeeze space also has a Minimalist precedent. But there is always a sense that what was repressed in Minimalism is slowly, like grains of sand, seeping out.

One difference between the sensibility of this installation and the sensibility of Minimalism is its Old World feel. Each of Ms. Pondick's forms seems to have a loaded history. The responsiveness to cushions and to the texture of closed rooms and dark spaces has nothing to do with the orderly spaces and antiseptic furnishings of the American middle-class home. It suggests old Europe, where the objects people live with have a smell and a weight, and where they are not even so much objects as actors in the drama of daily life.