

Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey

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Racine Art Museum

Apr. 24 – Aug. 16, 2009

Racine, WI

ramart.org



“Bigger, Better, More,” the first retrospective since 1981 of Viola Frey’s work, isn’t actually very big. An exercise in thoughtful distillation, it manages to spotlight Frey’s recurring themes, passionate exploration of color and increasingly bold use of scale with just 22 well-chosen pieces. Making the selections must have been wrenching. Frey was phenomenally productive: although her sculpture sold consistently, her 15,000-square-foot warehouse/studio was still crammed with work when she died in 2004.

Frey, of course, is best known for her brilliantly colored, monumental ceramic figures. Startlingly fresh when they emerged in the early 1980s, these figures have become icons of 20th-century ceramics, so familiar that it’s easy to take them for granted. It’s a revelation to step back and see them in a fuller context. At the Racine Art Museum, the most iconic works weren’t even visible from the first gallery, which was dominated by a raucous row of smaller, densely composed sculptures dating from 1969 to 1980. It was thrilling to round the corner and sense the scale ramping up, as the life-size *Mrs. National Geographic*, 1977–78, and *Double Self*, 1978, gave way to the imposing *Double Grandmothers with Black and White Dresses*, 1982, and two enormous men in power suits. The exhibition is fortified by some of Frey’s most evocative paintings and pastels and a handful of her luscious, inscrutable plates. Frey established her national reputation as a sculptor, but her paintings and works on paper are like windows into the sculptures’ world, revealing their chaotic relationships and emotional lives. Her plates and earlier sculptures carry much of the same thematic freight, creating a dynamic call and response around the gallery.

What impressed me most, however—I’m embarrassed I hadn’t fully grasped it before—was Frey’s extraordinary range. With her strong work ethic, well-honed technique and deep grounding in art history, archaeology, color theory, social politics and pop culture, she must have been an unstoppable force in the studio. She was a brash, confident draftsman, with the chops for everything from delicate impressionistic dabs to moody, slashing silhouettes, funky brushwork and a hopped-up wiggly line that riffs on 18th-century painted porcelain. Her glaze surfaces run the gamut from dusty matte to bright drippy gloss and the dry sheen of Egyptian paste. As her figurative pieces

