

Collection in Focus: Viola Frey
October 29, 2014–March 1, 2015

Bay Area artist Viola Frey (1933–2004) is perhaps best known for her larger than life figurative ceramic sculptures, many of which can be seen scattered throughout the di Rosa landscape. Along with artists such as Robert Arneson and Peter Voulkos, Frey was highly influential to elevating the medium of ceramics to a fine art form. This exhibition focuses on a lesser-known aspect of the Frey's oeuvre through a selection of di Rosa's holdings of the artist's works on paper and canvas. Dating from the 1980s, these tableaux explore ongoing issues addressed throughout her practice such as normative gender roles, notions of power, and what it means to be an artist and a woman.

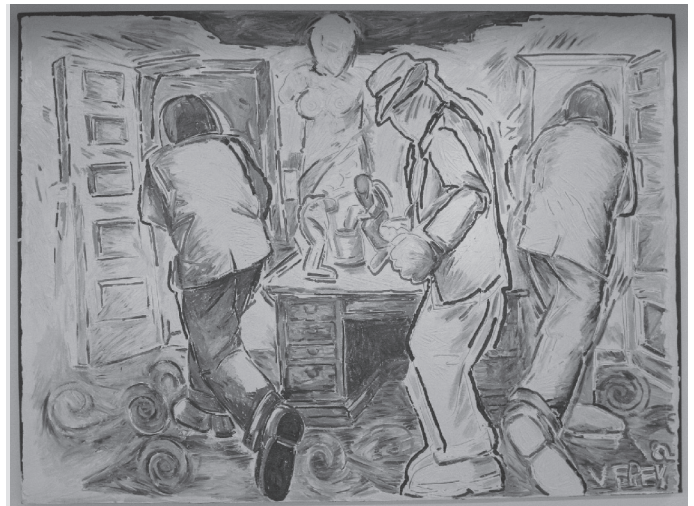
Originally trained as a painter (artists Mark Rothko and Richard Diebenkorn were seminal instructors), Frey moved easily between two- and three-dimensional forms and honed an abiding interest in exploring relationships between painting and sculpture. In the selection of paintings on view here, we see the exuberance of color and scale utilized in her sculptural work enter the frame of the painted surface with more freedom, energy, and movement—characteristics perhaps more difficult to attain in the solid form of clay. These images depict surreal scenes staged within the artist's Oakland home and studio populated by arrangements from Frey's collection of cultural bric-a-brac and cast-off ceramic figurines found at local flea markets and thrift stores. A number of Frey's enduring symbols and motifs found throughout her body of work emerge here as well: looming men in suits, classical female nude figures, birds and urns, among others.

In the large-scale work on canvas *Studio View—One Man Splitting*, 1983 (right), we see a corporate suited man scrambling to leave a room in such a hurry that he literally doubles himself in order to leave by two doors at once, perhaps a nod to the collectors who frequented Frey's studio at the time. As such, the scene evokes the artist's own reactions to frustrations brought on by the frenetic pace of her own struggles as an artist in contemporary society. Of her male figures the artist has stated, "To me, the suit is not only symbolic of power, but is of itself a geometric form for me to play with." Painted with

a quality reminiscent of that of Joan Brown's early paintings from the early 1960s, Frey applied paint thickly and gesturally lending a sculptural quality to her mode of application.

In *Untitled (Blue Urn)*, 1988, and *Untitled (Urn and Nudes)*, 1987, the artist's monumental female figures of her sculptural pieces (an example of which can be seen at the entrance of the Gatehouse Gallery) are found in the works here. Their towering scale is further exaggerated within these cramped compositions, while the suited male figures loom in the background. These dramatic juxtapositions and confrontations invert traditional gender roles, shifting the female form to a position of power, a subject matter Frey tackled throughout the course of her career regardless of medium.

Text by Curator Amy Owen



Viola Frey
Studio View—One Man Splitting, 1983
Alkyd oil on canvas, 72 x 96 in.
di Rosa collection, Napa