

Why, at 95, Magdalena Suarez-Frimkess Matters for a New Generation of Women Ceramicists

Artists like Anna Sew Hoy and Karla Ekaterine Canseco are picking up the mantle of the pioneering Venezuela-born, Venice-based ceramic artist

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Southern California's history of ceramic art has long been associated with the boys: the legendary, rule-breaking ceramicist Peter Voulkos; Ron Nagle and Ken Price, with their unusual use of synthetics; and Tony Marsh, artist and influential professor at California State University, to name but a few. But, while these artists have reimagined the material beyond its traditional boundaries of function and craft, it is Los Angeles-based female artists—many of whom have already had or will have exhibitions this year— that are fine-tuning the message behind the medium, and shaping culture through shaping clay.

Diana Yesenia Alvarado, whose first solo show in Los Angeles, "Earth Wish," closed at Jeffrey Deitch in January, is one such artist. While studying at California State University, Long Beach, Alvarado was able to experiment on a grand scale, owing to the ceramic department's large kilns. Her irresistibly charming sculptures and vessels require immense athleticism to shape, while their glazing is as mesmerizing as an abstract-expressionist or color-field painting. Alvarado's works picture cartoon characters of her own invention, with shades of Looney Tunes, collectible Homies dolls and the Precious Moments figurines that surrounded her during childhood. Her silver-toned bunny, *CONEJO ESPACIAL* (2023), is a pithy riff on Jeff Koons's stainless-steel *Rabbit* (1986). A pair of cats, fierce in their stance and gaze, are a mash-up of any number of famous cartoon felines and Chinese Tang Dynasty Foo dogs. Alvarado's smaller, shelf-placed sculptures are no less arresting, capturing a

pair of cats, fierce in their stance and gaze, are a mash-up of any number of famous cartoon felines and Chinese Tang Dynasty Foo dogs. Alvarado's smaller, shelf-placed sculptures are no less arresting, capturing a contemporary sense of ennui and the complicated politics of diminutiveness and power in Japanese kawaii culture.

Of the same generation, fellow LA artist Kristy Moreno's slab and coil-built stoneware sculptures, recently on view at Ochi Gallery in Los Angeles, have a solidity and monumentality that belie their frothy mix of niche pop-cultural references. Taking in 1970s LA punk fashion, Chicana lowrider culture and 1990s Chola staples like nameplate door-knocker earrings, the finely rendered elements fit together like hieroglyphics or pictographs on an ancient stele, with a futuristic spin, thanks to their Day-Glo palette.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess and Michael Frimkess, *Mercado Persa*,

It's not only younger artists adding cartoon and pop-inspired decoration to their ceramics. At 95, Magdalena Suarez Frimkess has been doing exactly that for more than six decades. Her figurines and hand-built vessels featuring the likes of Olive Oyl, Donald Duck and Condori—a comic-book character from Chile, where the Venezuela-born artist moved in 1949—are completely idiosyncratic and autobiographical. They are even diaristic in the sense that Suarez Frimkess wakes up and goes to work in her Venice studio every day, making exactly what she feels like: “I just use whatever happens that day,” she told *T Magazine* in 2014. “It’s like a menu that you choose your food from.”

When I ask why she includes cartoons in her work, Suarez Frimkess, speaking over the phone, explains: “It started with the pre-Columbians. The pre-Columbians were the best cartoonists. Way before Mickey Mouse and all that.” Suarez Frimkess might focus on the everyday but there is a seriousness underlying her comical depictions: “I also use cartoons because it’s a kind of cover,” she says. “You won’t be attacked for expressing your ideas because it’s funny.” Suarez Frimkess has only been widely recognized for her contributions to the arts in the last few years and her first museum retrospective, accompanied by an illustrated catalog, will open at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in August of this year.

Perhaps it was only natural that Sachi Moskowitz, Suarez Frimkess’s step-granddaughter (through her partner and frequent collaborator, Michael Frimkess), chose to work in ceramics: “Given that my grandparents are ceramicists,” she says in an email, “I thought I would try it out beyond making little things here and there when I’d go to their house.” Working in a limited palette of blue and white that recalls Delftware, as well as its precursor, Chinese porcelain, Moskowitz’s vessels are also reminiscent of her grandparents’ approach in their wide variety of subjects, ranging from quotations from Artemisia Gentileschi’s *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612–13) to references to Moskowitz’s own life and dreams.



Magdalena Suarez Frinkess. Photo: Peyton Fulford

There is something strangely familiar about New Zealand-born, LA-based Anna Sew Hoy's alien ceramic forms. They reference our bodies and the abodes in which we seek shelter or community, and are punctuated by rounded, womblike structures. Sew Hoy frequently combines her ceramic work with worn denim in a further, familiar reference to the body. *Psychic Body Grotto* (2017), on long-term view at Los Angeles State Historic Park, is meant to evoke a gazebo for future or imaginary meetings. She has recently curated the exhibition "Scratching at the Moon" at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Realized with support from executive director Anne Ellegood, the show features 13 Asian-American artists with ties to Los Angeles, including Sew Hoy.

As well as pushing the medium materially, artists are expanding ceramics conceptually. Amia Yokoyama works in porcelain—a material with a long history that began in East Asia before being commodified by European courts and nobility. Yokoyama's buxom, large-bottomed women appear almost aqueous in their dripping glazes. The works draw upon myriad topics and concepts, from the artist's childhood playing in the mud to anime Slime Girls and other digital and real-world concepts. While the rich and powerful may use their rituals and collections of objects to achieve a veneer of refinement, Yokoyama lays fetishization bare in her oozing, provocative figures.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess's studio in Los Angeles, December 2023. Photo: Peyton Fulford

In a similarly provocative vein is Karla Ekaterine Canseco's enthralling performative and sculptural work *Pedazos de Perra* (2023). The clay- and metal-based sculptures in Canseco's wider oeuvre often appear as if they are unraveling and becoming at the same time. The works are insistently grotesque and baroque, as if demanding that the viewer not look away. In *Pedazos de Perra*, Canseco slowly ties more than a dozen ceramic plates onto her body like armor. In a final flourish, she inserts a lubed-up buttplug with a tail extension. The audience watches as she crawls around on all fours, invoking the spirit of the xoloitzcuintle, a hairless Mexican dog with a 3,000-year history reaching back to the Mayans and Aztecs, which Canseco has adopted into her oeuvre as a symbol of return, history, home, memory and more. Canseco's show at Murmurs in downtown Los Angeles is currently on view.

It is the specificity and idiosyncrasy of each of these artist's bodies of work—and the malleable relationship to their chosen material—that gives them their import and individuality in an age of information silos and personalized algorithms. Asked if she considers an audience when making her work, Suarez Frimkess, the elder stateswoman among these LA-based, women artists working in ceramics, replies: "I'm just thinking about myself and my life. I'm selfish."