

Envisioning Origins

An artful look at our formation

BY JOE HOUSTON

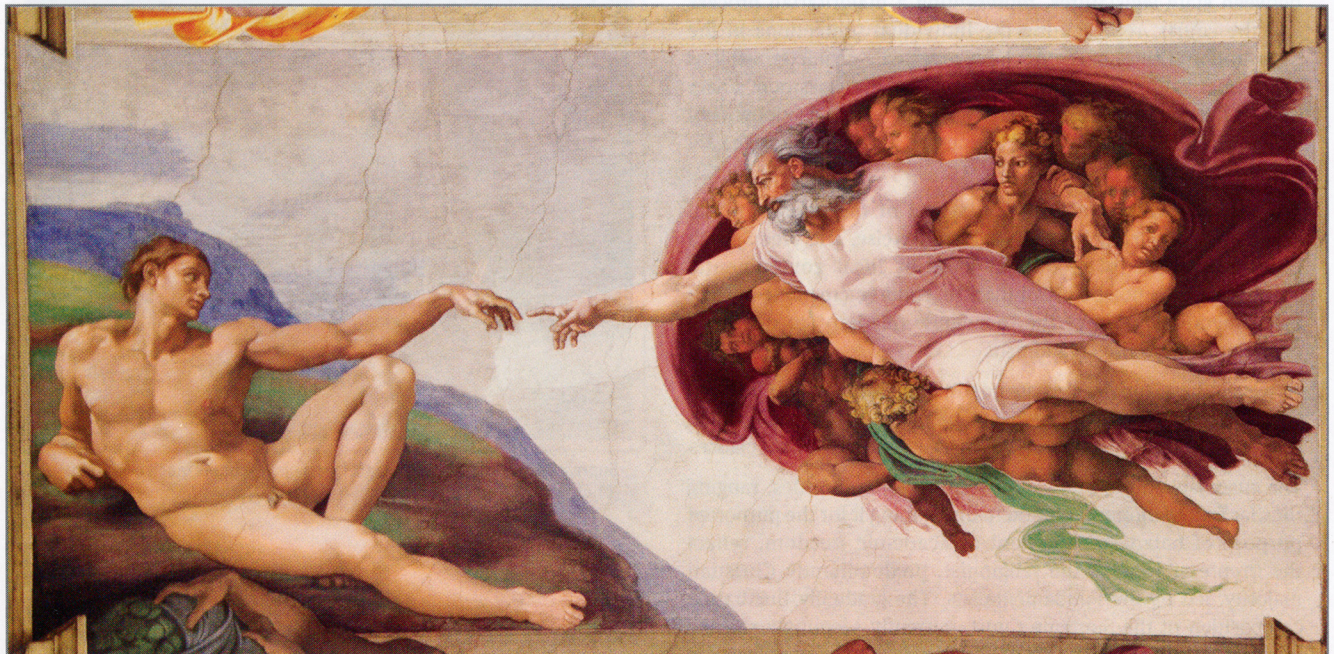
Of the perennial themes in art, the body ranks among the most enduring. Whether depicted as Cycladic figurines or manipulated in contemporary performance art, the human form offers a direct means of expression across cultures. It seems we humans have always been compelled to represent ourselves, perhaps as a means to understand better who we are and where we came from.

The riddle of our origins has inspired a number of visionary works of art, including interpretations as diverse as William Blake's illustration of the cosmological designer Urizen in *The Ancient of*

Days (1794) and Auguste Rodin's marble sculpture of primordial man issuing from the outstretched palm of *The Hand of God* (1898).

Perhaps most iconic of all is Michelangelo Buonarroti's Sistine Chapel fresco, *The Creation of Adam* from the early 1500s. This depicted gesture of the Biblical divination has upstaged the other major compositions adorning the Sistine ceiling in Vatican City, Italy. Now essential to the art historical canon, it is often quoted in art and advertising and has been reimagined as an alien gesture in Steven Spielberg's smash 1982 sci-fi movie *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*.

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Creation of Adam*, 1508-12, fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Italy, 224.4 x 102 inches. (Photo credit: Getty Images)



Training and career

Born in Caprese in what's now known as Italy, Michelangelo apprenticed with fresco artist Domenico Ghirlandaio and rose to fame during the High Renaissance period, an era in which painting and sculpture — based on Greek prototypes — reached their greatest degree of naturalism. Michelangelo's work, of both sacred and secular subjects, was commissioned by Roman Catholic clergy, particularly Pope Julius II, the artist's greatest benefactor. Michelangelo was primarily a sculptor and architect; only a few early and unfinished paintings survive in addition to his famous Sistine Chapel decorations. *The Creation of Adam* (1508-12) is a focal point of the Biblical narrative of Genesis he brought to life on the Sistine ceiling.

The Subject

Michelangelo interprets the Biblical story of Genesis recounting the moment at which God made Adam on the seventh day of Creation. The artist depicts a brief passage in elaborate detail: "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image,

after our likeness'" (King James version), giving human faces to man and God alike, both of whom are depicted as powerful, masculine figures. A gap between their outstretched fingers implies the spark of life passing between them. It is one of nine fresco panels that line the central vault of the chapel's ceiling.

Composition and perspective

Michelangelo chose a symmetrical organization of forms split diagonally across the fresco's composition, with God's outstretched arm as the center point. The symmetrical division implies a divine order to the universe. The ultimate effect is a balance of two forces — one heavenly and one earthly. Michelangelo positions the figures frontally against an uncluttered backdrop, allowing for clarity and decisiveness.

Material and process

Fresco, a medium that already was centuries old when Michelangelo created his masterwork, allows for brilliant color and must be applied in discreet sections, one area at a time. A durable

material, it is prone to damage from structural settling, seismic disturbance, ultraviolet light and pollution. The material absorbs light, which in turn provides color luminance, an apt effect given the subject matter of the piece. The most recent restoration (1980-92) took place to remove centuries of accumulated smoke and pollution. Vibrant color was revealed from the beneath the grime, causing a reconsideration of Michelangelo's influence on subsequent painters.

Viewing experience

Because the painting is on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, viewers must raise their heads to take in the ethereal subjects of the fresco. In other words, *The Creation of Adam* is a heavenly spectacle that unfolds above, on a higher plane of existence. Placed within the Papal chapel, the setting further defines our experience as a sacred event. To reinforce the spiritual allusions, the work is given dimension and animation through vibrant color, now visible after its controversial restoration.

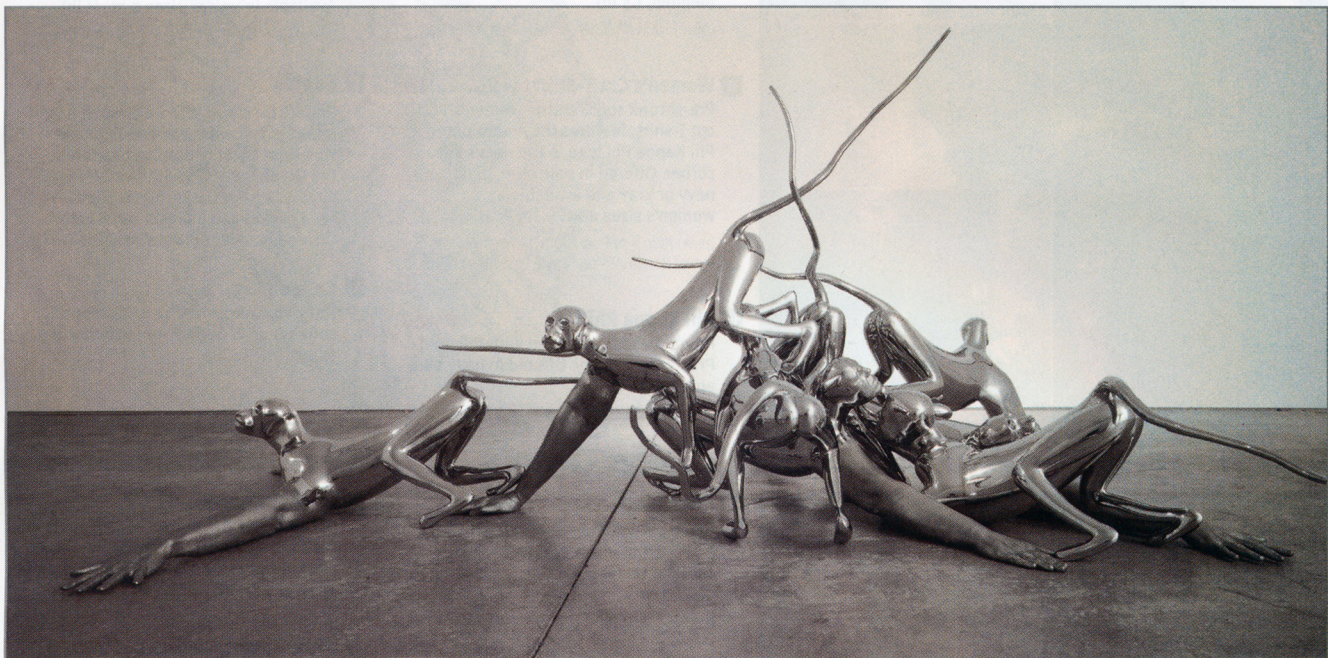
In the 21st century, the theme of creation has increased urgency for artists now that genetic engineering is adding a new chapter to the story of human origins. Among the most provocative images of the post-digital evolution is Rona Pondick's sculptural group, *Monkeys*. Considered within the context of evolution, Pondick's restless chimeras provide a fascinating counterpoint to Michelangelo's classically ordered view of creation.

While these pivotal works reflect the individuality of each artist, they will both likely stand the test of time as vivid documents of the cultures in which they were conceived. These works also may well serve as touchstones to larger philosophical issues for future generations as they continue to grapple with what it means to be human.

Read below for analysis of these two intriguing pieces.



Joe Houston is Curator of the Hallmark Art Collection in Kansas City, Mo. Previously, he served as Associate Curator of Contemporary Art at the Columbus Museum of Art in Columbus, Ohio, where he guided an exhibition program and the collection of contemporary painting, sculpture and new media. His other experience includes Curator of Exhibitions at the Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Mich.; Curator of the Rockford Art Museum, Rockford, Ill.; and Director of the Indiana State University Art Gallery, Terre Haute, Ind. Recent publications are *OPTIC NERVE: Perceptual Art of the 1960s* (Merrell Publishers, 2006); *In Monet's Garden: The Lure of Giverny* (Scala Books, 2007); and *Rona Pondick: Works, 1986-2008* (Internationale Sommerakademie für Bildende Kunst, Salzburg, 2008). He also has written for *American Art Review*, among other publications. Houston received an MFA in Painting and Criticism from Northwestern University and has taught at Northwestern University College in Evanston, Ill.; DePaul University in Chicago, Ill.; and the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, Mich.



Rona Pondick, *Monkeys*, 1998-2001, stainless steel, edition of 6 + 1, artist's proof, 41 x 66 x 85 inches. Courtesy of Sonnabend Gallery.

Training and career

The Brooklyn, N.Y.-born sculptor studied at Yale under Minimalist artists such as sculptor Richard Serra. Her early works were “scatter” installations of raw materials casually poured or strewn about the gallery space. These Post-Minimal sculptures forced the viewer's physical interaction, sometimes to an uncomfortable degree. Her recent human/animal hybrids hearken to ancient world mythology while simultaneously invoking a nightmarish vision of genetic engineering. Her art is in many public collections including the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. *Monkeys* (1998-2001) is the culmination of years of research into new computer techniques that she married with traditional hand-modeling. The result: fantastic — and plausible — chimerical forms integrating her own body.

The Subject

The artist's own visage, limbs and hands emerge from the mercurial tangle of simian forms. Such startling details hint at our primordial selves. The complex grouping was inspired by the animated

forms of Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Theresa* (1647-52) in the Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, Italy. One can read *Monkeys* as an embrace of evolutionary theory (meaning that, like the artist herself, we are constituted of the same matter and energy of our sister species). The piece also may be seen as a warning of the nightmarish effects of genetic experimentation.

Composition and perspective

Pondick's chaotic sprawl is decentered, implying uncertainty and doubt about our place in the world. It also suggests the indefinite hierarchy of the human species within the evolutionary chain. We strain to find a beginning and end to the mercurial mass of human/animal fragments. Therefore, she includes no vanishing point; instead, all forms twist in an undifferentiated mass of competing actions. As with all three-dimensional work, it is meant to be viewed from various angles.

Material and process

Pondick used high-grade stainless steel, a thoroughly modern, industrial material that is impervious to oxidation and extremely difficult to

damage. She applied casting techniques that date to ancient Greece; her sculpture is poured molten into numerous mold parts, welded together, then precisely tooled and polished by hand. It is the first instance in which the artist used computer scanning and rapid prototyping as part of her technical process. Pondick created *Monkeys* in two sections to allow for portability. The polished surface reflects the environment around it, including the viewer, whose own body can be seen in the many twisting facets, forcing personal interaction with the artwork.

Viewing experience

Because the sculpture is placed on the ground, on the same level as the viewer, one must cast one's eyes downward to see it. Viewers must bend down to inspect the details, often leading them to crouch on all fours, taking the simian or animalistic posture, a physical permutation that could hearken to biological ancestors. One of the existing casts is outside the New Orleans Museum of Art, where it miraculously weathered Hurricane Katrina in 2005 without blemish. ■