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“Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey”

at the Museum of Arts and Design

By: Simmy Swinder



Viola Frey, Weeping Woman, 1990-91

Ceramic with glazes

Artists Legacy Foundation

Despite the curator's choice to subject the show to a modest half of a floor at MAD, Viola Frey's monumental and imposing sculptures make the limited space satisfactory. They are accompanied by smaller wall sculptures and paintings, giving viewers an overview of Frey's oeuvre. Originally from Lodi, California, Frey routinely frequented flea markets in Oakland and San Francisco, acquiring ceramic trinkets and figurines. Examples of these found objects, which most consider kitsch, are encased in the back corner of the exhibition. Viola Frey described them as "the trifles that fill the cottages of thousands of people, things briefly cherished and then [thrown] out." This prompted Frey to transform traditionally disposable bric-à-brac into larger-than-life sculptures one cannot ignore, or effortlessly discard. She did this through a process of assemblage termed bricolage and using ceramic as her primary medium.

Surface imperfections, from the sketchy brush strokes and fragmentary parts to the glazed but rough edges remind me of the finished product's original, mass-produced, models. Namely, the poor quality of commonplace, found objects. However, Frey's works insidiously penetrate the viewer's psyche. Perhaps the scale of the sculptures or the remarkably realistic and downcast expressions of the figures is what gives them their emotional leverage. As former curator Kenneth R. Trapp commented, the balance of "static forms" covered in "expressionist strokes" of bold, emotive color, issuing an uneasy but "dazzling" effect also gives it its appeal, an effect that leaves this zealous Generation Y museum-goer with an indelible impression and longing for bigger, better and, well, more.

Frey lived and worked concurrently with other California ceramicists. Their works can be found on the 3rd floor in an exhibition titled "California Dreamers: Ceramic Artist from the MAD Collection." Although these works are less domineering than Frey's massive sculptures (there's another not-to-be-missed Frey sculpture in this related exhibition) they nevertheless provide viewers with a deeper understanding of the artist's contemporaries and influences, which is always worth a quick peak.

“Bigger, Better, More: The Art of Viola Frey” runs through May 2nd
2 Columbus Circle

Take the 1,A,B,C, or D train to 59th St/Columbus Circle

Museum Hours: Tue-Sun, 11-6; Thurs, 11-9

Museum Website: www.madmuseum.org