HEADS

HANDS

FEET

SLEEPING

HOLDING

DREAMING

DYING

Rona Pondick and Robert Feintuch in Conversation with Phong Bui

I've known both Robert Feintuch's and Rona Pondick's works since the early '90s, but I didn't get an opportunity to gain more intimate perspectives on their creative processes until I interviewed each of them independently for the Brooklyn Rail—Robert in May 2014, and Rona in March 2013.

Additionally, in the 2013 large-scale exhibition, "Come Together: Surviving Sandy, Year 1" which I curated at Industry City, Sunset Park, Brooklyn, I paired five intimately scaled paintings of Robert's where he used himself as a model, with two of Rona's hybrid sculptures that combined her head, hands and feet with animal bodies, in one space. The experience was compelling in that, while working in different mediums, sculpture and painting, the direct and indirect references to their own bodies, and their deployments of forms evoked as many similarities as differences. I was struck by their shared interest in how the presence of made (sculpted and painted) images can effect the inner core of our emotional lives, which needless to say, contains a wide spectrum of associations that occupy a small margin between the conscious and unconscious.

Phong Bui: Having done previous interviews with each of you separately, one thing we can begin with is something that you seem to have in common, namely that you are both so invested in the idea of layers, the layers of meaning that potentially can be generated from the relationship between form and images. In other words, a particular depiction of form can generate the way the viewer sees the image, and it strikes me that somehow everything about that seems to pertain to, or evokes references to, perception and to psychology. One cannot exist independent of the other and vice versa. I know this is a long question but they will get shorter [laughter].

Robert Feintuch: It's a great question.

Bui: I mean in order to gain access to any kind of psychological insight you have to be perceptive and open to your environment, which is something you shared immediately when you first met at Yale, graduate school, in 1975. Robert, you studied with Al Held, and Rona, you with David von Schlegell, among other teachers, at the time when minimalism and geometric abstraction were very dominant. So let's begin with what you took in and what you rejected, whether while you were at school or after. Why don't we start with you, Rona?

Rona Pondick: It's not an easy question.

Bui: Or Robert [laughter].

Pondick: It is an interesting question. For me, it's impossible to look at anything purely and disassociate it from other things in the world. It is impossible to not see relationships, to not be reminded by what it may look like, of other things. If something is not explicitly figurative, where you can't easily identify it, it doesn't mean that it isn't associative. What I rejected most about minimalism was the idea that a cube is only a cube.

For me, what is wonderful about minimalism, and important in my own work, is the awareness of how gravity, weight, and materiality affect presence. I was able to learn from minimalism the possibility of taking an object, placing it in a room, and making it play off the architecture in a way that makes viewers feel the sculpture physically. A lot of my sculptures play with gravity, in their gestures and postures, making you aware of their weight. While Robert's and my earliest conversations were about ideas related to minimalism, we both were always interested in metaphor and psychological feeling.

By the time I was in graduate school I recognized that Giacometti was really important to me, because I was attracted to his use of metaphor, and how he could make scale feel existential. Robert and I talked about what we shared, not just with each other, but also in relationship to abstraction and minimalism, and what we wanted to move away from, consciously.

Bui: Right. Robert, does that ring true for you as well?

Feintuch: Yeah, the play between form and the psychological and the readings that generates. I think that is really at the base of both of our work. I think that form is never neutral; that when form speaks, even when you can't articulate what it's saying clearly, you kind of feel it in your body, and that when you feel things in your body, they're not without psychology. For me, psychological feelings are bodily, and bodily feelings are psychological.

What Rona said was very clear. In painting and sculpture embodiment is everything. Minimalism was so much about physical presence. Remember when it was illegal to put a frame around a painting because it turned physical material into an illusionistic picture? Back then, paintings and sculptures had to be objects, devoid of metaphor. And I was very interested in

all of that. I was an abstract painter when I left Yale, and I was really aware, partially because minimalist artists had helped me articulate this, how standing in front of a painting or sculpture felt different depending on whether it's symmetrical, or asymmetrical, if it towers over you, or it's smaller than your head, how all of those things affect bodily feeling.

You are who you are, and looking back I saw that some of the artists I liked then-Myron Stout for example- were the obsessives. Stout was engaged with mythology and signs, and though I couldn't have articulated it then, that became important to me.

I mean what was hard for me, and I think we both struggled with this in some ways, was that images operate differently from pure abstract form—that we relate to images differently. Images make associations and we can see ourselves in them.

Pondick: Yes, that's something that we have both discussed in depth.

Bui: While you guys were in school?

Pondick: Well, then, but more since. It's really hard to explain, but the way one composes, the way one works with weights, scale and balances, is different if someone has worked both abstractly and figuratively during their artistic life.

Feintuch: Right, but that goes back to Phong's first question, because we both are interested in imagery, the associations that images bring, and the meanings they suggest. We both work to make the image and its form inseparable, in ways that affect the meaning- at least we hope so.

Pondick: And in both of our work nothing is very literally described. I think about my own work, and how so much of the imagery is exaggerated—the bodies are bloated, or pushed and pulled in ways so that you feel them psychologically.

We've been really lucky to travel with Antonio Homem, from Sonnabend Gallery, who is so deeply knowledgeable, to look at art. Something I think that Robert and I share, mostly in the last seven or eight years, is an interest in the ways form functions in Romanesque and Gothic art. It can be really wacky, strange and exaggerated, and very psychological.

Bui: Absolutely, but before we get to that, what about what you rejected? Were there certain things then that you didn't quite embrace readily?

Feintuch: I was very excited as I made the transition to being a purist abstract painter in my early twenties. I had painted both abstractly and representationally earlier but as I made the transition towards purist abstraction, I left overt figuration behind. Neither of our work was figurative then, but we each had elements that we saw as evoking relationships to the body.

Pondick: My work at Yale was very much a bridge between painting and sculpture. At the time, artists like Richard Serra would visit my studio and say that my work reminded him of Eva Hesse's.

Bui: Which is interesting because Hesse eventually left painting for sculpture by the mid '50s.

Pondick: I think I was already grappling with wanting not only to suggest visceral experience, but also to find a way to actually use the body. I was drawing from my own body back then but I wasn't using it yet in the sculptures. As you have seen, I'll start doing things in drawings that can take years to show up in my sculpture. In retrospect, I think I was struggling with my interest in metaphor, and how that would manifest itself. For the next few years, I tried to figure out what my loves really were. Not because of what was going on at the time—it's very easy to be seduced and embrace whatever is in style—but because I was trying to figure out what I was really interested in.

That's when I started drawing at the Met from Egyptian art, which is still a love of mine. I wanted to work my way through art history, trying to understand why I liked or didn't like something, and what better way is there than to work from it?

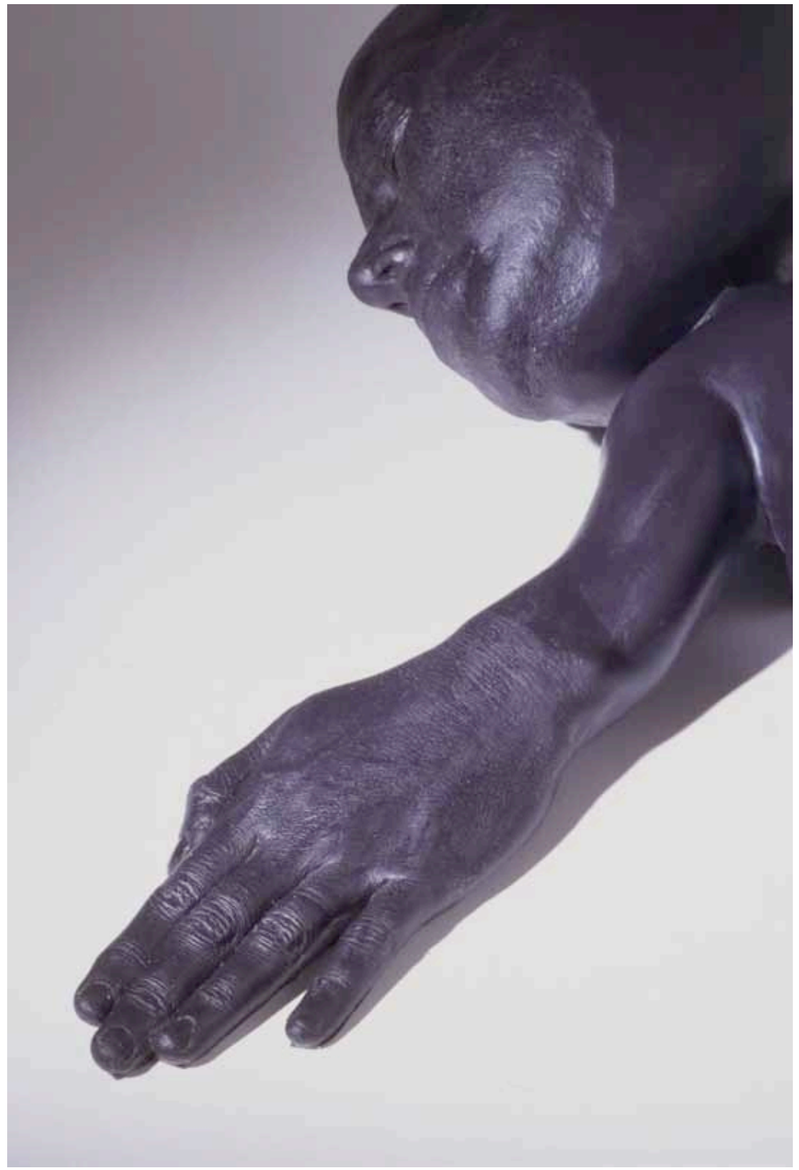
Bui: Yes, which is interesting, because most people draw from life, they tend to draw from the things they like, not from the things they don't understand, don't like, or don't know.

Feintuch: For me, it was a gradual letting go. I was always interested in metaphors, so even the purist painters I liked then were making references somehow. I came to stop believing the view of art history I had been taught. The idea that art moved in a line, that some idea of progress made certain things impossible, really came to seem more received than accurate or useful to me.

Bui: You mean like Alfred Barr's "torpedo, moving through time" diagram?

Feintuch: I mean what painters at the time seemed to believe. I think I had a kind of arrogance at 20 that I don't have now, or if I'm arrogant, I'm arrogant now in a different way. It seemed to me, when I was 20, that figuration was nostalgic, and now I see what a cloistered view it took for me to believe that. It seems like a ridiculous view now, but it was a dominant viewpoint in the art world at the time. I look back at an awful lot of stuff and as I get older, I think, "How could I have possibly believed that?" And I look at the work I loved, and I still love some of it, but I hate or am indifferent to some of it too. I look at the work I once hated . . .

Pl. 39



Pl. 40

Bui: Now you love . . .

Feintuch: Some of it I absolutely adore. You know, you tend to love things that feed you. I want my work to engage the world, and to engage life, to be somehow accurate about being alive, and a lot of things in the history of art feel available to me now.

Bui: What did de Kooning say about Mondrian in reference to purity? He said, “Purity makes me sick.” Remember? And he rejected Mondrian, yet towards the end of his life, de Kooning makes those late and lyrical paintings with colored ribbons in those similar primary colors like Mondrian. It’s so interesting, what you once rejected may come around and bite you in the ass late in life.

Pondick: You know I laugh when people say I will never do something. I know from my own experience, if you say that, you can bet in ten or twenty years you’re going to be doing it.

Bui: Yes. Yes.

Pondick: You know love and hate—they’re very close.

Bui: They are very close. Yeah. Talk about closeness, which is interesting. Because if working figuratively was considered to be nostalgic, or even taboo for that matter, for most of the ’70s, there were also artists like Ana Mendieta, Vito Acconci, Marina Abramovic . . .

Pondick: And Alice Neel.

Bui: Exactly, even Eleanor Antin. They were using their own bodies to explore different kinds of possibilities, whether through painting bodies, performing bodies, transgressive bodies, ritualistic bodies. Was there a relationship between what you guys were thinking about in terms of how to mediate your own bodies, with what they were doing, figuratively speaking, or not?

Pondick: I think the person that we were probably most engaged with at that moment was Philip Guston.

Feintuch: And there was Louise Bourgeois.

Pondick: And Bruce Nauman. They were key figures that I think we both felt a deep kinship with. We were floundering in the dark, working instinctively. For many years our studios were side by side, with just a wall between us, and that was a great gift. One would discover something in the work and it would mutate into the other’s studio. But because we are such polar opposites, the way it would manifest itself would be so different that it was hard for other people and, at times, even for us to see it.

Feintuch: It’s only recently that people have talked about the relationships between our work, and in a funny way it’s been there for a long time.

Pondick: My God, our studios were side by side for 35 years. Now that we have separate studios we sometimes miss that. And we’re both art addicts. When we’re not working we both love traveling and looking.

Bui: At museums?

Pondick: Yes, we divide our time between looking at painting and sculpture, and influences from both seep into our work.

Bui: So at that time, would it coincide a little bit with neo-expressionism too? Or not?

Pondick: I don’t see that correlating much to our work.

Feintuch: It’s funny, in that there weren’t many of those artists that I was interested in.

Pondick: Except for Francesco Clemente.

Feintuch: Clemente, yes. But some of it felt like they were reviving German expressionism, just adding a little bit of stylistic irony, which didn’t interest me so much.

I mean I don’t want to harp on Guston—we talked about him at our last interview—but for me there was something in that work and the way the distortion . . .

Pondick: And the fragmentation . . .

Feintuch: Both really helped make the paintings serious and comic at the same time. He pokes fun and savages stuff, including himself. He makes paintings where he is in front of an easel, holding a brush, with a Klan hood on his head. I mean, for me, there’s so much complex stuff suggesting layers of meaning. There’s both personal psychological, and sociopolitical references in the work, without simple moralizing, and that really interested me.

Bui: Is it true, Rona, that you felt the same way about Bourgeois as Robert did about Guston? And vice versa?

Pondick: Yes, Robert introduced me to Guston in ’75. I didn’t know what to make of his images. I thought they were perplexing, simultaneously wonderful and disturbing, and I loved how disturbing they were. They made me want to go back together and look at them again and try to understand them. When I saw the Bourgeois retrospective at MoMA, the same thing happened. Because of the work I had been making, I felt an immediate connection to the way both artists used bodily distortion and fragmentation.

We are both interested in that, and that's where that long title, a list of body parts, and of different states, came from. These fragments—heads, hands, feet—can be expressive in a lot of different ways. What does it mean when your hand makes a fist with the thumb inside or outside it, or if your hand and arm are in an aggressive or limp position? What do you feel? What does it make you think? Changes in gesture communicate so much. And we're both very sensitive to the psychological positioning of the body.

Feintuch: We both have been interested in gesture and posture for a long time. Phong, I'm looking at your facial expression and where your finger is, and reading it psychologically. When we look at each other's eyes, what we think we see communicates meaning. Some of that's probably communicated pre-verbally, where you feel it in your body. Those kinds of deeply embodied meanings are important to both of us.

Moving back to your first question, minimalism is very embodied too, but one of the things Rona and I came to reject, although we would say it differently, was the purity of it. The idea that art could be this powerful thing, detached from meaning, seems grandiose to me. I don't experience life like that, filled with purity and absolute power. To me, life is difficult, funny sometimes, and one way to get through it is to laugh. It's uncomfortable. It's beautiful. Sometimes it's sexy. Lots of the time it's not. And I want all of that.

Bui: Why head, hands, feet, and no torso, no knees, no ass?

Feintuch: It's funny that we left that out. In some of our work, both of us have pointed to the ass.

Bui: I mean the torso seems to be connecting all these things together.

Pondick: More than the torso, we look at hands, heads and feet instinctively to read emotional meaning.

Feintuch: We were looking through Rona's work the other night and there was a piece, "Monkey with Hair," that I absolutely adore. It's a difficult piece, made of stainless steel covered with hair. Its face, hand, and ass are exposed metal, and the ass is polished to a mirror finish. It's a beautiful, sexy, raised ass, and it catches you by surprise when you get to the back of the sculpture.

Pondick: And you did those paintings with your pants dropped, holding buckets, and in your paintings of Hercules, his ass is often out. I'm not sure who got to the ass first.

Bui: Yeah [laughing].

Feintuch: You know, if you look at Northern and Spanish Gothic paintings, there is a lot of closely observed naturalism, that places them in reality, but there is also expressive distortion at the same time, together, in this really deep way, that can be tragic and moving—but I also read it, at times, as funny.

Bui: Yeah, absolutely. What about the activity of holding, sleeping, dreaming, and dying?

Pondick: I've used the same version of my own head in every single sculpture since '98 and still running. My eyes are closed, and it feels so internal that it is unclear whether I am dead or sleeping. That ambiguity is important to me. People are always asking me "Are you sleeping? Are you dead? What's happening?

Bui: Yes, it is ambiguous.

Feintuch: Sleeping is a pretty big metaphoric place for the imagination, right?

Pondick: And also, sleeping deals with the unconscious.

Bui: Absolutely, the whole idea of leaving the body.

Feintuch: The holding part though . . .

Bui: Where did that come from? Was that affection?

Feintuch: We fought about the title for several days back and forth!

Pondick: Days? More like months!

Feintuch: I have a lot of people holding stuff in my paintings. I'm holding stuff often.

Pondick: Always. Holding grapes, a crutch, a newspaper, or a club.

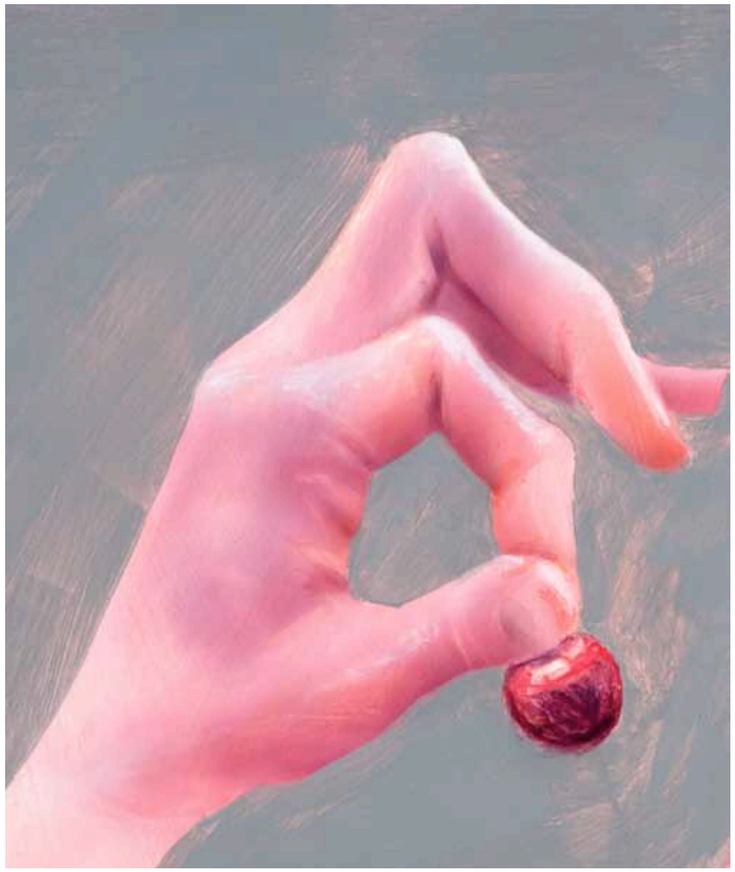
Feintuch: If you look through the history of portrait painting, what was in the hands of the person depicted mattered a lot. Books, money, skulls, staffs, and swords were signs of power. I love work that looks like it's about power, but I like it from an entirely skeptical point of view. The pomposity of it—it seems so comic as a depiction of desire.

With Rona, I always feel it's a little different. I feel like a lot of her work is about her bodily feeling—her own psychological feeling embodied. Rona is never holding anything. In "Marmot," Rona clenches her fist and her other hand presses onto the floor.

Bui: I think that's where the difference in how you each deal with distortion shows.

Feintuch: I went through a longer, more naturalistic period than Rona did. I think Rona's work used distortion from the beginning.

Pl. 41



Pl. 42

Pl. 43

Pl. 44

Pondick: And fragmentation.

Bui: Yes, yours is more violent, Robert's is more subtle.

Pondick: It's interesting hearing Robert talk about power and his relationship to it. I saw animal/human hybrids running through art history and I was fascinated. For me, putting my head on an animal instead of a human body was a way of introducing transgressive power.

Bui: Right. A very important question before we continue with what you just said. You said it wasn't until '98, Robert, that you made reference to your own body?

Pondick: No, you were making ear paintings in the 80's -you've been using body fragments for a long time.

Feintuch: I was using things that I thought of as myself, some of the time, but I didn't literally step out of the suit of armor in those knight paintings until '96, when I began to make drawings of myself nude, seen from behind.

Bui: What about you Rona? Was it in your first tree sculpture in'97? Or in earlier pieces like "Baby Fat" (1991)?

Pondick: No, no, no. I think of the bed as the holder for the body and the bed pieces were where my conscious involvement with the body started.

But if you are asking when I began to use my own body, it was in the teeth pieces. In 1990, I was using rubber Halloween teeth in pieces like "Little Bathers" and I called the company to order more. They told me they were discontinued and that I would have to order a couple hundred thousand. I thought that was crazy, so I started using molds from my own teeth.

Feintuch: So it was a practical thing?

Pondick: Oh totally pragmatic.

Bui: Ok. Cool.

Pondick: I think it was probably in 1999 that I started using my own head, hands and feet, combining them with animal bodies and trees, and I've used those parts of my own body exclusively since then. Oddly, I was the last person to see that they could be viewed as self-portraits, but I know now if I used someone else, it would take on other meanings. Working on the show together and thinking about how we both use our bodies and seeing how we each use our selves has really been interesting.

Bui: We create our own world—that's our job.

Feintuch: Rona, your eyes are closed in a lot of these hybrids. They feel very internal.

Pondick: Sometimes what I'm doing is pushing the world out because I can't tolerate what's going on in the world.

Bui: Robert, Unlike Rona's sense of distortion, which is dramatic, and is often bounded by gravity, everything you do defies gravity. You hold onto something so you won't fall.

Feintuch: She flops. I float.

Bui: You float in absurdity. The moment has been caught basically. She never cared about being caught. She just let it be. Transformed into otherness—the hybrid of human form and animal form, you know. She goes immediately into dream. You resist dreams, although one could say that you're playing your part like an actor. You're reenacting different movements of different acts.

Pondick: I also think he's able to poke fun at himself. I'm disconnected when I'm working, and I think he's way more connected.

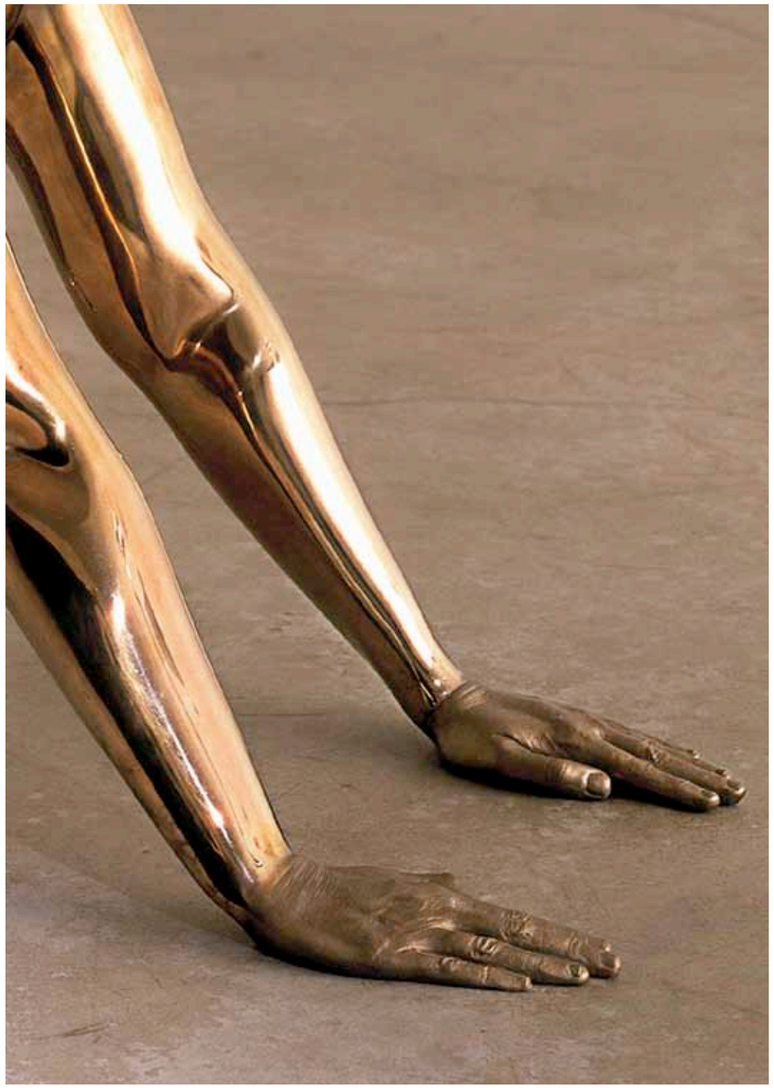
Feintuch: I don't know if I'm more connected. Some of the time I think I'm speaking about desire, and many of the desires are mine. Some of them are embarrassing and socially unacceptable. I've both had those desires, and am laughing at them. Some of the time, though, I don't think they're about me at all and it's not like I know painting to painting which one is more true than the next. Sometimes I think they satirize desires I see fucking up the larger world.

Pondick: Do you feel the same way that I do? Because, as much as I know it's me, I don't really think they are self-portraits. Even though it's my head, hands and feet, I think of them as stand-ins.

Feintuch: I keep my head turned away intentionally, to keep it from being me, something I saw in John Coplans' work. I think Rona's eyes being closed also makes people project themselves into it.

Bui: Yeah, you wrote a very wonderful piece on Coplans' work in Art in America.

Feintuch: That head being turned away gives you permission to look freely at a body. That's why when I was a kid, in heterosexual porn, the women often had sunglasses on, or were looking away. The only acceptable facial expression said "Come have sex with me."



Pl. 45

Pl. 46

Bui: I remember my aunt took me to see Marcel Carné's "Les Enfants du Paradis," which was an epic film. I must have been five years old. . . .

Feintuch: You had a progressive aunt.

Bui: Well she didn't think it was that alluringly erotic. It wasn't erotic, except for one scene when Garance came back, now being married to the Count (Édouard de Montray), to see Baptiste. They never consummated the first time they met. It wasn't much, she just opened her blouse and I remember my aunt put . . .

Pondick: Her hands over your eyes. [Laughter.]

Bui: Yeah. Naturally it made it more desirable.

Feintuch: Seduction means a lot to both of us, even with repugnant images, even with distorted images, or uncomfortable images. Rona's work is so materially seductive. I've seen her work in a room with no light at all . . .

Bui: It glows.

Feintuch: I've seen it out in nature, at night, daytime, and it's amazing. It becomes the only thing you see in the landscape. And I think about how my surface . . .

Bui: Your surfaces have the power of the transparency of those thin layers you build up so laboriously. It achieves, I think, luminosity.

Feintuch: I look at Northern paintings and they are restrained but they are extraordinarily sexy . . .

Bui: Absolutely.

Feintuch: . . . those surfaces and what skin feels like, and the level of attention to the body is sexy.

Bui: What does scale mean to you?

Pondick: To me scale is psychological presence.

Feintuch: And I would also say scale makes intimacy and I'm hoping to speak intimately. When a painting is small—say head sized—it asks you to come up to kissing distance.

Bui: One last thing you have in common is that you both believe that to make art takes a long time. It takes a long time to reach full maturity.

Feintuch: I hope to come to maturity someday.

Bui: Rona is there hope for you to mature?

Pondick: Nah. [Group laughter.] You know, I never want to lose the excitement of not knowing what is going to happen in my work. That sense of discovery is such a high. If I'm honest, the exploration for me—the process and what happens through the process—is one of the most exciting things. And even if what you have in the end is wonderful, it's not as great as that process.

Feintuch: The surprise of it is wonderful. I'm doing things I never thought I would do in my lifetime. Day-to-day it seems to evolve with its own logic. Sometimes, there's the thrill of doing something better. And finding myself doing things I wouldn't have conceived of years ago is still very exciting.

Bui: Last word Robert. What do you hope to get from this?

Pondick: It's been a fun process. 40 some years—it's a long time to allow us to take stock. But when you look in the mirror do you really see what you are looking at?

Feintuch: The look in the mirror thing makes me nervous. [Laughter.] But I want it all there—being grandiose, the desire to be powerful, narcissism and the desire to be beautiful, being awkward, being ridiculous, and finding ways to laugh . . .

Pondick: Robert is the only person I know who paints himself and makes himself have a bigger belly than he has.

Bui: What surprised me is why it took so long to recognize the similarities and differences in your work. That's what curation does. I think in some ways, both of your work is so much invested in self-analysis, which is about introspection, empathy and interpretation. All three things start from self-analysis.

Pondick: Good place to end.

Phong Bui is an artist, writer, and independent curator who co-founded the Brooklyn Rail, *where he is the publisher and editor-in-chief. He is also the artistic director of* Rail Curatorial Projects *and* Occupy Rail.