

RONA PONDICK

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RONA PONDICK: SCULPTURE AND INSTALLATION

An installation calls to mind the theater, a set through which the viewer moves and where a tale is told. If sculpture, like music, is essentially temporal, so much more so is an installation, creating a drama of perception extending fully in four dimensions. Here narrative assumes primacy. Whether more formal or focused on depicted content, every installation presents a story of perceptual experience.

The sculpture of Rona Pondick itself encapsulates such an experiential story. On first seeing the work one is struck by her disturbing images, often excremental forms of overwhelming association. Piles of brown matter, defiled white lumps, pillows on which turds repose—it is difficult to see beyond these forms so close to our earliest personal and social development. Eventually, however—and it often takes a number of viewings—you begin to appreciate the formal strength of this sculpture, the way in which it issues from a process of decision and revision. And there comes a point where the subject matter is not shocking at all. Without losing its emotional power, the work insists on more complete aesthetic consideration.

As with the experience of the sculpture, it is difficult to tear a discussion of this work from the imagistic content. Pondick often works with taboo subjects, with bodily functions excluded from polite conversation. There is an element of obsession in her continual return to these images, an obsession with provocation as much as with scatology. Yet there are particular associations with this subject matter.

One direction is Freud's, which emphasizes an autoerotic center to early excretory experience. In being forced through personal control to deprive himself of the sensations of free elimination, the infant "is first obliged to exchange pleasure for social respectability." Ejected from the paradise of polymorphous perversity, the child comes to know the world as a source of inhibition and frustration. Pondick's fecal piles evoke these psychogenetic concerns; and they are, in a way, the artist's revenge for such primal disturbance. As works of art these sculptures also play on Freudian associations of excrement with gifts and with money—especially such pieces as "Black Bed," in which a fecal form is elevated on satin pillows.

Another context for this imagery is African tribal sculpture, in particular the bolis of Mali. These animal forms—composed of dirt, blood, excrement, and urine—are important for their magical use of bodily materials. The association of this kind of power with taboo subjects is what especially interests Pondick, and her work often has a strong fetishitic quality.

These images issue from an active process of composition, and in the pile pieces—such as "Mine"—their construction is especially dynamic. Pondick throws together lumps of warm dark wax, removing segments from the developing mass and slamming them down again in alternative configurations. This is an aggressive process, almost violent at times, satisfying deep emotional needs. It seems right to call this "action sculpture", on analogy with the painting so involved with personal expression and formal composition. And while these works appear to be random piles, repeated viewing shows each to be an organic whole of structurally-interacting elements.

The sculpture that results from this process has a striking specificity and detail. Like the writing

of Kafka, a favorite of Pondick's, her work has a particularity of image that is especially compelling. For instance, when he mentions that he has "never seen a hand with the separate fingers so sharply differentiated" as those of his "Little Woman," Kafka focuses on a minor physical detail in a way that evokes a wider mood and a greater significance. Similarly with Pondick's sculpture. The success of the work is a matter of its details empowering the more general associations of the imagery. Decisions about scale, material, structure, spatial orientation—this is what engages our experience, making these fecal piles and strange beds more than mere references.

There is an element of drama in this sculpture that extends through both its formal and narrative dimensions. While the overall form is one of stasis, certain pieces appear to be at once fixed and in motion. This is a matter of physical stance in the piles, and it can be seen as well in the lead "Puddle." There sometimes seems to be internal motion—almost a swarming of the individual elements—as well as an expectation of overall movement. Appearing more than potential, but less than actual, this condition creates a tension in the work, as well as reinforces its association with organic life. For the more theatrical work, however, one must look to Pondick's series of beds, of which the Sculpture Center installation is the most ambitious realization.

The bed holds a wide and conflicting range of meanings: warmth, sleep, sickness, dreams, sex, comfort, death, protection, vulnerability. Like excrement, it is the locus of personal as well as social significance. Playing on both desires and fears, it is a loaded image of great power. Pondick works with these contrasts, from lead sheets that would drain any body of warmth to satin pillows that both offer up and suck in her bronze forms.

Like her piles, which have used a variety of materials to broad effect—wax, lead, plastic, steel wool—the beds have assumed many forms. The Sculpture Center installation will be comprised of a range of these, in three separate spaces. Moving from white to black in color, from open to claustrophobic in mood, the arrangement of objects is meant to orchestrate a particular and varied perceptual experience.

The installation format highlights perhaps the central fact of sculpture, the confrontation in space of physical object and human awareness. Experience of mass, surface, structure, and image is accentuated when the work is all around, felt behind as well as in front. Considerations of scale, of sculpture's relation to the human figure and to its setting, become critical. An installation broadens and enriches the experiential possibilities of its sculptural components, linking the work more fully to the lived world of human experience.

Rona Pondick has developed a concentrated formal and metaphorical vocabulary. Focused on two images, those of the excremental pile and the bed, her sculpture addresses these forms in isolation and in combination with one another. Pondick's work is both confrontational and evocative, simultaneously repulsive and engaging. Narratively these pieces elicit inquiry—What is on that bed, and how did it get there?—and stimulate deep emotional associations. With formal strength and powerful ideation, this sculpture leads us back from the work to our basic attitudes and the roles that they play in our lives. In installation, these questions and concerns fully surround us.

Bruce Altshuler, June, 1988

Mine, 1987. wax, 32 x 28 x 22 in. Courtesy: fiction/nonfiction, NYC



Black Bed, 1987. wood, satin pillows and bronze, 32 x 24 x 72 in.



Puddle, 1987-88. lead, 4.5 x 14 x 48 in. Courtesy: fiction/nonfiction, NYC



Lead Bed, 1987-88. wood, sheet lead, satin pillow and bronze,
11 x 24.5 x 72.5 in. Courtesy: fiction/nonfiction, NYC



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The Sculpture Center is a non-profit alternative space devoted to the work of innovative emerging and mid-career sculptors. Ten exhibitions are shown each year; an unaffiliated artists' file is maintained; panel discussions on important issues are presented. Rona Pondick's **BEDS**, September 6 through October 1, 1988, is the second in a series of site-specific installations to be built in the gallery space.

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