



Monumental Figures with Psychological Messages

*A Review by
Jan Garden Castro*

AS A WOMAN BORN IN 1933 (D 2004), **VIOLA FREY** decided early on that she wanted to be an artist, first studying art at Stockton College. At the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, she studied painting with Richard Diebenkorn and ceramics with Vernon Coykendall and Charles Fiske. During Master's studies in New Orleans, she took a workshop with Mark Rothko. In this era, women were objects (not artists) in books; *The Feminine Mystique* and gender issues were not addressed. As Frey settled in Oakland, she began a *bricolage* collection, some of which found its way into her sculpture, which became known for its nude women and men with suits, among other forms.

It is interesting that today leading critics still disagree about what these forms suggest. What are the intentions and signifiers in Frey's body of work, including that on view at the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in Manhattan? At a 4 October, 2012 panel on the artist's work at the New York University's Graduate Centre, critic Donald Kuspit's main argument was that Frey's art "holds out the possibility of sincerity in an insincere world" while Museum of Art and Design Curator Lowery Stokes Sims suggested that Frey's "explosive" use of materials, her representation of tensions between genders and her use of enormous sizes and scale were subversive and were her codified way of addressing the gender issues of her day.

Since I do not claim expertise, it is important to present the views of the Frey panellists before presenting my own. It is curious to me that, given their topic "Viola Frey: Making the Self", three of four panellists failed to even nod to the strong psychological and gender issues in Frey's art. The first speaker was Sharon Tanenbaum, the new executive director of the Artist's Legacy Foundation designed to promote the legacy of deceased artists; Frey donated her art and estate

to create the ALF. Tanenbaum gave an audiovisual overview of Frey's art.

Kuspit's presentation "The Pursuit of Sincerity: Viola Frey's Figurative Sculpture" was unusual, wandering quickly from the new OED definition of 'sincerity' to Damien Hirst and Barak Obama. Kuspit then discussed how Frey's "humanizing" art portrays "sincere people" who form a "convincing family". He mentioned "a core of idealised parts clustered about idealised objects and a periphery of more or less alienated 'relatives' and 'strangers' composed of the split-off bad aspects of self and objects" before closing by saying Frey's art "celebrates human presence and individuality in its differentiated variety and it does so using the comparatively primitive technology of ceramics" and that "the quality of their consciousness and sincerity, their alert, serious faces and intense, complex emotions – is more to their point." Kuspit's entire talk did not name one specific art work by Frey. This talk did not seem 'sincere' to me. (All quotes from a transcript of the talk.)

Panellist Robert Cozzolino, essayist for the Hoffman Gallery exhibition *Viola Frey: Echoes of Images*, suggested that motifs of self dominate Frey's body of work and that these and other images were cross-pollinated in her studio. Cozzolino posited that a 19 x 19 x 2 inch ceramic plate, *Artist Observing*, shows the artist's self – her hands holding eyeglasses and her work gloves. Cozzolino's interpretation of the three figures in the centre of the plate – a woman running with a baby, her back to a man with one arm raised – is quite different from my own. Cozzolino sees this as a "woman striding forward" and a man "waving to someone outside the space of the plate" while I interpreted this as an overt sign of a family in discord or abuse. Since this work was created in 1977 and is frequently exhibited/published, am I the only one to see, in the man's raised arm and in the running mother with her back to the man and a baby in her arms, the artist's message that she sees the mother's distress?

Cozzolino next calls the *Artist's Left Glove* and *Little Big Man*, both made in 1987, "forcefully chromatic" and applauds Frey's "delight in the textural possibilities afforded by glazing so utterly ecstatic that they each appear to be composed from slabs of paint rather than ceramic."

Artist's Left Glove is a large, complex 60 x 39 x 32 inch ceramic sculpture. A big blue glove with red nails holds a group of pink and blue figures, including a suited man with a small figure, probably a child, on one arm. The man holds a nude woman by her hair – she has her hands on her head and a droopy expression. Under the glove are various body parts (heads and a leg) on a short pedestal. *Little Big Man* is an orange and blue man, 106 x 48 x 23 inches, who towers over the viewer with his hands on his hips, his mouth open and a long orange (phallic) tie. To me, the frenetic, slightly wild interplay of bold orange



Facing page: *Little Big Man*. 1987. Glazed ceramic.

Above: *Artist Observing*. 1978. Ceramic.

Below: *Artist's Left Glove*. 1987. Ceramic.





Top: *The Wall (Biloxi)*. 1999. Ceramic.
 Above: *Falling Man in Suit*. 1991. Ceramic.

and blue hues suggests energy that is scattered yet dominating. These two works seem to show the artist pointing out that some men misuse their authority. Has the man holding the nude woman's hair ever been considered abusive by experts? In my opinion, the artist's blue glove exposes a nude woman's private pain that might be secret or otherwise hidden.

These works seem to me to support Lowery Stokes Sims views, including the following:

1. These are subversive portraits rather than utopian situations and show tensions in family groups and between genders. The surfaces of people, like skin disease, show disruptions.
2. Her use of materials was explosive and her *bricolage* was outsized and stripped of femininity/

sensitivity.

3. Like Marisol, she made art on a scale not associated with women. "One cannot underestimate the impact/relationship between female ambition and scale."

4. Frey "busted open the whole notion of the male gaze before it was codified by feminist theory."

The Frey exhibition at the Nancy Hoffman Gallery consisted of 17 works in varied media. The ceramics included the colossal standing *Little Big Man* and one *Falling Man in Suit*, 1991. Frey's construction methods, which were not mentioned by the experts, seem unorthodox and original to me. The 73 inch tall *Falling Man* is made of 14 smaller pieces with thick walls bolted together inside through holes in the clay. The final piece is a sort of lid (recalling a cookie jar). A ceramic wall (*Biloxi*), 1999, was a 100 x 140 inch montage of a range of figures on a grid – a Chinese woman doing *tai chi*, a dark-skinned woman, a blonde in a yellow body leotard, ladies in high heels, a large Elvis-like man in the centre with an orange tie and some balloonish figures recalling Matisse's 1904 *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*; some women observe what others are doing.

One work that moved me was a small ceramic sculpture of a female on her knees with her head in her hands. Her downward-facing belly is orange and her buttocks is white and yellow outlined in navy blue. To me, both the colouring and the pose head down on all fours showed subservient behaviour. Frey's work uses original crafting, coded colours, texture and scale to bear witness to the 'divine comedy' (heaven, purgatory and hell) of human relationships. I do not agree with one expert's view that her images are mostly self-portraits, nor do I think her women are all victims. Frey showed people in situations that moved her. She had the psychological insight to not title or otherwise label her views so that anyone may approach the work. It is a bit shocking to me that no one seems to have written about or considered the sexual and psychological issues that I observed when I studied the works in the exhibition. Viola Frey pioneered innovative constructions of monumental ceramic sculpture and she combined painterly, abstract and figurative approaches. Her legacy could benefit from new experts.

Jan Garden Castro (www.jancastro.com) is author of *The Art & Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*, *Sonia Delaunay: La Moderne* and other books. She is Contributing Editor for *Sculpture Magazine* and has a monthly online blog "In the Studio" at Sculpture.org. The Nancy Hoffman Gallery exhibition was 6 September – 20 October, 2012.