

"Rona Pondick: Sculpture, 1992-2003"

Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, MI

A new genre of artwork engaged in the complex world of genetic engineering and the ethical questions this research raises has developed since 1996 when Dolly, the first genetically cloned sheep, made an indelible imprint on our collective psyche. Yet who could have imagined the horror fantasy unleashed in the sculptural work of artists Rona Pondick (NY) and Patricia Piccinini (Australia). Pondick and Piccinini explore the ethics and potential, or unintended consequences, of our relentless exploration of the mechanics and possible permutations of the human and animal genome. Piccinini's *Game Boys advanced* which made a splash at the Venice Biennale last summer is a life-size figurative sculpture of teenage boys playing handheld video games, which seems normal enough, until you notice their wrinkled and prematurely aged skin and grayed hair. Piccinini's realism, the flesh and blood appearance of her Frankensteins, enhances our discomfort. On the other hand, Pondick's sculpture, on view in a mid-career survey at Cranbrook Art Museum, is intriguing because of the scientific distance and aloofness of her subject matter and her chosen material.

Heaped in a pyramid on the floor, *Monkey's* is a conglomeration of eight lemur monkeys cast in stainless steel, frozen in a moment of emergence from the pile. Some of the monkeys have begun to evolve or morph into animal-human hybrids. Some monkeys have human arms that they try to use functionally even though they are out of proportion to their body. Other specimens have sprouted human faces that, unlike the arms, are scaled to the monkey's body. At one end of the pile of monkeys is a single creature that has had both of its forelegs supplanted by human arms that are splayed on the ground. The absurdity of its predicament has rendered it immobile, and the grotesqueness of its dysfunctional human limbs is unsettling. Each of the mutated features is textural unpolished stainless steel as opposed to the sensuous high polish finish evidenced throughout the body. The polished, liquid mercury look of the stainless steel recalls the techno hybrid



cyborg of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator II*, frightening and seductive all at once.

Fox (1998-99) is a smaller sculpture of the anatomy of a small fox combined with a full size human head. The weight of the human sized head, metaphorically as well as physically, is so great that it rests lightly on the ground, as if its human burden were too great for the fox. The

display of single creatures and their isolated placement in the exhibition amplify their otherness, as does the stainless steel with its clinical associations. Ironically, this isolation parallels the one predicted by scientists and lay people 25 years ago when the first baby was born using the in vitro fertilization process. Yet today that fear has proven unfounded. Pondick's hybrid creatures are just that, combinations of creatures we know; their alien status may be short lived.

Outside of the galleries a tree, *Crimson Queen Maple*, was installed at the end of the Triton reflecting pools. A modest scale sculpture, although a dwarfed sized tree, *Crimson Queen Maple* was cast in stainless steel and planted surrounded by river rocks in a black planter. This unremarkable barren tree slowly distinguishes itself as small buds on the branches catch the sunlight. The buds though are not flowers but tiny human heads, some single and some in clusters. The delayed revelation of this mutation is a startling and exciting addition to Pondick's oeuvre. Much of Pondick's sculpture is direct, almost confrontational, but the tree exists first as an object of beauty, coaxing us nearer until it finally exposes its own unholy abomination. Growing people on trees is horribly creepy, but even more discomfiting is the impression that all the heads are male, as if the tree and science had supplanted or eliminated the need for woman. It is fortunate this exhibition is a mid-career survey; there is much more to look forward to from Pondick in the future. ☪

Julia Morrisroe is a freelance writer and director of the University Art Gallery at Central Michigan University.

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Above: *Crimson Queen Maple*
Inset: *Crimson Queen Maple* detail