

ARTISTS' LEGACY FOUNDATION

PERSPECTIVES

VICTOR FEYLING

Victor Feyling is a graduate student in the Museum Studies Program at San Francisco State University. During his research in the Viola Frey archives at the Artists' Legacy Foundation, he produced this essay and an art glossary for educators.

I was almost completely unaware of Viola Frey's work prior to the start of this project, having only seen glimpses on display at a local museum where I used to work. I quickly found that Frey was a deeply thoughtful, but incredibly private person. As a result, a significant portion of what's been written about Frey exists as timelines based either around her various moves: Lodi, San Francisco, New Orleans, New York, and Oakland; or her employment: the family farm, Macy's, Museum of Modern Art in New York, and finally California College of Arts and Crafts.

Much of this interpretation outlines changes in style and technique in response to these significant life events, and while these are important, they are an incomplete picture, often only mentioning briefly the iconography in her work so as to avoid unfounded speculation. Speculation was all I had initially, as I started off by looking at her artwork with no grounding in her personal history. After learning more about Frey, namely her unyielding commitment to privacy and proclivity for dodging direct questions, it almost seems as if she wanted us to speculate endlessly about meaning and motive.

Frey passed away in 2004, having never answered the majority of the questions posed to her through interviews and oral histories. Absent the discovery of some kind of lost diary or autobiography that would explain her personal lexicon of symbols, I believe that future interpretation of her art will rely heavily on educated guesses based on the few known parts of her life. I also believe that this kind of interpretation is valid, so long as those of us doing it are upfront and honest with the viewer about the fact that there are so many things we don't know, and that what we're saying is often based as much on opinion and speculation as it is on hard evidence. It is possible that Frey derived some kind of enjoyment from watching people try to unravel her enigmatic body of work, but as I paired imagery she used with verifiable life events and behaviors, she seemed to

hint at something that was simply too painful to talk about - something that she could only process through her art. What it may have been is something we're unlikely ever to know, but it was almost certainly related to her childhood, as she nearly completely severed ties with her family as an adult.

When viewed alongside the prospect of unresolved trauma, many of Frey's recurring icons become all the more potent. In addition to understanding her icons, one of the things that I believe must also be addressed is the recurring relationships between them. None of the figures truly stand alone; even those that are removed from their original context in the studio were surrounded and influenced by other examples of Frey's work during their creation. In that respect, they are like Frey; distantly removed from their origins, but indelibly shaped by them.

ICONS

Very few artists are able to begin their careers with showstopping works on a monumental scale, and though this is the kind of work Viola Frey is best known for, she started off on a much more modest scale. Much of her early work was smaller and uncolored, instead relying on the natural earth tones of the clay and occasionally a simple white or neutral glaze. This aesthetic choice was in line with some of the subject matter she was pulling from antiquity as it lends an aged look to what, in reality, is a new object.

One such subject that recurs frequently in her early art is the sphinx, most commonly associated in modern times with the famous landmark in Giza, Egypt. The sphinx at Giza is simply a lion with a man's head, but the variety of sphinx that appears in Viola Frey's artwork has a leonine body, avian wings, and the head and upper torso of a human woman, which originates in Greek



Reconstructed Sphinx, Sphinx Series, 1976, VF-0048CSS

mythology, specifically the story of Oedipus. The sphinx guards the gates of Thebes in order to devour travelers seeking entry, inadvertently protecting the Thebans inside from the destruction Oedipus' arrival will bring upon them, and in particular his mother, Jocasta, the queen of the city-state. Ultimately, Oedipus bests the sphinx, and inadvertently destroys a female family member after defeating the female guardian protecting her.

The familial nature of the conflict in the Oedipus myth may have made the symbol especially powerful for Frey given her estranged relationship with her family. In Frey's sculpture, the sphinx makes numerous appearances alongside other imagery including self-portraits, roosters, and suited men. The rooster and suited man each represent different varieties of hypermasculinity; roosters are rural, showy and aggressive, while the suited man is more urban and calls to mind imposing, patriarchal authority - forces Frey would have encountered across her rural upbringing and urban adulthood. The question then becomes what is Frey's "sphinx": what is it guarding and what from? There is likely no single answer to any of these questions. Context is key to the icons in Frey's work, and though she was notoriously solitary, so too are her relationships.

The sphinx figure tapers off as Frey transitions into larger and more colorful work, but the rooster persists for decades more. In addition to being a typical farmyard animal, it is also a key component in an often repeated anecdote about Frey's formative experience of decapitating roosters as a childhood chore, and classic symbol of masculine virility. At times her use of the rooster also puts at the fore a cheeky sense of humor, belied by her typically grim expression in photographs.

Not shying away from the obvious double entendre or possible pearl-clutching over perceived crudity, her 1996 drawing *Untitled (Man with Rooster in Pants)* shows exactly that. A towering suited man looks down,



Walking Men, 1994, VF-3293CS

almost scornfully, at a globe cradled in a massive hand, while a rooster emerges from the fly of his pants, coming face-to-face with the Venus de Milo, itself a historic depiction of a feminine ideal. The man himself is comprised of multiple masculinities, but appears otherwise devoid of identity, having no significant individual features beyond his suit and rooster. The suited man and rooster seem at first to be competing versions of masculinity, but the suited man's impersonal institutional authority is empowered by the rooster's more primal, implicit threat of aggression.

In contrast to the rooster and suited man, one of Frey's most consistent archetypes of feminine power is the grandmother figure. Appearing frequently in her larger-than-life sculptures, the grandmother is at times gentle and welcoming, at other times scolding and ornery, but always dressed in her stylish Sunday clothes. While the basic format of a business suit has been a stable pillar of men's fashion for over a century, the grandmother's clothes place her firmly in a post-war time period. The grandmother's clothes also give her a greater sense of personal identity; unique patterns, colors and hat styles denote personal tastes and preferences. That, in addition to her emotional range, presents her as a full-fledged person rather than a blank stand-in for institutional power onto which various authority figures can be overlaid. Often acting as the de facto matriarchs of their families, the grandmother represents a type of power that can potentially supersede that of the suited man; what is a high-powered business executive to his own grandmother? In the domestic sphere a suit means nothing but a beloved grandmother's authority is undeniable.



Untitled (Man and Rooster), 1990-1991, VF-0836WP



Untitled (Man in Suit with Rooster in Pants), 1996, VF-0812WP

CONCLUSION

A myriad of other themes and icons exist in Frey's vast oeuvre, many of which have been little explored since her death. A chronology of her life and work provides critical information, but only tells a part of the story. In the spirit of her early Desert Toys series (1975-1980), talking about Frey's decades-spanning practice often feels more like archaeological work than contemporary art criticism. Historians will likely never come to any one conclusion about her work, and on a personal note, I don't believe that Frey had one single intent behind most of what she did.

Others viewing this work may believe that

everything written here is completely off base, and the line of thinking behind that is just as worthy of pursuit. Cultivating a deeper appreciation of Frey's work will require us to think in different streams at the same time, and on occasion hold contradictory ideas in our minds simultaneously. Counterintuitively, this uncertainty and incongruity may mean that we are actually coming closer to understanding Frey's enigmatic oeuvre.



Grandmother and Possessions, 2001,
VF-1052CSS

PHOTO CREDITS

Viola Frey, *Reconstructed Sphinx*, *Sphinx Series*, 1976, whiteware and underglazes, 37 x 13 1/2 x 25 in., VF-0048CSS.

Viola Frey, *Walking Men*, 1994, ceramic and glazes, 68 x 40 x 40 in., VF-3293CS.

Viola Frey, *Untitled (Man and Rooster)*, 1990-1991, pastel and charcoal on paper, 12 x 16 in., VF-0836WP.

Viola Frey, *Untitled (Man in Suit with Rooster in Pants)*, 1996, pastel and charcoal on paper, 30 x 41 3/4 in., VF-0812WP.

Viola Frey, *Grandmother and Possessions*, 2001, ceramic and glazes, 40 x 41 x 27 in., VF-1052CSS.

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