



MONUMENTAL
THE ART OF VIOLA FREY
EXHIBITION GUIDE



FLINT INSTITUTE OF ARTS



MONUMENTAL

Over the course of her 50-year career, Viola Frey (1933–2004) produced an impressive body of artwork, including sculpture, paintings, and drawings, but she is best known for her brilliantly colored, monumental ceramic figures. Frey belonged to a generation of California artists who pushed the boundaries of clay as a craft to produce sculptural artworks, which would elevate ceramics as a medium for fine art as

we know it today. Frey's multifaceted approach and training as a painter and sculptor taught her to experiment using contemporary materials, art historical and pop culture references, and personal iconography, which she gathered from her surroundings. These deep sources of imagery allowed Frey to reflect on culture, power, gender dynamics, and in one particular series, the broad topic of Western civilization.

VIOLA FREY (1933-2004)

When asked about her artistic inspiration, Viola Frey answered, “I had to make my own culture,” referring to her childhood roots. The family’s grape farm in Lodi, California, was far from art museums and other cultural institutions so she found inspiration in her surroundings. The irrigation ditches where she sculpted objects out of dirt, the discarded farm machinery that littered the property, and the trinkets she found at the local flea markets would have a lasting impact on her art.

She began working with clay while attending Stockton Delta College in the early 1950s, and then as a student at the California College of Arts and Crafts, where she also studied painting. During her graduate studies at Tulane University, she explored color and its effect on the senses. Bright, expressive colors became one of her artistic signatures. She was also introduced to the history of art and incorporated elements like ancient vessels and Venus figures into her visual vocabulary.



In the mid-1970s Frey’s art took on the monumental scale for which she is most well known. Her large home and backyard in Oakland, California, doubled as her studio for over two decades until she moved to an even larger space and continued to produce an impressive amount of artwork until her death in 2004.

Viola Frey at work during her residency at Manufacture national de Sèvres, France, 1986. Photograph by Jacques Cressaty.





The Decline and Fall of Western Civilization, 1992

Ceramic and glazes

95 x 202 x 66 inches

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Viola Frey has always worked on a large scale but this is the largest sculpture she ever created. She started working with monumental figures in 1976 when she acquired her own kiln and could work in her backyard. Her figures, which started off life sized grew until two buckled under their own weight. After that she developed the technique that you see here. Frey hand built individual sections that weighed between 40 to 75 pounds. This sculpture is made of 155 individual pieces that are bolted together from the inside. Since they are essentially three-dimensional puzzles

each large section took months to make and required careful planning. Because of this, she was unable to be spontaneous with the form but could express herself with glaze. She could mix colors, add gestured lines, and incorporate texture to make the sculptures as vibrant and colorful as her drawings and paintings. Experimentation was always part of her process, she was even known to grab a handful of dirt from her backyard and smear it across a sculpture to see what effect it would have during the firing process.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

All artworks lent by Artists' Legacy Foundation, Oakland, CA. Artwork © Artists' Legacy Foundation / Licensed by ARS, New York.

Amphora: Western Civilization, World and Figures (White, Pink), 2003

Glass and china paint

17 x 10 x 10 in.

The Decline and Fall of Western Civilization, 1992

Ceramic and glazes

95 x 202 x 66 in.

Untitled, Fighting Men Series, 2001

Glass and china paint

14 x 9 x 9 in.

Untitled (White Glass Vase with Painted Figures), 2003

Glass and china paint

17 x 10 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.

Western Civilization I, 2000

Ceramic and glazes

36 x 23 x 14 in.

Western Civilization Diptych #4, 1997

Pastel on paper

41 1/2 x 59 1/4 in.

Western Civilization Series, 2000

Ceramic and glazes

90 x 70 in.

Cover Image: Viola Frey in her Third Street Studio, Oakland, CA, 1986.

Photograph by Chris Felver.

