



Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey

Teacher Resource Packet



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Dear Educator,

We are delighted that you have scheduled a visit to *Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Vila Frey*. When you and your students visit the Museum of Arts and Design, you will be given an informative tour of the exhibition with a museum educator, followed by an inspiring hands-on project, which students can then take home with them. To make your museum experience more enriching and meaningful, we strongly encourage you to use this packet as a resource, and work with your students in the classroom before and after your museum visit.

This packet includes topics for discussion and activities intended to introduce the key themes and concepts of the exhibition. Writing, storytelling and art projects have been suggested so that you can explore ideas from the exhibition in ways that relate directly to students' lives and experiences. Please feel free to adapt and build on these materials and to use this packet in any way that you wish.

We look forward to welcoming you and your students to the Museum of Arts and Design.

Sincerely,

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Artist Educators



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The Museum of Arts and Design has been functioning as an international resource center for craft, arts and design since 1956. Through its collections, exhibitions, programs and publications, the Museum serves as a forum for critical debate concerning the nature of craftsmanship and the engagement with the process that links materials, techniques, forms, patterns and concepts in all creative work.

How does a museum work?

Administration: The team led by the Director of the Museum determines the programs, plans and philosophy of the Museum. It also raises funds to realize the Museum's goals and works directly with the Board of Governors, which guides the Museum's functions.

Curatorial: This is the team, led by the Chief Curator, that works together to decide which exhibits will be shown, how they will look, what artwork is to be included, and how they are to be interpreted.

Registration: Led by the Registrar, this team arranges the safe handling of art to be placed in an exhibition and maintains the permanent collections acquired by a museum.

Education: This team provides the interactive interpretation of the objects on view through the educational programs designed for children, adults and families who visit the Museum.

Facility Maintenance: This is the team that allows the day-to-day operations of a museum to continue: from the lights being turned on, to the safety of all who enter the building.

Security Guards: This is the team most often seen in a museum, because its main task is to protect the artwork from harm so that in the future people will be able to see the same objects as seen in a museum today. They also are helpful to visitors who have a variety of questions.

Museums are places where we can learn about the past, present, and future of the world around us. The diversity of knowledge is endless when the habit of museum exploration is formed at an early age. We look forward to welcoming your group into our galleries.



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Helpful Hints for your Museum Visit

"I try, when I go to museums, to do two things. One, to appreciate what I'm looking at, just to see it, but then to isolate a few pieces that I really look at in detail. I study and I draw not with any purpose in mind. I mean, I don't go looking for specific things. I just try to be open-minded and keep my eyes open. It's interesting that every time I go back to the same place, I see something different." Arline M. Fisch (1931-) Brooklyn, New York

While visiting the exhibition try to use all your senses. Notice the way the pieces are displayed. *Are there any specific groupings of pieces you can distinguish? If you enjoy looking at one piece more than others can you explain why?*

Here are some questions and suggestions to think about as you move around the exhibition:

- I. *What can be objectively observed?*
 - a. *What is the physical description? Measurement, weight, materials used, articulation of materials...*
 - b. *What iconography, if any, is used? Designs, words, diagrams...*
 - c. *What are the object's formal design characteristics? Lines, shapes, forms, color, texture...*

- II. *What would it be like to interact with this piece of art? How would you handle, lift, display it?*
 - a. *How would the piece of art feel, move, and sound?*
 - b. *What does the piece do? Does the piece have a function? How would the figures move if they were alive?*
 - c. *What is our emotional response to this beaded figure? Fear, joy, indifference, curiosity, revulsion, excitement...*



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- III. *What is in the mind of the artist? What are the viewers thinking and feeling?* Use creative imagining and free association.
 - a. Review all of the above information and consider what was going on in the world when the work was produced to develop possible interpretations of the piece. (Theories and hypotheses)
 - b. *Do the figures tell a story? Does the piece have underlying political or social meaning? (Understanding and visual thinking)*
 - c. Develop a program to investigate the questions posed by the material evidence. (Program of research)

- IV. Brainstorm about an event or situation that is happening in your life at the moment which you could animate into one scene which could be made into your very own figurative sculpture. (Design themes)



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Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey
January 26 – May 2, 2010



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Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey

Viola Frey (1933-2004) was one of the most influential sculptors of the twentieth century. She emerged in the complex and often contradictory art world of the 1950s where painting, craft and design often merged and diverged in dynamic ways.

After studying and working in New Orleans and New York, Frey returned to San Francisco in the 1960s to devote herself primarily to ceramics. At that time the west coast was a hotbed of experimentation and innovation. Bay Area artists such as David Park and Richard Diebenkorn were reintroducing the figure to Abstract Expressionism, and Joan Brown and Manuel Neri introduced pictorial narratives in bold, broad swatches of color to painting and sculpture. California was also home to the most vital ceramic communities in the United States and Frey's contemporaries Peter Voulkos, Robert Arneson, Richard Shaw and Ron Nagle took ceramics to new horizons by deconstructing form, and interjecting sculptural values as well as political and personal content.

Because she worked in painting, ceramics and bronze, Frey became a central figure in the craft-as-art discussion. She moved back and forth between these mediums throughout her career, transferring techniques from one material to the other, in order to create new approaches to working in each medium.

Frey found her unique style and visual vocabulary in her life-long fascination with mass-produced ceramics figurines which she collected in flea markets in San Francisco and Oakland. She assembled images of these "found" objects into madcap compositions she dubbed her "bricolage" sculptures." Frey is, however, best known for her monumental ceramic sculptures of domineering men and overwrought women. She both experimented with dynamic color glazes on their surfaces, and make cogent observations regarding gender and power issues as they were played out in mid-twentieth century America .

Frey was interested in art from an early age. Her personal aesthetic and approach to creating art were actually shaped by her family's struggle to make ends meet on their grape farm. Her grandmothers represented the kind of strong independent women Frey admired. Along with her mother, these family matriarchs were often the inspiration for Frey's powerful female ceramic figures.

Exhibition Wall text, Museum of Arts and Design, 2010



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Viola Frey

Family Portrait, 1995

Ceramic with glazes

84 x 79 x 29.5

**Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Gift of Rena Bransten, 1996**

Photograph by Lee Stalsworth



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“Figurines function in order to make acceptable those things that our culture finds unacceptable. They might deal with old age, with menace, or with women. My work is figurative, but it's as far towards the abstract transformation as it is possible to go and still retain the integrity of the image or the information”.

– Viola Frey¹

Below are questions to have in mind while you are viewing *Family Portrait*.

Composition:

- How would you describe this composition? (What organization strategies did Frey use?)
- What kinds of decisions did she make about her composition?
- How did the decision to elevate the figures on a platform impact the work?

Size:

This sculpture is seven feet high and is actually a cluster of individual sculptures.

- How does the size of the sculpture impact the way we view this artwork?
- Frey made this an integral part of the sculpture, why is it important?

Material:

Viola Frey worked as much outside in her garden as in her studio. She kept many of the larger works outside in the backyard. Over an extended period of time, she was able to study the dramatic changes in the surfaces. She used the light and dark glazes, like paint, to cover large areas on the sculptures. She juxtaposed impressionistic dabs of paint to define form and create a visually dynamic composition, mirroring the freedom of her paintings.

With this artwork, Frey finished the surfaces with a worn, faded and pitted patina giving the artwork a rough and weathered look rather than a smooth surface.

- Has the artist signified meaning in the use of materials? How?
- How does the color affect the artwork?
- Compare this surface to other work by the artist with a more polished finish.

Interpretation:

In the above quote Viola Frey states that her work is figurative, but as far toward the abstract transformation as is possible and still retain the integrity of image.

- What in the work gives you visual evidence of this move towards abstraction, and yet retains the figurative?

¹ Susan Wechsler, *Low-Fire Ceramics: A New Direction in American Clay* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1981), p.73



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To develop the discussion on abstraction further, have students do research on some of the Bay Area artists mentioned in the introduction, such as David Park and Richard Diebenkorn, who were re-introducing the figure into abstraction, and using bold, vivid colors in the compositions.

- Ask students how this movement impacted and influenced the work of Viola Frey?

Discussing the figures:

- Who do you think these figures are?
- Who is the dominant figure in this group? What visual evidence suggests this?
- What body language is communicated in the arrangement of this family portrait?
- What are the emotions and expressions that you discern through the expressions and body language?
- Are there different moods within this work that you can identify? What are they?
- What happens to emotions and memories over time?

Ask students to pay close attention to the figures near the bottom platform edge. Then ask them to describe what they see. (figurine baseball player, doll like figure, kimono clad figurine, and other objects)

- Do these added figurines represent her real life family or do they signify objects collected by the artists that have become apart of her extended families?

Viola Frey collected figurines from thrift shops and local flea markets which served as source materials for her art. Selecting toys and bric-a-brac as her inspiration, Frey re-created these objects in her sculpture and paintings.

- What is a portrait?
- If you were to make your own family portrait, who would you include and omit? Why / why not?
- How would you represent your family members?



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Viola Frey

Double Self, 1978

Ceramic with glazes

Figure 1: 64 x 20 x 18.5; Figure 2: 61.5 x 18.5 x 17

Collection of Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland

Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago



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Frey's double pieces – and all sculpture – can never truly be seen in one glance or a single perspective or location. Even more than occurs with Frey's single monumental standing figures, her double portraits require the viewer to navigate her pieces: a single vantage cannot provide the direct eye-to-eye presence and connection that usually empower traditional portrait paintings or drawings.²

Below are questions to have in mind while you are viewing *Double Self Dialogue and Possessions*.

- What is the first thing you notice about this work?
- What is the material? How do you think it was made?
- Describe everything both figures have in common. Pay attention to hairstyle, clothing, body language, and facial expression.
- What do these attributes tell us about this person? What might her personality be like? What do you think her profession could be? Explain.

Activity: With a fellow student, imitate the pose of each figure, facing each other.

- What is the dynamic between the two?
- Looking back at the artwork: what are some of the differences you notice between the two figures now?
- Why would the artists create a mirror image of herself?

When she made Double Self in the late 1970s, Viola Frey was busy establishing a serious artistic identity that went beyond the notion of "craft" often associated with her preferred medium, ceramics. For this self-portrait, she chose a visually dynamic composition that forces the eye to dart back and forth between two almost identical images.

- What effect does the doubling of selves have on you as the viewer?
- How does this enhance the story the work tells?
- How does this work take the material of clay and move it from a medium of craft into the more serious realm of fine art?

² Patterson Sims, *Viola Frey: Empathically Present, Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey*, Hudson Hills Press: NY and Manchester, 2009:67



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Viola Frey

Western Civilization Fountain, 1996

Ceramic with glazes

60 x 60 x 60 inches

Private Collection, Courtesy of Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York

Photo by Chris Watson



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"Look at your work in series of three, outdoors, for three years. Sunlight distracts the eye, but marvelously concentrates the search for form".

- Viola Frey³

Viola Frey was passionate about nature. In the 1960's she described herself as being an artist specializing in garden planters and sculptures. By the late 1970's her backyard provided a setting for her artwork, allowed her to research and develop her work and had become the center for her intellectual and professional growth.

Below are questions to have in mind while you are viewing *Western Civilization Fountain*.

Function:

- What type of sculpture is this? What is its function?
- Where do you expect to find a fountain?
- Where could this work be installed and working? Explain your answer.

Looking at the sculpture:

- Who are the figures in this sculpture?
- Why has she organized the figures in this way?
- In remembering what you already learned about Frey collecting figurines, how does her collection influence the way that she has composed this sculpture?
- What are the figures doing?
- How does their dress inform us about who they are?
- Why did she choose these figures for an outdoor functional fountain?
- What type of clothing do we usually see on outdoor garden fountains?
- What is often the gender of the figures in these fountains?

Looking at color:

- How does the color and glazes used affect the fountain?
- What sort of look was she aiming for?
- Does the water play an integral part in this sculpture? Why / why not?

Interpretation:

This work is called "Western Civilization Fountain".

- What does Frey mean by the title of this artwork?
- How is Frey making a reference to art history?

³ Viola Frey, "Viola Frey", *Studio Potter* 14, 2 (1986), p. 47



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The outdoor garden that was gained when she bought a house was very important to Frey's continued expansion of artwork. She was able to contain her large gas and electric kilns out in the garden. Once the works were fired, she glazed them outside and then refired them.

Because the sculptures were outside in the backyard, Frey was able to study the dramatic changes in the surfaces over an extended period of time. She used the light and dark glazes as one might use paint to cover larger areas on the sculptures. She juxtaposed impressionistic dabs of paint to define form and create a visually dynamic composition, mirroring the freedom of her paintings.

Form:

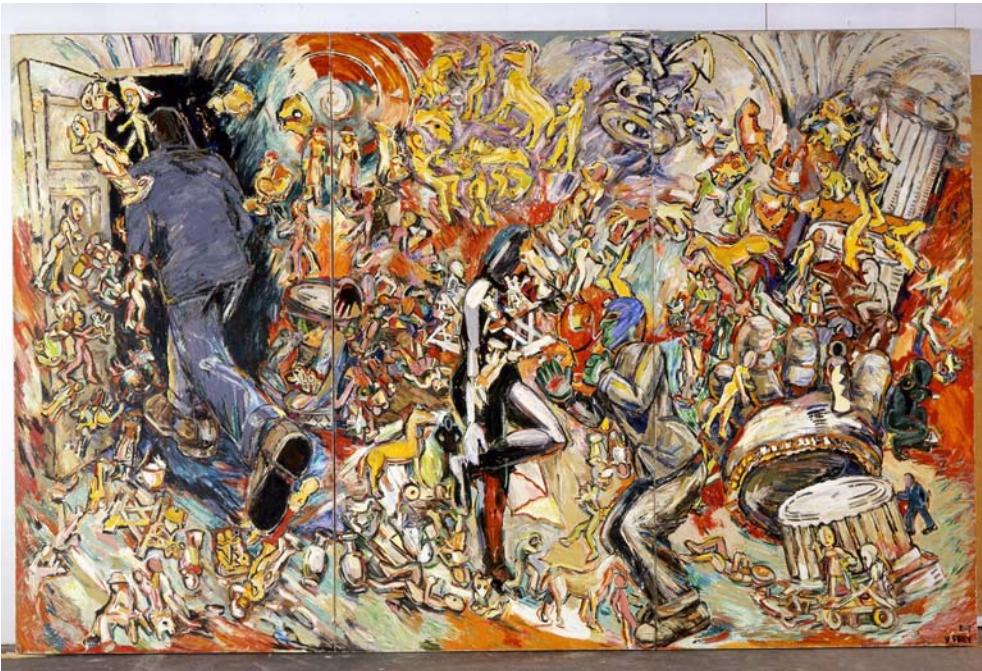
- Looking carefully at the base / bowl of the fountain can you explain what Frey was representing?
- What are the figures doing?
- What does the semi-circle bowl suggest to you? What does it remind you of (world, ball, half a sphere etc.)?
- What comment on society is the artist making with this artwork?
- What influences from history and art do you see represented in Frey's work?

Viola Frey reflected contemporary society around her through her work by abstracting figures and images she saw around her.

She associated the construction of her monumental ceramic figures with plants, comparing the process of building her figures from the ground up to plants that emerge from seeds. Throughout her whole life nature was integral to her aesthetic: patrons were advised to use her colorful circular benches outdoors in place of flowers.



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Viola Frey

Studio View - Man in Doorway, 1983

Oil on canvas

105 x 163

Collection of Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland

Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago



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Frey's paintings and big pastels most audaciously display her concepts of space and human interaction. They evoke the density, jumble, and clutter of her Oakland house and backyard [...] These boisterous works overflow with figures and figurines that cannot be differentiated, behaving in ways that cannot be explained.⁴

Below are questions to have in mind while you are viewing *Man in Doorway*.

"Deconstructing" the painting:

Go around the classroom and have everybody name and describe one object or figure they notice.

- What types of objects are they?
- Where might we find things like this?
- What could they be used for?
- What do you notice about the use of color, line, and composition (how are different shapes arranged within the painting)?
- How do these formal elements influence our experience of this painting?

Frey was a life-long collector of flea market knick-knacks. While they served as a source of formal inspiration for her work (often she even used them to make molds for components of her "bricolage" sculptures), her paintings literally breathe life into them and turn them into animated characters in mysterious stories that blur the boundaries between (human) figure and (sculptural) figurine but also between trash and functional object. Here is how she describes it:

Figurines, Camera. I have taken dozens of small objects, clowns, statues of liberty, dogs, parrots, chairs, dollies, skeletons [sic], sweaters, shoes – in every material – porcelain, straw, paper, wood, plastic, fabric – I have assembled them in unlikely groups, photographed them, painted them on paper, canvas, stoneware plates. I've done this until I've created a unity out of a confusion of unwanted junk objects.

- Viola Frey⁵

Discussing the painting:

- What are some instances in which the figurines depicted in "Studio View" come to life?
- Where do you see different objects "interacting"?
- What is the resulting story or stories?
- Imagine the painting were the last panel of a comic strip. Write the story of the events that precede this final picture.

⁴ Patterson Sims, *Viola Frey: Empathically Present, Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey*, Hudson Hills Press: NY and Manchester, 2009:71

⁵ "BRIEFLY"; Entry, May 30, 1075, ALF, Charles Mixed Notebooks, Box "1975"; Untitled manuscript, ALF, File cabinet 372, Writings on Viola Frey



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Extension:

One of Viola Frey's favorite activities was to scavenge the Alameda Flea Market for new finds. Her interest in collecting objects both from her personal past and that of strangers stemmed from a wish to "take them out of the crib and off the coffee table, make them myths of childhood [...] to give them alertness and vividness and to unfreeze them."

Following the link below, take a "virtual stroll" through Alameda Flea Market:

<http://www.antiquesbythebay.net/photos.asp>

- What are some of the objects you would combine in an artwork of your own?
- What story would your finished picture/sculpture tell?
- If you have a printer, print the images that interest you most and make a two or three-dimensional collage based on your ideas.



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Viola Frey

Junkyard Planet, 1970

Ceramic with glazes

44 x 18 x 18

Collection of Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland

Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago



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Freys collection of clowns, dogs, chairs, porcelain, and other objects greatly influenced her compositions; often, assembling them into unlikely groups, and photographing them, painting them on paper, canvas, and other surfaces. The artwork is over 3 feet high and glazed in a smooth and glossy finish. She used the glaze as paint and this can be seen by the attention to detail represented on the goose / dodo hybrid and the urn-like base.

Below are questions to have in mind while you are viewing *Junkyard Planet*.

Composition:

- What is the first thing you notice about this work?
- How has Viola Frey organized the objects?
- Where might have the artist collected the subject matter?
- How has she transformed the materials into art?

Viola Frey was renowned for her bricolage sculpture. She was inspired by her collection of figurines and bric-a-brac and from these objects she slip-cast molds in whiteware. She then reassembled them into larger compositions. The work was later glazed in a range of bright colors.

Scale and color:

- How does the scale impact the way we view the artwork?
- Why did Frey exaggerate the size of the figures?
- Does color play a significant role in this artwork? Explain your answer.

One great influence on Frey's work was the book, *The Savage Mind* by Claude Lévi-Strauss published in 1962. Frey easily related to his analysis of the psychological and anthropological significance of figurines and knickknacks because of her background and upbringing. She grew up on a farm where broken machinery and implements were not discarded but saved and reused or put to new uses.

"The first year I was happy just having the junk; I was going to make people out of it. In the second batch I wanted them to convey certain states, like eating, or greed for example; and the third dealt with emotions. It has been a difficult challenge to turn that junk into something that deals with emotions".

– Viola Frey⁶

⁶ Wechsler, pp. 73 and 75.



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Connecting to the art:

- Is there anything in your experience that this artwork reminds you of (e.g. trophy, cookie jar)?
- Does the title give any clues to the artist's intentions?
- What emotions does Frey want us to experience when we view this artwork?
- What contradictions exist in this artwork?
- Do you think this work is political? Explain your answer.
- What issues is Frey raising?
- Who do you think Frey is communicating to in this work?

This artwork was made in 1970.

- Are the issues raised by Frey relevant to issues in today's society? Describe these issues.
- What items would you select and represent if you were to make your own 'Junkyard Planet'?

Thinking further:

"Junkyard Planet" mixes Frey's interest in extinct, endangered and non-endangered animals.

Crowning the trophy – like object is hybrid Californian white goose / dodo bird. A keen observer of people and the world around her, Frey has been called a visual anthropologist and an urban archaeologist.

- What do you think this statement means?



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Viola Frey

H.K. (also H.K. in Doorway), 1978

Ceramic with glazes

26.5 x 26 x 3.5

Collection of Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland

Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago



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Plates reach out to you both physically and visually. I like forms that move towards the view, and I believe both the junk pieces and the figures have this feeling...they are larger than life, from twenty-six to thirty-six inches in diameter, and this creates an aggression of its own.

- Viola Frey⁷

Frey created more than 300 plates in the course of her career. Her plates moved from flat and simple to more adorned and sculptural in later years. Frey was often able to finish several plates in one day, which is much faster than completing her ceramic sculptures.⁸

Below are questions to have in mind while you are viewing *H. K. in Doorway*

Initial observations:

- What are some notable physical differences and similarities between this artwork and Frey's ceramic figures? Comment on the material, shape, glaze (color), surface (gloss, texture), size, design, etc.

Looking at form and function:

In the above quote, Frey describes some of her work as being larger than life, moving towards the viewer, creating an aggression of its own.

- Why do you think Frey was interested in having this type of impact on the viewer?
- Provide some adjectives for the colors that Frey uses on the plate. Compare the variety (or the lack of) colors compared with her figure sculptures.
- In your opinion, would you describe H.K. as a 3-D (three dimensional) work or more of a 2-D wall hanging? What are some criteria (shape, thickness, material) that would categorize an object as being 2-D or 3-D?
- Do you think the artist meant for this plate to be a functional or a decorative object?
Support your answers by considering the size, glaze, image (on the plate) and texture of the plate.

⁷ Patterson Sims, *Viola Frey: Empathically Present, Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey*, Hudson Hills Press: NY and Manchester, 2009:62

⁸ Ibid:62-63



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In the late 60's and into the 70's Frey used single frame images, often in silhouette, like in this work. The style of the image is an ode film noir (a cinematic style that was popular in the 1940's and 1950's in Hollywood crime dramas, which often incorporated silhouettes).⁹

Telling a story, setting a mood:

- What kind of narrative (story) do you get from the image?
- Describe what the figure is doing (or about to do).
 - What kind of a person is he?
 - What is he wearing?
 - What kind of vocation could he be involved in?
 - Is he a "good guy" or a "bad guy", if he were a character from an old Hollywood movie?)
- What kind of mood does the monochromatic (black and white) aspect of the plate create? Provide some descriptive adjectives that describe "the scene" depicted on the plate.
- Why do you think the artist added a yellow glaze? In your opinion, does it add or detract meaning or the overall mood of the image?

The title "H.K." represents the initials of the Northwest ceramic humorist and conceptualist, Howard Kottler, whom Frey admired as an artist. If possible, look up in the Internet for examples of Howard Kottler's work.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid:62

¹⁰ Ibid:



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Influence of Howard Kottler:

- Do you think Frey was figuratively depicting Howard Kottler, the ceramic artist, in the image?
- Why do you think the artist gave the title, “H.K.” (and not just spell out Howard Kottler’s name)? Consider the element of mystery and suspense of film noir, the humorist element of Howard Kottler, or other possible reasons for the rather cryptic title.
- Compare the man on the plate with other male figures in Frey’s work (both sculptures and paintings). What are some similarities or differences that you observe? Do you think “H.K.” looks any different from the other male figures (whom Frey merely refers to each as “man”)?
 - What is a tribute? Would you call this plate a tribute to Howard Kottler? Consider how “plates” are sometimes used in our society for awards, commemoration, etc.,
 - If you were creating a plate as a tribute to someone whom you admire, how would you depict that person to show your admiration for that person? (Consider decoration, color, materials, etc.)



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Viola Frey

Man and Meissen Figurine, 1982

Oil and acrylic on paper

60 x 40

Collection of Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland

Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago



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Viola Frey depicts a faceless man in a brown business suit looking down at a Meissen statue in this painting. Meissen is a town (and the type of porcelain made there) in Germany renowned for producing porcelain over many centuries. By the time this painting was made (1982), Frey was a well-established ceramist who has had an extensive retrospective (a retrospective is an art show often displaying an established artist's work that has been created over many years) in California. Although Frey was known for her ceramics work, she always simultaneously worked with other mediums, such as paintings on canvas, prints, photography and other.¹¹

Below are questions to have in mind while you are viewing *Man and Meissen Figurine*

Noticing the painting:

- Describe the lines that are used in the paintings (thick, thin, painterly, rough, jagged, or other descriptions)
- How many colors can you find in the painting and are there some colors used more frequently than others?
- What kind of mood does her choice of colors create? Why do you think Frey chose the colors, and how different would the painting look if she had used brighter vibrant colors (like some of her sculptures)?
- Compare some of Viola Frey's ceramic sculptures with this painting in terms of color, lines, material, texture, form, etc. What are some similarities and differences?

Interpreting the painting:

- Describe this man's age, job, or anything you notice about him by looking at his clothing and his gestures.
- What is the man in the painting doing? Consider his pose, gestures, etc.
- Where do you think this man is?
- What role or significance, if any, does the Meissen figurine play in this painting? What is the story behind this painting?
- Why do you think the man is faceless?
- Is this a man who lives in America today? Support your answer.

¹¹ Patterson Sims, *Viola Frey: Empathically Present, Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey*, Hudson Hills Press: NY and Manchester, 2009: 57-58



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Making connections:

Compare Viola Frey's large sculpture of men in suit with this painting.

- Are they all representing one person or a specific person? Support your answer by looking at both his sculpture and the painting.
- How tall do you think this man is? Is he the size of Viola Frey's giant sculptures? Support your response with elements you find in the painting (i.e. doorway, ceiling height, proportion of the figurine to the man, etc.).

Frey's male figures in both sculptures and paintings were almost always wearing a business suit. In the era when she was becoming a young educated adult (after WWII or late 1940's and onward) men in power (politicians, white-collar workers) often wore suits. Frey's background and relationships with her father, brothers (she was the only girl out of four children) and other male figures are not entirely clear, but it is assumed that she was never close to them, and she distanced herself from them as adults. Even though she was the only girl, she was the one who got higher education over her brothers. Also, even though she had a life partner whom she lived with (an art historian named Charles Fiske), Frey never depended on any man and neither got married nor had children.

Understanding the artist's perspective:

- What do you think the relationship is between the artist and the model in the painting? (Is he a friend? stranger? family member?)
- How does the artist feel about men in suits?
- How does she depict male figures differently from her female figures? Which one has more power? wisdom? strength? Base your answers on visual evidence that you see.



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Viola Frey

Fire Suit, 1983

Ceramic and steel with glazes

98 x 32 x 23

Collection of San Jose Museum of Art.

Photograph by Douglas Sandberg



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Patterson Sims writes in the exhibition catalogue (*Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey*) that Frey uses this male figure as a “blank canvas for free-form composition and abstraction...the backs of this piece [is] no less engaging than the front.”¹²

Below are questions to have in mind while you are viewing *Fire Suit*

Noticing the sculpture:

- What colors does Frey use for the sculpture? Does her choice of color evoke a particular emotion?
- Describe the brush strokes and the width or size of the lines.
- Describe the surface texture of the ceramics. (Note the partial handprints on the male figure)
- How does the material allow the artist to achieve the surface texture and patterns?
- Compare the size of the man’s hands in proportion to his feet, or the size of the facial elements or his head. What seems disproportionately large or small?
- How do you compare the differences and similarities in how Frey depicts her male and female figures? Look at the shape, color, etc.
- Do you see the lines that separate each section of the sculpture? Why do you think the artist has to assemble this sculpture in blocks or sections?
- Is this a figurative or abstract work of art (or both)? Explain elements that are abstract and figurative.

By the late 1970’s Frey realized that by increasing the scale of her figures, the artwork made greater impact. In order to achieve her vision, she invented ways to ‘anchor’ her giant figures by pouring cement in the legs of the statues, and firing the statues in sections like a three-dimensional puzzle.¹³

¹² Patterson Sims, *Viola Frey: Empathically Present, Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey*, Hudson Hills Press: NY and Manchester, 2009: 68

¹³ Ibid:64



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Discussing the figure:

- What is the expression on the figure's face? What mood does he portray?
- What does his gesture, his clothing, and other physical elements tell you about him?
- Come up with a story of this male figure's life based on Frey's depiction (consider the physical form, size, color, texture, expression, etc.)
- How does the size of the sculpture, affect the viewer? In what ways would your impressions differ if this sculpture were regular human size? Or a much smaller miniature?
- If you were to imagine what this man might be saying, what would it be?
- Describe how you would feel if you were standing in front of this large man. (He is 98 inches tall.)
- What role does the material (ceramics) play in the large-scale statue? How different would you feel if the male figure were made of paper maché? bronze? wood?

This sculpture can be considered Frey's mid-career piece (1983) as she was already an established artist in her own right, but she continued to create until her death 20 years later in 2004. It is known that Viola Frey had a distant relationship with her family as an adult, but the presence of her father, grandfather and three brothers growing up seems to play a large part in her interpretation of males in the society. Frey depicts all of her male figures in a business suit, often looking angry, startled or expressionless, with small mouths. According to Patterson Sims, "For all his vitality, he has limited power of speech.¹⁴

Extending our thinking:

- What statement do you think the artist is making when she portrays her male figures as startled or expressionless large figures with small mouths?
- Is Frey stereotyping a particular segment of the male society? Which segment? Support or disagree with the statement through what you observe in the statue.
- What would the "stereotypical" male figure look like in your life? Describe your thoughts on stereotyping a gender group?
- Compare Frey's large female figures with this male figure. Who has more power? Which one is Frey more sympathetic towards? Explain your answers with details that you observe.

¹⁴ Ibid:68



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Viola Frey

Weeping Woman, 1990-91

Ceramic with glazes

76 x 58 x 80

Collection of Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida, Purchase, the
Rose L. Kraft Fund



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Frey was a painter and a ceramicist and fluidly moved from one medium to another. Frey's skills as an artist, her observations of the world around her, as well as her collection of source material went into making her objects, which illustrate her interest in paint, sculpture and ceramics.

Below are questions to have in mind while you are viewing *Weeping Woman*.

Discussing the physical:

- Describe the size of this sculpture?
- If it were a standing figure how tall do you think it would be?
- As a 3 dimensional object, it exists in your physical space, what type of response does it evoke?

Take a look at the surface and describe the qualities of the work.

- How has the artist used different materials to make this work?
- How has Frey used paint or glaze on this sculpture?
- What do you think might have been some influences?

Looking at material:

The material of clay and product of ceramics has long been identified as a craft. For the most part traditionally ceramics are used in our daily lives in the form of plates, cups, and vases; while fine art is defined as an art form developed for aesthetics and or/concept, rather than utility.

- Describe in your opinion how Frey experimented with clay, and used ceramics in a way that went beyond function.

Discussing the emotional:

- What is going on in this piece?
- What is the woman doing?
- Is the woman wearing anything?
- Why just red lipstick?
- Notice other red markings on her body?
- Why is she nude?



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Viola Frey worked with clothed figures until the 80's when she began to rethink the power of the clothed figure as a result of one of her trips on public transportation where she was shocked to find out no one commented on the fact that the coat she was wearing was inside out.¹⁵

Why would this situation lead her to change her perspective on the power of the clothed figure? She believed that women's power was connected to their bodies and nudity, and "in contemporary society the female nude symbolized power and control".¹⁶

Discussing the impact:

- Is there power in this unclothed female figure?
- Why? Or why not?
- Does this work convey a story?
- Does this work elicit an emotional response?
- Does the title inform the work? How?

Looking at public and private space:

Anthropologists have come up with some good body language -the difference between intimate, private, personal space and space in which people and things join: public space. I like the space just between-a space into which private and public merge, each anticipating the other, a shift from the self to society. It's that area at which singular and plural blur- a sort of welcome is offered.

- Viola Frey ¹⁷

- Does "Weeping Woman" exist in a space somewhere between the public and private?
How?

There is a long history of the nude female body in art history. Frey describes her experience on a bus as the catalyst for rethinking the power of the clothed figure.

- Does the monumentality and nudity of "Weeping Woman" add an aggression to the figure?
Describe?

¹⁵ Davira S. Taragin, "Viola Frey: Everything is Autobiographical", Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey, Hudson Hills Press: NY and Manchester, 2009: 33.

¹⁶ Ibid:36

¹⁷ Patterson Sims, Viola Frey: Empathically Present, Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey, Hudson Hills Press: NY and Manchester, 2009:71



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**Classroom Activity Suggestions
For
Bigger, Better, More: *The Art of Viola Frey***



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Global and Local

K-2

Have students make pinch pots. Use pinch pots to talk about the common use of bowls by people all over the world.

3-5

Ask the students to come up with a list of personal routines that they do; – this could be something very small (getting the post from the mailbox, feeding the dog, playing the clarinet). The student will then sculpt from clay a small medallion that shows an aspect of one interest.

6-8

How does one decide what to collect? Does collecting have to be expensive? How do you keep your collection in top condition? What does your collection tell us about you?

Are there social or political implications to this collection? Viola Frey used her collection of figurines as a source of inspiration for her artwork. Why do you collect these objects?

Ask students to share their collections with the class and open up a discussion based on these questions.

9-12

Based on what is relevant to the class material, the teacher can focus on a particular event, period, person or theme for this activity. Based on the selected theme, ask students to come up with emotions that are tied to politics, political cause or events (anger, anxiety, surprise, liberation, etc.). Ask students to use “Junk yard Planet” as their point of departure. Making observations on the world around them, ask them to express a social or political concern that they may have at the moment (the environment, politics, endangered species), using clay as the medium how would they depict their concerns. This could be a 3 dimensional object or a bias relief. It could also be a collaborative project with the entire class involved. After discussion and planning, have each student depict an aspect of the narrative on an individual clay tile. All the tiles will come together at the end to form a complete story or narrative.

9-12

"A Tribute"

Frey pays tribute to certain people in her artwork. Select a historical figure or someone in your community (can also be a profession) that you admire. Create a paper maché (can also be made in clay) of the figure of your choice. Study or emulate some of Frey's techniques to make your figure seem “larger than life.” For example, consider making some elements of the figure proportionally larger, or select colors and textures that express the person.



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Narrative and Content

K-2

If you could be an animal what would you be? Write or draw this animal. Why did you choose this animal? Make the animal sound. Make a mask using colored papers to wear and express this new identity.

3-5

How do you see yourself today? What about in five years time? Write a description about how you would look like and what you would be doing thus creating a word portrait of yourself. Using this information make a small clay sculpture reflecting a vision of you.

6-8

Paper maché “Junkyard Planet”: Ask students to gather an assortment of objects that they feel has meaning to them about the environment (good and /or bad). Assemble into a sculpture and tape together. Cover with paper maché and let dry. Once dry, carefully cut the paper maché shell in half and remove the objects. Tape the two halves together and paint sculpture.

6-8

This lesson will cover the ideas pertaining to the notion of paradox, irony, oxymoron and other words that describe opposing or contrasting meanings.

Create a collage (2-D) or paper maché (3-D) of self-portraits that show the *Inner You* and the *Outer You*. Consider different opposing aspects of yourself (i.e. shy & brave) or different selves (i.e. when you are hanging out with friends vs. when you are home with your family). What would it look like when the two different “you-s” meet in the artwork? Would they be friendly like Viola Frey's double portrait and face each other? Would you look the same (or different) physically?



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9-12

In a work titled “Catalysis IV (1970), artist Adrian Piper, while seated on a crowded bus, dressed very conservatively but her mouth was stuffed with a large white bath towel, side of mouth (jaws and cheeks) bulging to twice their normal size, letting the rest hang down her front. Piper states, “making artificial and nonfunctional plastic alterations in my own bodily presence of the same kind as those formerly made on inanimate or non art materials. Here the art-making process and end project has the immediacy of being in the same time and space continuum as the viewer. This process/product is in a sense internalized in me, because I exist simultaneously as the artist and the work. I define the work as the viewer’s reaction to it. The strongest, most complex, and most aesthetically interesting catalysis is the one that occurs in uncategorized, undefined, nonpragmatic human confrontation.

The immediacy of the artist’s presence as artwork/catalysis confronts the viewer with a broader, more powerful, and more ambiguous situation than discrete forms or objects”.¹⁸

Ask students to research compare and consider the quotes between Piper above and Frey on “Weeping Woman” pg 13. Have students: write about or illustrate (presentation) how were the explorations similar? How did the impact on the viewer differ? Or did it? Was each artist successful in their aim? How?

¹⁸ Adrian Piper, “Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object”, Out of Order, Out of Sight, MIT Press: London, 1996



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Form and Structure

K-2

Make a geometric tile that can interlink with others. Scratch into the surface of a tile of clay with bamboo skewers to form a pattern and texture. Color can be painted when the clay has dried.

Abstract shapes that fit together would also work.

3-5

Make very thin coil pots and press small dried beans into the side creating patterns and textures.

When the pots are fired the beans will burn off and a relief will be left in the clay.

6-8

Using the sculpture of Viola Frey, specifically looking at **Double Self**, have the students create a full figure self portrait out of self drying clay. Start the project by introducing figure drawing so the students can understand the human form. Then have them study briefly the skeletal system and create a small (12" tall) full figure self portrait.

9-12

Have students think about their environment (on the way to school, home, their room, school studio) or any place that they identify as a place belonging to them, what objects occupy these spaces, would they imagine these objects as an extension of themselves, a family of sorts? How would they arrange these objects to compose a "Family Portrait"? Take note that Viola Frey's "Family Portrait" contains objects that she has collected from flea markets and thrift stores. Have students sketch out ideas about how they would compose these objects into a portrait.



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Process and Materials

K-2

Take a trip to a local park or outdoor area to gather natural materials such as twigs, branches or rocks. Once back in the classroom, use the materials to create individual patterns in clay tiles.

3-5

Create a clay model of your hand and try to get the size as close to your actual hand as possible. Weigh the clay model and note the weight of the clay that was used. Now double (triple, etc.) the weight and create a hand similar to the one you made. How big would your hand be when it is twice as large in volume? Experiment with different multiples and guess how many times larger some of Frey's figures could be compared to real life.

6-8

This activity should be done before "Form and Structure".

Using clay, talk to your students about where clay comes from and the way it is used both function and form. Talk about the various ways clay can be used to make objects like cups and plates as well as to make sculpture. Ask the students to experiment with a small amount of clay making both a usable object and a sculpture. Show them clay techniques.

Reinforce the idea of experimenting. After the objects are completed, looked at and discussed by the class the students will destroy their objects and the clay can be used for "Form & Structure".

9-12

Extending the assignment on Form and Structure:

Have students decide what materials they would use to turn their "Family Portrait" into a 3 dimensional object.

Using clay, or Paper maché to construct their sculpture, have students decide on glaze or paint to decide on the mood of their sculpture (festive, sad, funny, celebratory, anxious).

9-12

The students who researched and presented on Piper and Frey have them consider which materials and process to use to discuss private/public space in their own practice. Ask students to consider the impact they would like the work to have on the viewer, what medium would they choose to have the desired outcome.



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You will find under the drop down menu “learn” and “teach” resources and information for educators including:

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Watch videos of artists, curators and other guest speakers discuss the art and design process, installations and exhibitions on view at MAD.



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Paper Mache Websites:

<http://familycrafts.about.com/cs/papermache/a/051500pm.htm>

<http://www.kinderart.com/multic/machemask.shtml>

Rubbings Websites:

http://www.ehow.com/how_2097428_do-tree-rubbing.html

<http://www.busybeekidscrafts.com/Tree-Rubbings-Collage.html>

Weaving Websites:

<http://www.artprojectsforkids.org/2008/11/paper-weaving.html>

Shadow Puppet Websites:

http://www.ehow.com/how_4479611_make-shadow-puppets-out-construction.html

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WlbQPmXg08>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shadow_play

Bookbinding/ Book Arts:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XHfwe_VfbM

<http://www.videojug.com/film/how-to-make-a-book>

http://homepages.nildram.co.uk/~dawe5/bookbinding_pages/BB_welcome2.html

<http://www.life123.com/hobbies/scrapbooking/binding/bookbinding.shtml>

<http://www.sff.net/people/brook.west/bind/bindit.html>

<http://www.aboutbookbinding.com/>

Paper Relief Sculpture:

<http://www.mmwindowtoart.com/3d.html>

BOOKS:

Shadow Puppet Books:

“Making Shadow Puppets,” by Jill Bryant

“Shadow Puppets” by Orson Scott Card

“The Art of Chinese Shadow Puppet Theater,” by Kyle Okada & Susan Olivier-Hirasawa



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Checklist with complete credits:

***Group Series: Questioning Woman I*, 1998**

Glazed earthenware

108 x 33 x 28

Museum of Arts and Design purchase with funds provided by the National Endowment for the arts, matching funds from the Associates of the American Craft Museum, and contributions from the general public, 1991

Photo: Eva Heyd

***Family Portrait*, 1995**

Ceramic with glazes

84 x 79 x 29.5

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, DC, Gift of Rena Bransten, 1996

Photograph by Lee Stalsworth

***Double Self*, 1978**

Ceramic with glazes

Figure 1: 64 x 20 x 18.5; Figure 2: 61.5 x 18.5 x 17

Collection of Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland

Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago

***Western Civilization Fountain*, 1996**

Ceramic with glazes

60 x 60 x 60 inches

Private Collection, Courtesy of Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York

Photo by Chris Watson

***Studio View - Man in Doorway*, 1983**

Oil on canvas

105 x 163

Collection of Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland

Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago



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Junkyard Planet, 1970

Ceramic with glazes

44 x 18 x 18

Collection of Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland

Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago

H.K. (also H.K. in Doorway), 1978

Ceramic with glazes

26.5 x 26 x 3.5

Collection of Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland

Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago

Man and Meissen Figurine, 1982

Oil and acrylic on paper

60 x 40

Collection of Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland

Photography by Michael Tropea, Chicago

Fire Suit, 1983

Ceramic and steel with glazes

98 x 32 x 23

Collection of San Jose Museum of Art. Museum purchase with funds

contributed by the Museum's Council of 100, partial gift of Byron Cohen and
additional funds provided by the Museum's Collections Committee, in honor
of the San Jose Museum of Art's 35th anniversary.

Photograph by Douglas Sandberg

Weeping Woman, 1990-91

Ceramic with glazes

76 x 58 x 80

Collection of Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida, Purchase, the
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