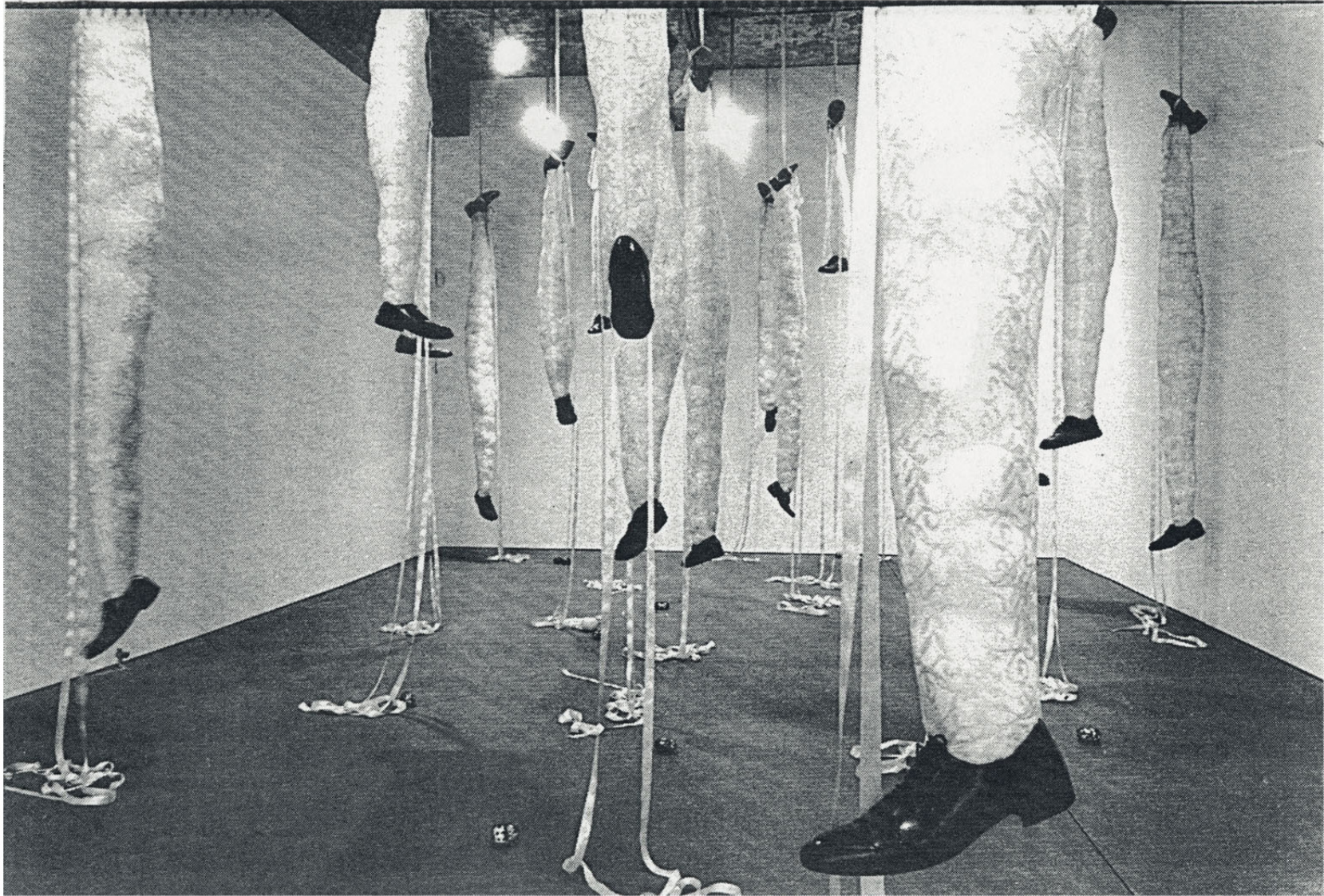


MAY 26—JUNE 1, 1993



Rona Pondick: *Legs* (detail, 1993)

Basic Instincts

By Elizabeth Hess

Rona Pondick

José Freire Fine Art
130 Prince Street
Through June 5

"Coming to Power"

David Zwirner
43 Greene Street
Through June 12



Rona Pondick walks a tightrope through a circus of obsessions. There's a swing to grab, but no safety net. Despite their deceptively pleasing materials, the objects in her latest show are easily construed as internal organs, genitalia, and feces. Pondick's humor keeps us from falling into an abyss where shit is merely shit. The artist continues to make sculpture that both describes and triggers sexual anxiety, but this time she attempts to virtually swallow the viewer in a new body of work. Her installation sprawls all over the gallery like a rash resistant to any treatments.

We enter a tableau of amputated fragments—metamorphosing into penises, vaginas, and breasts—that cover the floor like insects, or hang from the ceiling as if lynched by an angry mob. Pondick's characters are divided by gender; the 25 males, inscribed into her narrative as phallic legs wearing men's shoes, loom over 600 small balls, each one screaming with joke-store lips and teeth. There's no physical contact between the two groups (actually

two separate pieces) demonstrating the incompatibility between sexes. The leg/penises, all different lengths and thicknesses, are dressed in feminine, pink lace stockings, yet they dominate the landscape without questioning their own authority.

Welcome to the fun house. The work beckons us to enter, but there's not much room for the living to move around. Baby bottles, creatures made of sagging breasts, nipples, and coils of intestines that slither around a corner like a large snake, strand us in a field of oral fixations, where sucking is the only means of survival. Regression is Pondick's cynical comment on any developmental progress between boys and girls. This is a kind of gender hell, where even drag can't cover up the effects of testosterone poisoning. Pondick's "women" have no mobility at all. Nothing moves in this installation, unless you kick it, accidentally or not. What begins as dark comedy moves into a deeper level of trauma, as Pondick's dangling phalluses become body bags and her cunt/mouths, dead babies.

The artist revisits her own images, continuing to squeeze them for every bit of juice. Compulsion, however, not repetition, is the driving force behind her sculpture. There's a manic energy pushing her configurations, which feels as unstoppable as the basic instincts they represent. The work operates within a vicious cycle that the artist, at this point, consciously refuses to break. The implicit argument: progress for women is, and has always been, slow. Too slow.

Pondick is not an optimist. Like

other contemporary women artists in the main ring, she works off the body, investigating the social agents that (over)determine sexuality and gender. Yet she refuses to be explicit, using ready-mades as her only points of reality. Her trademark shoes fetishize the body, yet the work never tries to unleash any libidinal energy. *Milk Milk* might bring thirsty babies to the breast, along with adult men and women, but the piece is sucked dry.

Some of Pondick's colleagues in the vanguard of a growing radical sex movement have moved off the analytical couch to assert a more disciplined sexuality, tying pleasure to broader cultural and racial conflicts. If Pondick attempts to fix viewers as children, tripping over—with hindsight—their own body parts, these artists locate us in the present, empowering us as the victors of a hard-fought sexual revolution. "Coming to Power," a show of 32 women artists curated by Ellen Cantor, connects prominent '70s feminists with a militant selection of '80s and '90s artists ready to put the whole body to work reimagining a plurality of sexual acts. Anything goes—if there's an operative imagination. It is not surprising that we must, ultimately, look to artists to reinvent visual pornography, a genre that should never be dismissed, let alone outlawed.

The most historically significant work in this show is a scroll sitting in a box, an artifact from a 1975 theater piece by Carolee Schneeman. In a nude and shocking (believe me) performance, Schneeman pulled this very scroll from her womb, giving birth to an angry feminist text that would, for

the time, unite women artists. Schneeman, an early transgressor and originator of performance, used her actual body as a work of art, with her cunt the locus of power. It was the '70s; biology still had its charms, and women were just beginning to reclaim sexual practice from an army of bogus experts and sadistic doctors.

Walking through "Coming to Power," it's difficult to see any linear development of ideology. Nevertheless, this is the first group show that is genuinely interested in linking the '70s to the '90s through overtly sexual—gay and straight—content. Lesbian commentaries from the '70s, like Nancy Fried's romantic depictions of women, were not meant to disrupt "normative" practice, but to publicly assert lesbianism as an alternative. Fried's works, made from flour, are as sweet as the finest pastry.

There are no sweets in the back room of the gallery, where "pornographic" works play on video and the walls. (And don't miss the lurid comic books on the coffee table.) In this realm, sex is experienced through technological intervention and frequently given meaning through pop-culture referents. Patricia Cronin's grid of snapshots document an s&m scene, focusing in on bleeding nipples. It's a live performance brought to us before the blood has dried—by Polaroid.

You don't have to be there, anymore. Maybe you shouldn't be there. If '70s art was ephemeral, emphasizing performance and live action, much of '90s work purposefully dislocates us from the scene. Nicole Eisenman's private/public sketch books, G. B. Jones's

lesbian homages to Tom of Finland, and Monica Majoli's delicate paintings of golden showers reveal intimate scenarios, but place us as spectators, not participants. While Pondick presents her work more and more as live theater, ironically, artists using more explicit representations keep us at a distance.

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