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Larger Than Life: Viola Frey at the Racine Art Museum

Racine, WI January 28, 2009

The Racine Art Museum and the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, are pleased to announce the first major exhibition of artist Viola Frey’s work since her death in 2004. *Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey* will open at the Racine Art Museum on April 24, 2009. On view through August 16, RAM features Frey’s colossal clay figures, as well as a selection of her paintings and ceramic plates. The exhibition will travel to Toronto in September, and then, to museums nationwide, including the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City.

In the early decades of her career, Frey received major recognition on the west coast in solo and group exhibitions at museums and galleries. Following an important solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1984, Frey was featured in almost 50 solo museum and gallery shows across the country, at venues including the Crocker Museum of Art, Sacramento, California; the Fresno Art Museum, Fresno, California; the Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco and the Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York. Her work is represented in museum collections throughout the world, including The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and The Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park, Shiga, Japan.

This retrospective at RAM features her works on loan from the collections of major American museums, such as: The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Until the late 20th century, many of these galleries and museums were known for focusing on painting and sculpture, but not for presenting ceramic works. Because she worked in ceramics, painting and bronze, Frey is often regarded as one of the key artists who broke through these theoretical boundaries between art and craft. She moved back and forth between art media, transferring techniques from one to the other in order to create new approaches to working with each material.

Frey earned her B.F.A. degree from the California College of the Arts, formerly known as the California College of Arts and Crafts, where her focus was divided between

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painting and ceramics. While doing graduate studies at Tulane University, her interest turned strictly to ceramics. By the 1950s, the most vital ceramic communities were located on the West Coast, leading Frey to return to the San Francisco Bay Area. Along with Peter Voulkos and Robert Arneson, Frey was central to the craft-as-art discussion.

Frey recounted her own life, as well as late-twentieth century culture, through her art. She is a forerunner in self-revelation by creating sculptures and vignettes based on her own personal relationships, recollections and the people she knew. For instance, in the piece, *Double Self*, 1978, Frey portrays herself in two life-sized ceramic figures. Dressed in sandals and a smock, she is dotted with color, suggesting being covered with bits of clay and glaze from working in her studio. Her arms are outstretched, and Frey plays the friendly teacher, welcoming the viewer to see what she has created in the studio. Frey's use of double portraits echoes Andy Warhol's use of double images in his portraiture of the same time period. The stance of the figures requires the viewer to move around the pair, noticing subtle nuances and differences between the seemingly identical depictions of the same woman.

Interested in art at an early age, Viola Frey often grumbled about growing up in the farming town of Lodi, California due to her perceived lack of encouragement and exposure to art. Yet, it is her family and their struggle to make ends meet on their grape farm that actually shaped her aesthetic and approach to art. Her grandmothers represented the kind of strong, independent women Frey admired. Also, her mother was often the inspiration behind her powerful ceramic female figures.

Frey often created *bricolages*, which are collage-like clay assemblages. In these sculptures, inspiration came from objects found or purchased at flea markets that were seen as junk to others, but had meaning to her. Nonetheless, she is best known for her brilliantly colored, literally larger-than-life ceramic figures, ranging up to 12 feet tall, that she created later in her career.

Frey came to terms with her childhood and her family through her art by creating over-sized groupings of figures reminiscent of family photographs. In her work *Family Portrait*, 1995, Frey reconnects her family members in ways that they may not have interacted in real life. As Patterson Sims states in the catalogue essay, these oversized family members "stand side by side, more as a collection of strong, single individuals subdued in their feelings or emotions than a contented and united group." The surfaces of her works are covered with painterly glazes, both faded and pitted, as if they have been subjected to exposure by the elements and time. Thereby Frey has created her own historic family relics or enduring monuments.

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Accompanying *Bigger, Better, More* is a 134-page exhibition catalogue that follows Frey's career from her breakthrough student years to her mature work. Author and show's curator, Davira S. Taragin, formerly RAM Director of Exhibitions and Programs, together with Patterson Sims, former director of the Montclair Art Museum, present never-before-published facts and fresh interpretations of both Frey's life and her art. Susan Jefferies, former Curator, Modern and Contemporary Ceramics at the Gardiner Museum, offers a personal recollection of the artist. The book is available from the RAM Museum Store in hardcover or softbound. Copies may be reserved by calling 262.638.8200.

After closing in Racine on August 16, 2009, *Bigger, Better, More* will travel to the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, from September 10, 2009 through January 10, 2010; the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, from February 3 through May 30, 2010; and the Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, from August 13 through November 28, 2010.

This exhibition is made possible by: Presenting Sponsors - Karen Johnson Boyd and William B. Boyd, RAM Society Members, S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., The Hearst Foundation, Inc., and Windgate Charitable Foundation; Gold Sponsors – Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland, Diane and Richard Fisher, Friends of Contemporary Ceramics, Hal Jackman Foundation, Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York, National Endowment for the Arts, Racine United Arts Fund, The Bransten Family Charitable Fund, UNC Center for Craft, Creativity and Design, CRAFT RESEARCH FUND, and Wisconsin Arts Board; Silver Sponsors - Jon and Sonja Hoel Perkins, PACART, and Walker Forge, Inc.; Bronze Sponsor - Diane and Jerome Phillips and 

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Together, the two campuses of the Racine Art Museum, RAM in downtown Racine at 441 Main Street and the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts at 2519 Northwestern Avenue, seek to elevate the stature of contemporary crafts to that of fine art by exhibiting significant works in craft media with painting, sculpture and photography, while providing outstanding educational art programming.

Both campuses of the Racine Art Museum, are open Tuesday - Saturday 10:00 am - 5:00 pm, and are closed Mondays, Federal holidays and Easter. RAM is open Sunday Noon - 5:00 pm, while Wustum is closed Sundays. An admission fee of \$5 for adults, with reduced fees for students and seniors, applies at RAM. Admission to Wustum is free. Members are always admitted without charge to either campus.