

## Hybrid Immortality: Rona Pondick's Fantastical Self-Portraits

By [Albert Godetzky](#)  November 29, 2022 9:00am



View of Rona Pondick's *Monkeys*, 1998-2001, stainless steel, 41¼ by 66 by 85½ inches.

PHOTO JOHANNES STOLL / COURTESY BELVEDERE, VIENNA

At first encounter, [Rona Pondick](#)'s large-scale stainless steel sculpture *Monkeys* (1998–2001), currently on view in the Belvedere palace and museum in Vienna, may seem incongruous with the decorative opulence of the surroundings. The work comprises eight sleek shining simian bodies chaotically scrambling over one another. In contrast, the Belvedere's Carlone Hall—named after [Carlo Innocenzo Carlone](#), the Italian artist who contributed the room's painted walls and ceiling in the 1720s—is a Baroque confection bursting with ornamental forms, colors, and illusionistic architecture, all rendered in fresco. Look slowly, however, and this marriage of distinctive elements from widely disparate periods reveals itself as a clever juxtaposition and a case of curatorial savvy.

Both the sculpture and the paintings play with spatial illusion. Pondick's mischievous animals appear to spew into the room from some mysterious source, while Carlone's figures seem to tumble from their celestial dwellings, and the painted architecture defies the room's structural simplicity. All the components are about metamorphosis and the imaginative possibilities of change.

Hovering in the ceiling above is Aurora, ancient Roman goddess of the dawn and renewal, while scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* appear on the walls below. Pondick's monkeys are themselves transforming into hybrid creatures with human arms and heads. The painted scenery of the Hall, a venue once used for grand receptions, invites visitors to fantasize about the cyclicity and changing nature of human life. Pondick further pursues this strategy: the surfaces of her lustrous, undulating sculptures distort not only the room but its guests, who thus take part in the animal/human metamorphosis. Moving around *Monkeys*, viewers can follow their own elastic reflections until the images come to a halt on the matte surfaces of the human limbs and heads.



*Monkeys* (detail).  
PHOTO JOHANNES STOLL / COURTESY BELVEDERE,  
VIENNA

This installation—the latest in a growing number of institutional presentations for Pondick—is an opportunity to reassess the New York-based artist's nearly 40-year career. The experiential nature of her art calls attention to cultural, historical, and biographical factors of her life, to be sure—but even more so to her means of physically making the work. Before the stainless steel pieces, which appeared in 1998 with her first use of then nascent 3D scanning and printing technology, Pondick employed masses of wax, unfurled lengths of lead, fecal clumps of bronze pillowed in satin, and mounds of chattering teeth ensconced in newspaper clippings. Since the late 1990s, she has been using molds taken from her own head, arms, and legs that she manipulates by hand in size, proportion, and finish to create a final cast in her chosen medium.

This is a highly generative process, reminiscent of the way [Auguste Rodin](#) worked on the Gates of Hell (1880–1917), deriving countless sculptural inventions from a few prototypes. Recently, Pondick has been reintroducing color into her work by way of acrylic and resin. The colors lend titles to an ongoing series of self-portrait heads. *Encased Magenta Green* (2018), for instance, is a magenta head afloat on a pool of translucent greenish-blue inside a block of cloudy acrylic. When creating these pieces, Pondick



*Encased Magenta Green*, 2018, pigmented resin and acrylic,  
16 by 8 1/2 by 8 1/2 inches.  
PHOTO RONA PONDICK / COURTESY NUNU FINE ART,  
TAIPEI

leaves some processes to chance, allowing the material to dictate the final form. Casting lines, uneven edges, air bubbles, solidified ripples, and other irregularities remain as traces of time and marks of labor. The finished works are not “transparent” in the modernist sense; the enclosed object is not easily examined. Instead, the material imperfections create ambiguity and mystery; Pondick’s head, hovering with an eerie solarized effect, appears like an apparition, perhaps a death mask reawakening to a technicolor afterlife.

Like many other examples of the artist’s work, these encased heads suggest an experience of the self beyond the body. *Head in Tree* (2006–08), currently on view at the Belvedere in a group exhibition concerning trees in art, features a head lodged in an arboreal tracery of steel nearly nine feet above the ground. As writer Pac Pobric recently revealed in *Artnet News*, the imagery for *Head in Tree* originated in a morphine-induced vision Pondick had while recovering from spinal surgery; her husband, painter Robert Feintuch, later told Pondick that the work’s precariously slender trunk came to substitute for her spine, her lifeline, Pobric reported.

In sculptures such as *Monkeys*, *Encased Magenta Green*, and *Head in Tree*, Pondick portrays the human subject as a being experiencing constant tension between mind and matter, afflicted with corporal dysfunction, facing the prospect of oblivion. Her work evokes dreams of rebirth, renewal, and reincarnation through transformation and metamorphosis, while offering exquisitely wrought visions of what that other life might look and feel like.



*Dog*, 1998–2001, yellow stainless steel, 28 by 16½ by 32 inches.  
PHOTO RONA PONDICK / COURTESY GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC,  
LONDON/PARIS/SALZBURG/SEOUL, AND SONNABEND GALLERY,  
NEW YORK

Pondick’s visual language—particularly in the animal-human hybrids—finds precedent in centuries of imagery that merges human bodies with those of other animals. Whether monumental Egyptian statues of gods, the satyrs and minotaurs depicted on Greek vases, Mayan ceramic figurines, or [Hieronymus Bosch](#)’s paintings of phantasmagoric creatures, such works may reveal a desire to express divine power and protection, or to expose the animalistic tendencies in human behavior. *Monkeys*, with its unruly troop of primates, clearly evokes the latter view, while *Dog* (1998–2001), featuring the artist’s head and arms on a canine body, bespeaks the former. *Dog* sits on the floor with eyes closed, a self-contained sentry granting no admittance, like a sphinx guarding secrets or a reliquary preserving vital organs.

Biography and material history are just two of the lenses through which Pondick’s work has been interpreted. More critical approaches, especially prevalent in the 1980s and early 1990s, referenced Freud and feminism. In a January 1990 *Art in America* review, Nancy Princenthal implied

that Pondick's sculptures might reflect sexual politics in the rapidly changing American workforce. *Pink Balls & Brown Pump* (1991), with its two titular elements suspended on a wire, seems to substantiate this reading. A woman's shoe filled with pink epoxy is balanced by a pair of tooth-studded balls enlarged by an accretion of the same modeling compound.

Formally, the work points to Alexander Calder's whimsical mobiles, yet conceptually it recalls [Louise Bourgeois](#)'s tragicomic, sexually allusive *Fillette* (1968). But where Bourgeois's decaying phallus—titled after a small wine bottle or, more disconcertingly, a young girl—remains essentially organic in form, Pondick's hanging pieces deliver a more varied array of socially defined gender references. *Pink Balls & Brown Pump* can be seen as a representation of a perpetual tension between the sexes: the high-heeled pump appears to kick the scrotal orbs, which, in turn, seem to want to chomp at the shoe. Yet, as the sculpture rotates or the viewer circles it, the two elements appear to merge and form a union, albeit a disquieting one. The conceit is as clever as it is simple: antagonisms and contradictory desires are part and parcel of interhuman relationships.

Pondick has returned again and again to isolated body parts with an imaginative sensitivity that gives her work exceptional power. When invited in 2015 to participate in a project for which artists respond to works in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she chose to talk about a group of ancient Egyptian sculpture fragments—mouth-, eye-, breast- or hand-shaped shards evincing once complete bodies. At one point in the resulting video, she looks at these fragments as though they had been made that way intentionally, and notes that each has a life of its own.

Such observations about millennia-old sculptural remnants could apply to Pondick's use of body parts, particularly in the "teeth" works she created between 1990 and 1997. Toy shop chattering teeth, along with the artist's own more lifelike dental casts, were the source materials for these pieces. In *Little Bathers* (1990–91) as well as the seminal installation *Dirt Head* (1997), bodies have seemingly shattered and disintegrated. Yet, rather than present the mouths as broken irregularly, Pondick has made them whole again. Pink plastic in the earlier work, brown soil in the later, they have become little self-sufficient entities.



*Pink Balls and Brown Pump*, 1991, rubber teeth, shoe, epoxy modeling compound and wire, 23½ by 11 by 18 inches.  
PHOTO RONA PONDICK / COURTESY STEVEN ZEVITAS GALLERY, BOSTON, AND GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC, LONDON/PARIS/SALZBURG/SEOUL

Dirt Head has attracted different interpretations with each new showing. When first exhibited at the Johannesburg Biennale in 1997, the 10 tons of earth and 400 earth-toned apple-size “dirt heads” elicited fears in some viewers that the forms possessed magical powers. South Africa, which had recently ended apartheid, was then actively debating the social implications of its anti-witchcraft laws. At the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands the following year, Dirt Head was compared to news imagery from war zones in Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Cambodia. Installed at the Museum of Modern Art in Salzburg, the earthen dunes invaded the vaulted arcade of the Rupertinum building, evoking parallels with the Holocaust. At the Lyon Biennale in 2000, the piece was conceptually linked to cloning and genetics.



*Dirt Head* (detail), 1997, mixed mediums, 400 elements, each approx. 3 by 3 by 3½ inches, with 10 tons of earth.  
PHOTO MAREK KRUSZEWSKI / COURTESY KUNSTMUSEUM WOLFSBURG

More recently, *Little Bathers* and *Dirt Head* were shown in “On Everyone’s Lips”(2020–21), a group exhibition focused on the oral cavity in art at the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg in Germany . The show’s critical emphasis was on teeth—teeth exposed as an index of emotion, teeth remaining (even after disintegration of the mouth) as traces of biological existence. Since the exhibition was staged during the Covid pandemic, it was sobering to think of the mouth as a gateway for both life-giving and life-threatening forces.

In the catalogue for the show, curator [Uta Ruhkamp](#) observes that Pondick’s “*Little Bathers* have now been transformed into four hundred “earth heads” that threaten to dissolve into the monumental pile of soil on which they lie.” *Dirt Head* is, in short, a contemporary vanitas.

Yet teeth, storing DNA that records our genetic makeup, are also lasting monuments to our identity. This concept lends *Dirt Head* an almost archaeological or forensic dimension: a human community seems to be preserved in the earthen mound—except that the community consists of Pondick herself, replicated 400 times.

The multiplication of her own image might be seen as Pondick's chief tactic for symbolic self-preservation. In her most recent body of work—colorful acrylic pieces shown at Marc Straus Gallery in New York earlier this year—she has reduced the size of her head and the animal bodies on which it appears. In some cases, the bodies sprout multiple heads and so resemble a self-propagating viral form. This is in keeping with the artist's ongoing dialectic between cleanliness and contagion, between dirt and translucent or reflective purity, and between the fugitive and the enduring aspects of life. Debris adheres to the little mouths in the earth on the gallery floor, where the toothy orifices seem to multiply and spread unrestrainedly.

In contrast, the stainless steel works (Pondick uses the surgical-grade variety) are inherently clean, slick, unblemished, and sealed off from the outside world. Then there are the heads and bodies suspended in acrylic, likewise a material associated with sterile operations and impenetrability. The blocks encasing the artist's heads bring to mind museum vitrines and how such modes of display attempt to preserve the past in perpetuity.



*Head in Tree*, 2006-08, stainless steel, 105 by 42 by 37 inches.  
PHOTO JOHANNES STOLL / COURTESY BELVEDERE,  
VIENNA



*Small Green Yellow Reds*, 2019-21 pigmented resin and acrylic, 8 by 8 by 9 1/2 inches.  
PHOTO RONA PONDICK / COURTESY MARC STRAUS GALLERY, NEW YORK

Pondick invites us to contemplate these inherent dichotomies of mind and matter, to question how we approach self-preservation in the face of crisis and change. But she also offers imaginative, fantastical proposals for dealing with change. Fragmentation need not be lamented when heads and other body parts recombine in visionary ways, regenerating with animal components, or taking on vibrant colors. Despite the historical expanse that separates *Monkeys* from Carlone's 18th-century paintings in Vienna, both projects suggest transformation and renewal, prompting us to reassess the handmade in relation to the technological, and to contemplate the nature of the human in a volatile world.

“Carlone Contemporary: Rona Pondick,” featuring *Monkeys*, is on view at the Upper Belvedere, while *Head in Tree* appears in “Grow: The Tree in Art” in the Lower Belvedere, Vienna, through Jan. 8, 2023. Both works will be in Pondick's solo show at Thaddaeus Ropac, London, Mar. 29-May 13, 2023.