

Viola Frey Biography: Excerpts from Various Articles

VIOLA FREY

Viola Frey was born in Lodi, California in 1933 and died in Oakland in the summer of 2004. She received her B.F.A. from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland and her M.F.A. from Tulane University, New Orleans. She twice received an Artist's Fellowship Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Arts Commission of San Francisco conferred on her an Award of Honor for Sculpture.

She is known for her larger-than-life monumental ceramic figures of men in power suits and women either clothed, inspired by the fashions of the '50s, or dressed in pink in their birthday suits. She sculpted women holding the world or gazing at it, placing them in a position of power. She created men standing, walking, seated or fallen, wearing their nature and vulnerabilities in their suits and their visages. Frey also delighted in making smaller ceramic sculptures—sometimes hand-built, at other times slip-cast, as well as drawings.

In her smaller groupings, Frey's love of the human figure is evident, men in blue power suits are juxtaposed with figurines, a cornucopia of cascading figures combines the most unlikely selection of objects, shapes and figurines for the artist, the abstractions of contemporary society, combined with images that have become visual "watchwords" of her vocabulary. In the artist's hands the compilation comes alive as an animated, active, colorful tableau of life.

Like her smaller groupings, Frey's plates bring together a wide variety of images that constitute Frey's visual vocabulary: hands, eyes, windows, figures, grandmothers, figurines, spoon people, a swirling paint brush, an eccentric red Buddha, a Raggedy Ann doll, a horse winged or running, to name a few Frey icons. More heraldic tondos than plates, created of clay and Egyptian paste, with energy, drive and gusto, Donald Kuspit has said: "Each plate is like a different dream, but Frey's dreams run in series... Each plate seems like a marvelously irregular yet uncannily perfect pearl. Indeed, if pearls are the oyster's ecstatic response to an irritation, then Frey's ecstatic plates are perfect pearls, for their intensity is a response to such irritations of life as death and memory."

Above all, Frey is a figurative artist who delighted in painting or drawing figures, faces, profiles, eyes, hands, limbs. She applied her energetic, vigorous color and drawing line to the form of the human figure which she would hand build over a period of approximately one year. Her women represent everywoman, her men everyman. The monumentality of scale in the figures brings us back to the sensation of childhood when adults were towering pillars in the forest of humanity.

1933—2004

Viola Frey was born in 1933 in Lodi, California, and died in Oakland, California, in 2004. She is well known for her large, colorfully glazed clay sculptures of men and women, which expanded the traditional boundaries of ceramic sculpture. Frey was one of a number of California artists working in clay in the 1950s and 60s who turned away from that medium's conventions to produce works with robust sculptural qualities associated with Abstract Expressionist painting, Pop art and what would come to be known as California Funk.

Frey moved to San Francisco in 1960 after studying at Tulane University. In the early 60s she began producing large plates and assemblages as well as sculptures and paintings. In 1965 Frey began teaching at the California College of Arts and Crafts. It was not until the late 70s, after moving into her large studio in Oakland, that she had room to start creating her signature larger-than-life figures. Standing about nine feet high and constructed of separate pieces, with visible seams, these massive men and women are rendered in a simplified style. The men appear in generic suits and ties and the women in simple, 50s-style dresses and old-fashioned hairdos. Bright colors and heavily textured surfaces are integral to Frey's work. While some of her art is highly autobiographical in nature, her large figures deal with universal themes of social interaction in an increasingly complex world.

In addition to the large scale, Frey was drawn to the miniature. She began collecting ceramic figurines in flea markets near her home in Oakland. Some inspired her large sculptures, and others provided imagery for her paintings, drawings and assemblage pieces. In her vividly colored drawings she incorporated many of her purchases, such as the bear, rooster, dog, and horse, containing them in a sealed environment.

Frey lived surrounded by art and art books. She collected some 4,000 books, which she often used as references for her works. Committed to her art, she continued working almost until the end of her life.

The Colossal Ceramic World of Viola Frey
By [Greta Berman](#)
[March 2010](#)

The current exhibition of Viola Frey (1933-2004) at the Museum of Arts and Design, titled “Bigger, Better, More,” is crowded into two smallish galleries. The loud, unladylike show, however, refuses to be constricted into a room or two, shattering expectations and stereotypes. Frey’s colorful, controlled chaos of enormous ceramic figures creates its own world. It even spills over into the lobby of the museum, where there is an additional ceramic piece, the *Western Civilization Fountain* (1998). All this is very appropriate for March, which marks [Women’s History Month](#).



An exhibition of works by Viola Frey is currently on display at the Museum of Arts and Design. The exhibit, titled “Bigger, Better, More,” includes *Weeping Woman* (1990-91).

(Photo by Photos: Artists’ Legacy Foundation/Licensed by VAGA)



Man Balancing Urn (2004)

Upon entering the first gallery, you see a number of works lined up against the wall. The first piece is a massive seated nude woman whose title, *Weeping Woman*, immediately conjures up Picasso for me—but this one is different. Picasso’s renowned animalistic *Weeping Woman* (1937, based on Dora Maar, his lover at the time) is pathetic, and contorted in grief. Frey’s “Woman” may be wiping a tear, but she sits in a stable position reminiscent of ancient Mayan figures such as Chac-Mool, which inspired Henry Moore. This powerful woman is more reminiscent of early-20th century Expressionist nudes, especially those by pioneer female artist Paula Modersohn-Becker. Placed next to her are two larger-than-life standing male figures. One is called *Man Observing Series II* (1984), the other *Fire Suit* (1983). Both are depicted wearing suits and ties; they are blocky and monumental, domineering and non-individualistic. The nude woman easily holds her own against the two men.

Frey’s small double self-portrait of 1978 stands in the center of the line-up. The two identical selves are recapitulated in the *Double Grandmothers With Black and White Dresses* (1982), on the left. Biographers have suggested that the women—Frey, herself, and her grandmother figures—were inspired by her Huguenot ancestry and the strong, independent women of her family. During World War II many of these women re-entered the work force, while also continuing to make handmade clothing and other objects. Hence they also reflect her pride in her crafts background.

Entering the second gallery, we notice a sculpted man strangely seated on the floor, his feet attached to an unstable urn—perhaps reflecting his own instability. Or is he trying to kick over a pot made by a woman? Indeed, *Man Balancing Urn* (2004) is a new take on Frey’s earlier conception of males as domineering, authority figures.

The Eater II (1980) is one of a number of bricolages, resembling a table with a tablecloth and junk on top of it. It reminds me of Picasso’s sculpted *Glass of Absinthe* (1914), sometimes referred to as “rococo cubism.” It is both funny and upsetting at the same time. On close inspection, one sees nude bodies painted on the surface, and the eater appears to be shoving not food, but little boys into his/her mouth/stomach. The fork is out of all proportion and the surface wildly painted with colorful splotches. Perhaps this cannibalism represents Frey’s critique of a gluttonous consumer society.

Viola Frey is not well known in today's art world. Her own reticence may have contributed to this, but during her lifetime she ran into prejudice for three major reasons: First, her art comes out of Abstract Expressionism, a male-dominated movement of the 1950s and early-60s; second, she was little recognized since she came from California, rather than New York City; and last, her preferred medium, pottery, was historically relegated to "crafts" rather than "high art."

Interestingly, however, there were a small number of men who achieved a reputation for making oversize ceramic sculpture. These artists—Peter Voulkos, John Mason, Kenneth Price, Robert Arneson, David Gilhooly, and Richard Shaw—were featured in a clay show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1981. Patterson Sims, one of the curators at the time, realized that Frey was excluded, and attempted to remedy the oversight by giving her a small solo exhibition there in 1984.

Frey was fortunate that her life partner, Charles Fiske, who had been her teacher, was supportive of her career, even placing it before his own. Her oeuvre, although not political, represents an integral part of feminism in the 20th century. You know immediately it is a woman's work.

Why and how? It is the autobiographical nature of her art, which like that of many women, had a strong effect on male artists. Her art consistently refers to herself, her family, and childhood memories. Frey often frequented flea markets and local thrift shops, adding photography to her arsenal. One amusing item in the exhibit is a cabinet containing part of her collection of bric-a-brac. The dada/chance/art brut aspects of her work reveal her appreciation for the everyday and the accidental. They make it more down to earth. You don't have the feeling of "reverence" that you have for some art.

On the other hand, Frey also possessed a great deal of sophistication and knowledge. Much of her art is informed by familiarity with antiquity and Japanese ceramics. She even spent a period in residency at Sevres, the French center of fine porcelain production. Like Picasso, Jean Dubuffet, David Smith, and many others, she loved to incorporate found objects into her work. A low-level job Frey briefly took at New York's Museum of Modern Art enabled her to see both Picasso and Miró's use of clay as a medium. In addition to her most eye-catching ceramic sculptures, she made plates, paintings, and drawings, many of which are seen in this show.

Women's History Month is a good time to remember that not so long ago many women artists worked quietly in their bedrooms or a corner of the living room or kitchen. Genteel still lifes or perhaps portraits of family and friends were the only avenues open to them. Frey's innovative art is neither quiet nor polite, and it was not produced in a small room. In addition, her huge, brash figures were primarily made of clay, a medium until relatively recently consigned to "crafts," rather than "Fine Art."

Viola Frey was one of those overlooked, strong, and exceptional artists of the 20th century who enriched the repertoire of both women and men artists, vigorously enhancing our understanding of feminist thought in the past century.

"Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey" runs through May 2 at the Museum of Arts and Design, 2 Columbus Circle. The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11

a.m. to 6 p.m., and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.; it is closed on Monday. (212) 299-7777; www.madmuseum.org.

From the Frank Lloyd Wright Gallery:

Viola Frey (1933-2004) worked in many modes. Whether it is her monumental figurative sculptures, her painterly plates, or her ceramic assemblage culled from trips to the flea market, she created intelligent and provocative ceramic sculpture. Throughout her work, she employed aspects of funk art and elements of social critique, and returned constantly to the figure, using it to explore a wide range of themes. Bright, almost garish colors and heavily textured surfaces are an indispensable part of her work, heightening the sense of urgency and tension each piece imparts. While her plates are highly autobiographical in nature, often incorporating aspects of her childhood and personal life, her large figures and assemblage pieces deal with universal themes of social interaction in an increasingly complex world.

Frey, who grew up on a farm and vineyard in Lodi, California, lived and worked in Oakland for much of her career. She moved there in 1960 after completing an M.F.A. at Tulane University in New Orleans. In 1965 she began teaching at the California College of Arts and Crafts, and in 1975 expanded her studio in Oakland so she could produce larger work. She became well known for the monumental sculptures she began creating in the 1980's, which can be found in public places and private collections throughout the world.

Despite her interest in monumental forms, Frey was also drawn to the miniature. During her early years in Oakland, she began collecting small ceramic figurines found at flea markets near her home. These pieces of the past, the detritus of a society that is always moving on to the next big thing, fascinated Frey. Some of them inspired her large sculptures, while others become elements of her assemblage pieces. Casting molds from her many flea market knick knacks, she remade these castoffs in her own style and bound them together in a complex amalgamation of appropriated forms. For Frey, these pieces have much to do with modern life and our dependence upon material goods. In her words, "most peoples' lives- what are they but trails of debris? Each day more debris, long, long trails of debris, with nothing to clean it all up."

Oral history interview with Viola Frey, 1995 Feb. 27-June 19

<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-viola-frey-12554>

Listen to MP3 sound excerpt from this interview 

Frey, Viola , b. 1933 d. 2004

Sculptor

Active in New York, N.Y.; San Francisco, Calif.

Size: Sound recording: 5 sound cassettes (5 hrs.) : analog.

Transcript: 126 p.

Collection Summary: An interview of Viola Frey conducted 1995 Feb. 27-1995 June 19, by Paul Karlstrom, for the Archives of American Art, Women in the Arts in Southern California Oral History Project, at the artist's studio, in Oakland, Calif.

FEB. 27, 1995 SESSION: Family background in the Midwest; Huguenot ancestry; importance of grandmother in her life; living in Central Valley, Calif.; father's collecting junk; early plans to become a writer; declining her acceptance to UC Berkeley and attending community college to study art; attending California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, majoring in ceramics; winning a first prize at City of Paris contest; attending Tulane University; moving to New York; working at the Museum of Modern Art; returning to San Francisco in 1960 and community there. She recalls Richard Diebenkorn, Mark Rothko, Peter Voulkos, and Robert Arneson.

MAY 15, 1995 SESSION: Influence of Robert Arneson; comparison of her work to Voulkos, Arneson and Manuel Neri; effect of gender on art subjects; Frey's theme of man in suit as power to do good or bad; interest in archeology; influence of National Geographic magazine on her work, especially as a source for images of grandmothers; production of her large-scale ceramic sculpture; her preference for electric kiln; modular production; studio spaces in Oakland and San Francisco and effect of varying light; working on a piece over a long period of time, which is unusual for sculpture; and the importance of space in the creation of work.

JUNE 19, 1995 SESSION: Influence of television and radio; attitude toward Japanese-influenced ceramics; use of color; overglaze painting; china painting in France; relationships between her figure drawing and sculpture; New York period; funk; plate art; autobiographical and personal qualities in her work; move from house to studio;

personal relationship with Charles Fiske; her private art library; interest in artist's monographs; social life; image of man in suit; influence of AIDS in her work; art-brute; and response to critics Donald Kuspit and Susan Larsen.

Biographical/Historical Note: Viola Frey (1933-2004) was a ceramist and sculptor of Oakland, Calif.

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators. Funding for this interview was provided by the Margery and Harry Kahn Philanthropic Fund of the Jewish Communal Fund of New York.

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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There are also numerous videos on YouTube (vimeo) that are very interesting.

