



Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey
April 24 – August 16, 2009

- A California native, Viola Frey (1933 – 2004) spent most of her entire adult life living and working in the San Francisco Bay Area.
- In the 1950s and 1960s, California was home to the most vital ceramic communities in the US.
- Frey received recognition early in her career on the West Coast. However, an important solo show of at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1984 brought national attention to her work.
- From the 1980s through the early years of this century, Frey was featured in almost 50 solo shows at museums and galleries across the country.
- Until the late 20th century, many of the museums and galleries that presented and collected Frey's work were known for focusing on painting and sculpture media, but not for ceramics. Because she worked in painting, ceramics and bronze, Frey is often regarded as one of the key artists who broke through the boundaries that existed at the time between what was considered fine art and what was perceived as craft. Frey moved back and forth between these media throughout her career, transferring techniques from one material to the other in order to create new approaches to working in each one.
- Since one of RAM's main goals is to have contemporary crafts viewed within the context of painting and sculpture movements of the same period, Frey is a natural subject for encouraging further examination and discussion (of what each of us considers art to be).
- Frey was driven by an insatiable need to create art. She once noted that she was able to do her work because she adhered to two priorities: to survive and to create art. For Frey, art and survival were inseparable. Like many driven, creative people, Frey was not only an artist and a teacher, but was also a consumer of art.
- Frey's fundamental preoccupation with the human figure, and her habit of making references to other artists and art from other cultures and times, followed her throughout her career.

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- Aesthetics, philosophy, art history, American middle class life, global commodification and personal history were equal concerns in Frey's work.
- Frey's ceramic sculptures are her best-known works, uniting all the visual resources of composition, line and color. Ceramics had a venerable history as a functional and artistic medium, but was not yet accepted in the US as a fine art medium. Frey was an integral voice in linking craft media with fine art.

Viola Frey's History

- Born into a grape-ranching family in Lodi, California, during the Great Depression in 1933, Frey realized early on that she "had to be an artist to survive." She received a bachelor of fine arts from California College of Arts and Crafts (now California College of the Arts [CCA]) in 1956. She studied painting with the Abstract painter Richard Diebenkorn and took an elective course in ceramics with Vernon Coykendall and Charles Fiske. Frey received her master of fine arts from Tulane University in 1958, studying with Katherine Choy and George Rickey. She also studied briefly with Mark Rothko in New York.
- After spending two years on the East Coast, working with Choy at the fledgling Clay Art Center in Port Chester, New York, and in the business office at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Frey returned to California in 1960. She settled in Oakland and remained there until her death in 2004.
- Viola lived with Charles Fiske until his death in 1999. Fiske, an art historian, had been Frey's professor at CCA and her mentor. Although they lived and worked together, Frey maintained a decidedly solo personality.
- In 1965, Frey joined the faculty at CCA and continued a relationship with the college through 1999 as full professor and chair of the ceramics program. During Frey's tenure, she guided the design and building of the Noni Eccles Treadwell Ceramic Arts Center on the college's Oakland campus. In 1999, she was awarded the status of professor emeritus and in 2003, the college established the Viola Frey Chair in Fine Arts, created specifically to bring noted artists from around the world to teach as visiting professors at CCA and to share their work with the Bay Area community.

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Influences

- Frey used her work to find closure to personal issues.
- Frey's work has a strong familial influence. Her grandmothers and mother were frequently the inspiration behind the powerful ceramic females in her work. The mouths on her early suited male figures were often omitted, as Frey felt her brothers could be overbearing during their childhood.
- Her father's obsessive collecting habits were passed on to Frey, who frequented flea markets and secondhand stores, gathering inexpensive ceramic figurines, which she used for visual inspiration in her work.
- In the 1960s, Frey was influenced by the Photorealism movement and began using the camera to record unusual-looking people, familiar haunts, such as the flea market, and the bric-a-brac tableaus she created from her collections of knickknacks.
- In French, a *bricoleur* or *bricoleuse* is someone who performs odd handiwork around the house. Although the subtle nuances of these words are not fully translatable into English, the literal meaning of *bricolage* is the thing a *bricoleur* patches together out of trash or junk. Such objects are, however, more than recycled trash, for they are imbued with personal associations and powers the artist bestows on them.
- Around 1971, Frey combined her interest in the “throwaway” with influences of the farm life from her childhood, to address the myths and realities of the California dream.

Artists, Galleries and Exhibitions

- Frey worked and exhibited with artists such as Robert Arneson, Robert Brady, Squeak Carnwath and Peter Voulkos.
- She claimed an affinity with Bay Area Figuration—with artists like Diebenkorn,

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David Park and Joan Brown—and saw her roots in Art Brut, particularly the work of Jean Dubuffet.

- Her use of color was strongly influenced by Mark Rothko; her figures show the influence of Matisse's posed figures with muscular curves and fleshy limbs and Frey adopted his nondescript color within representation.
- Frey's palette and imagery were also potently formed by twentieth century European and German Expressionist painting.
- Scholar, writer and gallery owner Garth Clark included Frey in the exhibition *A Century of Ceramics in the United States 1878 – 1978*.
- The first acquisition of Frey's work by a major museum, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, brought Frey to the attention of Patterson Sims. He immediately featured Frey's work in a one-person show at the Whitney Museum of American Arts in New York, including her monumental figures, along with plates, bricolage sculptures and paintings that demonstrated her range of work.
- Art dealer Rena Bransten began representing Frey in 1980. Under her guidance and influence, Frey continued to exhibit nationally and Bransten began placing Frey in important private collections. Bransten claims responsibility for the show at the Whitney as she introduced Frey to Sims. Frey's association with Bransten allowed her to become more active internationally and she began accepting invitations to do workshops abroad.
- In 1986, the Nancy Hoffman Gallery began to represent Frey. Her work was exhibited at shows in major cities across the country. Through Hoffman, major collectors such as Steve Wynn began to collect Frey and display her work in premier spots, such as the Bellagio and Mirage Hotels in Las Vegas.

Tableaus

- From 1975 to 1980, Frey started creating tableaus from her flea market finds. She photographed these arrangements, and then, created pointillist paintings from the images. Her study of color and light during this time helped develop Frey's richly figured surfaces and interest in pattern and decoration.

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- The Tableau photographs also became the basis for an ongoing series of large and small bricolage ceramic sculptures. Frey made clay molds from her flea market finds and reassembled them into larger compositions.
- In the mid-1970s, Frey began to create assemblages of small figurative works inspired by her collection of dime store figurines and bric-a-brac that she found in the flea markets and junk stores in the Bay Area. Slip-cast in whiteware from existing figurines, these assemblages are referred to as bricolage.

Plate or Tondo Forms

- Frey also began working with circular plates or tondo forms at this time. These forms and the potential of their surfaces obsessed Frey throughout her career. The imagery she explored included self-portraits, skeletons at feasts and a silhouetted man in a doorway. This last repeating image was based on a photograph Frey had taken of Seattle-based ceramic sculptor Howard Kottler.
- In the early 1980s, Frey developed her distinctive aesthetic of placing slip-cast or press molded images on Egyptian paste to attain a high relief-surface.

Monumental Figures

- In the late 1970s, Frey began her best-known work—her monumental ceramic figures.

Grandmother Motif

- She introduced her grandmother motif in 1980. Based on the women who joined the work force in World War II, these powerful and respected female figures were made of strong, medium-textured white clay covered with thick white glaze. Some were painted with vibrantly colored glazes.
- Frey once said, "I don't think that one gets anywhere by promoting women as victims."
- To capture the essence of women, Frey focused on the clothing. Her surface treatment of the dresses went from monochromatic areas of color to smooth surfaces. She returned to flea markets and second hand stores for dresses, handbags, shoes

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and accessories, which she placed on hangers to copy.

- Frey's men's faces were recognizable, although they were more generalized than Frey's women.
- Prior to 1981, Frey created figures in pairs. Later, they were created as single female or male figures. The sizes of these figures ranged in height from life-sized to nearly ten feet tall.

Creating the Monumental Figures

- Frey's sculptures are at a scale nearly unprecedented in ceramics, with many of them standing in excess of ten feet tall and weighing thousands of pounds. The Grandmother's heavy bodies on thin ankles necessitated the need to cut the figures in half to transport them. Frey built and fired one section at a time, starting with the legs that, once fired, were filled with cement and steel rods for additional strength and stability. After all pieces were built and fired, Frey painted them and then reassembled the parts into the final sculpture.

Evolution of the Monumental Figures

- The early figurative women were dowdy and often wore hats. Later figures were sleeker, taller, hatless women wearing more contemporary dress and hairstyles. Printed dress patterns were replaced with abstractly painted areas in bright colors.
- The male figures transformed from cowering puppet-like figures wearing monochromatic suits with highlights of color to massive figures, some more than eleven feet tall. Frey's later male figures have mouths, though they retain subtle reminders of the role women play in their lives. For example, *Man Observing Series II* is a male figure with the artist handprint on his back.

1984 – 1997

- In 1983, Frey broke up her house/studio environment and began to rent workspace and storage space elsewhere. After the move, where she wasn't surrounded by her collections and flea market finds, she began to draw from a model. She often clipped

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images of individuals from magazines and worked with the television on and no volume. Frey was intrigued by many blue-suited political figures of the day, such as Ronald Reagan, George Bush and Bill Clinton.

- Her larger studio allowed her to think big: both vertically and horizontally.
- Her model drawings allowed Frey to explore a reclining figure in clay, which was a dramatic approach for her ceramic figures. Frey believed that in contemporary society the female nude symbolized power and control. In contrast, her male nudes were unheroic, human, and vulnerable, often influenced by the impact of the AIDS epidemic and the declining health of Fiske.
- The late 1980s and the 1990s showed a change Frey's figurative groups that stood frieze-like on decorated pediments. These were a direct result of her visits to Sèvres, with ceramic artist Betty Woodman who provided companionship and professional encouragement. During this time, Frey was influenced by a visit to the Netherlands, with fellow sculptors Akio Takamori and Woodman, where she became intrigued by an Etruscan-lidded funerary vase. The vase became the format of choice for her glass compositions and she used it as a prop to support her reclining men. In 2000, the vase shape assumed the same monumental proportions of her figures.

Frey's Later Years

- Frey developed carpal tunnel syndrome in 1991, which made it particularly difficult for her to work on her large-scale pieces. However, with the help of her assistant Sam Perry, Frey was able to continue to work up until her death and to realize her seemingly ceaseless flow of ideas.
- After suffering debilitating strokes in 1995, and a diagnosis of colon cancer, Frey's work went into new and diverse directions. She contracted glassblower Chuck Vannatta to continue her investigation of glass, using reverse imagery of fighting men. Frey continued working on the nude figure. At the time of her death in 2004, Frey was working on monumental figures glazed only in white for show at the Nancy Hoffman Gallery. It is speculated that her figures were all white because Frey physically would not be able to glaze them. This enabled her to realize a long-held desire to create monochromatic surfaces.
- By the time of her death, Frey had accumulated a significant financial and artistic

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estate, which she bequeathed to the Artist Legacy Foundation (ALF). Established in 2000 by Frey and Squeak Carnwath, ALF's mission is to promote, protect and maintain artists' legacies. Through sales of artwork and financial resources left by Frey and subsequent artists, ALF supports other emerging and established painters and sculptors through awards, grants and educational programs.

- ALF joins major US art museums as the principal lender to this exhibition.

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Assemblage is an artistic process in which a three-dimensional artistic composition is made from putting together found objects. The origin of the word (in its artistic sense) can be traced back to the early 1950s, when Jean Dubuffet created a series of collages of butterfly wings, which he titled assemblages d'empreintes. However, both Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso had been working with found objects for many years prior to Dubuffet. They were not alone, alongside Duchamp the earliest woman artist to try her hand at assemblage was Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, the Dada Baroness. One of the most prolific assemblage artists was Louise Nevelson, who began creating her sculptures from found pieces of wood in the late 1930s.

Bisque (or biscuit) is unglazed ware that has been fired to a temperature sufficient to harden, but not mature, the clay body. This firing is usually followed by another at a higher temperature for the glaze. The purpose of the first firing is to harden the green ware enough so that additional work can be performed.

Bricolage, is a term used in several disciplines, among them the visual arts and literature, to refer to the construction or creation of a work from a diverse range of things which happen to be available, and to a work created by such a process. It is borrowed from the French word *bricolage*, from the verb *bricoler*, whose meaning in French is "fiddle, tinker" and, by extension, "make creative and resourceful use of whatever materials are on hand (regardless of their original purpose)." A person who engages in bricolage is a bricoleur.

Bone China is hard, translucent whiteware made by the English from a soft paste porcelain developed in the 18th century. The body contains up to 50 percent bone ash and is not very plastic; it also tends to warp.

Casting is process of forming clay objects by pouring a clay slip into a hollow plaster mold and allowing it to remain long enough for a layer of clay to thicken on the mold wall. After a sufficient hardening, the puddle of slip in the center of the mold is poured off, the mold is opened, and the clay object is removed. It is allowed to dry and then fired. This method allows for the creation of numerous forms from a single mold. Also referred to as slip casting or solid casting.

Clay is a malleable material made from decomposing rock. Generally free of vegetable matter, this material often contains other impurities that affect color and firing temperatures. Clay is classified into various types, such as ball clays, fire clays, and slip clays.

Collage (From the French: coller, to glue) is a work of formal art, primarily in the visual arts, made from an assemblage of different forms, thus creating a new whole. A collage may include newspaper clippings, ribbons, bits of colored or hand-made papers, portions of other artwork, photographs and other found objects, glued to a piece of paper or canvas. The origins of collage can be traced back hundreds of years, but this technique made a dramatic reappearance in the early 20th century.

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Cone is (1) a support, in form of a cone, for an object being fired; and (2) a scale for measuring the temperature of a kiln. For the latter, supports are made in the form of a pyramid and given the index number corresponding to a certain melting point. When the predetermined temperature is reached, the tip of the pyramid sags until it is level with the bases. Such cones are principally employed in order to measure temperatures in those kilns where this factor is not controlled automatically. Also known as Orton cones, pyrometric cones, and Seger cones.

Firing Temperatures

Cones 022 – 15: 605° to 1435C°

Cone 07: 990°C (low-fire earthenware matures)

Cone 02: 1125° (earthenware matures)

Cone 9: 1285°C (stoneware matures)

Cone 13: 1350° (porcelain matures)

All temperatures are approximate. (Source: Kenny, John B. *The Complete Book of Pottery Making*. 2d ed. Radnor, Pennsylvania: Chilton Book Company, 1976.)

Earthenware refers to non-vitreous, opaque, low-fired ware usually red or tan in color. The bisque firing temperature is normally 1125°C; the glaze firing temperature is 1080°C.

Egyptian Paste was used, as the name implies, by the ancient Egyptians, as far back as 7,000 years ago. Egyptian Paste is a self-glazing, low-firing clay body that was probably discovered by accident when a mixture of sand, clay, potash feldspar and soda ash were fired. The Egyptian Paste body contains soluble salts that rise to the surface while the work is drying. This layer of salt acts as a flux, glazing the surface and also helping the clay body itself to vitrify at low temperatures. That's why it is important not to disturb the crystalline surface after the drying process is completed. Slow and even drying will also ensure consistent sodium coverage and glaze effect.

Enamel refers to pigments that fuse at approximately 750°C, which are applied after the glaze firing over the ground color, or fused glaze. The comparatively low-firing temperature of enamels permits the use of a far wider and often more saturated range of colors than is possible with pigments that require higher firing temperatures. Sometimes referred to as china paint, on-glaze decoration, or over-glaze enamel.

Glaze is a liquid suspension of finely ground minerals that is applied by brushing, pouring, dipping, or spraying the surface of bisque-fired ceramic ware. After drying, the ware is fired to the temperature at which the glaze ingredients will melt together to form a glassy surface coating. This coating may be translucent or opaque, colored or not colored, smooth or textured, shiny or matte, depending upon its composition and the temperature to which it was fired.

Glaze Fire is a firing liquid cycle to the temperature at which glaze materials will melt

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to form a glasslike surface coating. This is usually at the point of maximum body maturity and is considerably hotter than the bisque fire. Also referred to as a ghost fire.

Greenware are ceramics that have been formed but not yet fired.

Kiln is an enclosed or partially enclosed structure for firing ceramic materials. Kilns may be labeled on the basis of their construction or firing characteristics. Some important types of kilns are:

- Bottle – an updraft kiln with a narrow chimney, shaped like a bottle.
- Clamp – an open topped updraft kiln of semi-permanent construction, usually with intermixed fuel and ware.
- Climbing – a kiln set along a slope to aid the draft.
- Continuous – a kiln with a moving track on which ware is fed into the firing atmosphere.
- Cove – an updraft kiln usually having no permanent parts.
- Down Draft – an enclosed intermittent kiln in which the heat is passed to the top of the kiln, then the draft carries it down through the ware.
- Intermittent – a kiln that is loaded, fired, cooled and unloaded before a new batch is fired.
- Muffle – a kiln constructed so that the ware is not directly subjected to radiant heat from flame or heating element.
- Pit – a clamp kiln that is partially buried in the ground.
- Salt – a kiln used only for salt glazing.
- Tunnel – a type of continuous kiln.
- Updraft – a kiln in which the heat or flame passes upward through the ware and is vented outside.

Mold is a form or box, usually made of plaster of Paris, containing a hollow negative shape. The positive form is made by either pouring clay or slip or pressing soft clay into the mold, which then absorbs water from the clay allowing it to harden and later be removed. See Casting.

Paste refers to bodies composed of two or more ingredients used in making European-type porcelains.

Porcelain refers to hard, high-fired, non-absorbent clay body that is white and translucent. See Hard-paste porcelain, Soft-paste porcelain.

Pottery refers to low-fired, non-vitrified objects, including cooking, serving, and storage vessels (as distinct from high-fired ceramics); an enterprise within the ceramics field concerned with the manufacture of such products.

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Relief: High-relief is where the most prominent elements of the composition are undercut and rendered at more than 50% in the round against the background.

Low-relief is where the overall depth of a projecting image is shallow. The background is very compressed or completely flat, as on most coins, on which all images are in low-relief.

Slip refers to clay combined with water to a fluid consistency either for a slip casting, for joining parts, such as a handle, to a vessel, or for decorating the surface of wet or leather hard ceramic ware. Slip may be colored. Also referred to as clay slip or slurry.

Soft-Paste Porcelain refers to a clay body that matures to vitreous or porcelain hardness at a lower firing temperature than hard-paste porcelain. It must be fired unglazed, and then re-fired for glazing.

Hard-Paste Porcelain refers to a clay body that matures to vitreous or porcelain hardness at a higher firing temperature than soft-paste porcelain. It must be fired unglazed, and then re-fired for glazing.

Stoneware is high-fire ware (above cone 6) with slight or no absorbency. It is usually gray in color but may be tan or slightly reddish. Stoneware is similar in many respects to porcelain, the chief differences being increased plasticity and the color, which is a result of iron and other impurities in the clay.

Whiteware are ceramics that are essentially white or creamy in color. The term refers to low-fire white earthenware adapted from commercial uses to those of the studio potter.