

Many Dimensions

A SURVEY EXHIBITION OF CERAMICIST AND PAINTER VIOLA FREY REVEALS HER FULL SIGNIFICANCE, FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FOUR DECADES. BY ELIZABETH PANDOLFI



Viola Frey, *The Decline and Fall of Western Civilization*, 1992, ceramic and glazes.

VIOLA FREY, sculptor, painter, and long-time arts educator, was one of the most important figures in northern California's ceramics movement of the late 1960s through '80s, yet it's been nearly 40 years since the region saw a comprehensive exhibition of her work. That's changing this year with "Viola Frey: Center Stage," a comprehensive survey of the artist's work at the di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art in Napa, Calif. Spanning the years 1963 to

2002, the exhibition consists of not only the monumental ceramic sculptures for which Frey is best known but also many early and less-known paintings, functional ceramics, and drawings.

Frey began her career as an artist training as a painter, learning from teachers who included the influential artists Mark Rothko and Richard Diebenkorn. She studied painting as a graduate student at Tulane University in New Orleans—where Rothko



From top: *China Goddess Painting*, 1975; *China Goddess Group*, 1979-1981.

was a visiting artist—and later at the Clay Art Center in Port Chester, N.Y., before moving back to the Bay Area in 1960. She spent the next decade working both as a ceramics artist and in the accounting department of Macy's department store, until she was hired as a full-time professor at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. Frey taught at the college until her retirement in 1999 but continued working fiercely and tirelessly on her own art until the time of her death in 2004.

In "Viola Frey: Center Stage," curator Amy Owen has taken pains to create an expansive, integrated view of Frey's work, one that illustrates not only the artist's technical skill and independent, feminist sensibilities but also how Frey's paintings and sculptures relate to and interact with each other. The timing of the exhibition is also

important, according to Owen. "This is a great opportunity to look back at Frey, particularly at a moment when ceramics is re-emerging on the contemporary art scene for a younger generation of artists," she says.

Owen started preparing the Frey show close to home—by drawing from the di Rosa's extensive collection of Frey's works, both sculptures and paintings. "We have a great breadth of work by Viola that goes far beyond her monumental sculptures, including her paintings and drawings," says the curator. "We also have some of her monumental figurative works outside in our sculp-





Clockwise from top left: *Untitled (Manikin Couple)*, 1980; *Untitled (Nude Woman Lying on Man)*, 1985; *Untitled (Man Standing on Glove)*, 1985; *Father's Farm*, 1975-1976.

ture park, and over the past several years we've been doing extensive conservation work—prompted by need, but also by the recent wildfires. This seemed like a great opportunity to leverage that work with the depth of our holdings.”

Owen worked closely with the Artists' Legacy Foundation (ALF), an organization co-founded by Frey in 2000 that works to preserve the work of artists after their death. The ALF contributed many works that had never, or rarely, been seen before. One of these rarer pieces is a wallpaper that Frey created in 1991 during a residency at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia. Owen received permission to recreate a sample of that wallpaper, which she has used, in turn, to recreate an installa-



COLLECTION OF ZELIE AND JACK MYERS. PHOTOGRAPH BY M. LEE FATHERREE; © ARTISTS' LEGACY FOUNDATION / LICENSED BY ARS, NEW YORK; © ARTISTS' LEGACY FOUNDATION / LICENSED BY ARS, NEW YORK; PHOTOGRAPH BY M. LEE FATHERREE; © ARTISTS' LEGACY FOUNDATION / LICENSED BY ARS, NEW YORK; PHOTOGRAPH BY M. LEE FATHERREE



From left: *Untitled (Blue Oval, Hands Holding Glasses, Stenciled Figures and Figurines)*, c. 1981; *Space Age Series (Ice Planet/Planet Pot)*, 1969.



tion that Frey developed after her residency at the workshop. It's this installation that greets visitors as they enter.

In it, one of Frey's larger female figures is seated within what Owen refers to as the "colorful, chaotic backdrop created by this wallpaper." Featuring the bright colors—particularly blues, pinks, and reds—that Frey frequently used in both her paintings and her sculpture in a complementary manner, the installation sets up the central concept of the show. "What I really like about this installation is how it shows her interest in the relationship between her 2-D and 3-D work, between her paintings and sculptures," Owen says. "She really considered her sculptures to be an extension of her paintings.... She was looking at the sculptural form as a kind of three-dimensional canvas."

This may surprise some fans of Frey's work, as it was her figurative sculpture that brought her such wide acclaim. It's important to note that these pieces are also included in the di Rosa's exhibition—pivotal works such as *The Decline and Fall of Western Civilization* (1992), and *China Goddess Group* (1979–81), which is one of Frey's first experiments with expanding the size of her sculptures. Seeing these works in the context of Frey's paintings and works on paper will offer visitors a deeper understanding of the artist's body of work—not only the forms she explored, but also how her approach developed over time.

"Some of the earlier stuff is exquisitely gorgeous," Owen says. "There are different transitional moments where you really see the level of detail that she used earlier



on, and then that kind of abstract, looser approach—more Fauvist-inspired applications.” This point is illustrated most clearly by some of Frey’s early paintings, like the works on paper *Pink Man and Venus* (1975), *Manikin Man and Swan* (1975), and *Father’s Farm* (1975–76), both of which employ what Owen describes as an “almost pointillist” approach. Later works, such as *Untitled (Blue Nude Standing on Crouching Figure)* (1978–80) are much more expressionistic, using bolder brushstrokes and a less detailed composition.

The complexity of the work and the

depth of artistic and social concerns on display in “Viola Frey: Center Stage” will give visitors plenty to think about as they wander through the di Rosa’s gallery, whether they’re familiar with Frey already or not. “When we look at the work, we begin to see a lot of themes emerge,” says Owen. “There’s the theme of the independent woman, and looking at gender and power dynamics. We also see an interest in materialism, consumerism, and ecological issues. She was very much looking at what was happening in the world around her and the impact of humanity on the planet.”

From left: *Junkyard Planet*, 1970;
Three Graces, 1979–1981.