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ON VIEW

An 84-Year-Old Ceramist's New York Moment

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A selection of works by Magdalena Suarez Frimkess are on view at the artist's first New York show at White Columns.
Courtesy of White Columns

Though Magdalena Suarez Frimkess's ceramics collaborations with her husband, Michael Frimkess, have drawn a following for many years — they're in the collections of a number of institutions, including the Museum of Arts and Design and the Smithsonian — the 84-year-old Venice, Calif.-based artist has rarely exhibited her own work. But as her debut New York solo show, opening tonight at White Columns, demonstrates, her talent is as singular as the life she has led.

In her choice of motifs, the Venezuelan-born artist seems entirely unbound by convention. She's just as likely to decorate one of her pieces with scenarios from Greco-Roman pottery as she is to feature Mickey and Minnie Mouse dancing the jitterbug. Though she often returns to the same imagery in her work, she never plans her subjects beforehand. "I just

use whatever happens that day – it's like a menu that you choose your food from," she says. But if her work appears offhand and playful, there can be something unsettling about it as well. A frequent theme has Olive Oyl in trouble, getting kidnapped or dangled over a school of vicious sharks. Other pieces depict more quotidian scenes, borrowed from Mayan and Aztec codices, of women giving birth or looking into obsidian mirrors.

The stories that Suarez Frimkess portrays may not correlate directly to her own experiences, but her life has been eventful. Orphaned at the age of 7, she later enrolled at the School of Plastic Arts in Caracas but set her ambitions aside at 18 when she met a man with whom she had a son and a daughter. As the children grew older, she returned to study painting and sculpture at Catholic University in Santiago with several Fulbright students, including the California artist Paul Harris. He was so taken with her work that he described her as "the most daring sculptor now working in Chile" in a 1962 article for *Art in America*, and arranged for her to receive a fellowship to study in the United States. This drew her partner's ire, and he gave her an ultimatum. The decision to attend the Clay Art Center in Port Chester, N.Y., was a wrenching one, and it would ultimately take her away from her children for decades. But it did bring her into contact with the Los Angeles-born ceramist who would become her husband and longtime collaborator, Michael Frimkess.

In 1971, after the couple moved to L.A., Frimkess developed multiple sclerosis. Producing his solo work became more difficult, and Suarez Frimkess set aside her own painting-and-sculpture practice to begin collaborating with her husband. In this new arrangement, he would throw his signature thin-walled, elegantly proportioned pots and she would glaze them. In his earlier solo work, even before Pop Art, Frimkess had decorated his pieces with images from popular culture, touching on multiculturalism, overpopulation and jazz. "He comes to it from a more ideological place," says Karin Gulbran, who curated the White Columns exhibition (and also has a solo ceramics show opening there simultaneously). "She jumped in and took the subject matter in her own direction."

Perhaps because Suarez Frimkess is self-taught, her own pieces have less in common with the work of other West Coast ceramists than the ones made with her husband do. "She's not an outsider artist, but she is outside of the ceramics tradition," Gulbran says. The way she makes and decorates her pieces bears this out: Her forms are more sculptural than functional, and although glazes are designed for dipping, Magdalena applies them like paint in a process that she likens to cloisonné.

The White Columns show comes at a time, half a century into their career, when Suarez Frimkess and her husband seem to be having a moment. Last year, a number of pieces were in "Grapevine~," a standout exhibition of California ceramists at L.A.'s David Kordansky Gallery. South Willard, a men's wear store and hub of that city's arts community, has shown their work numerous times. And they are to be included in the Hammer Museum's

upcoming "Made in L.A. 2014" biennial – which should help make apparent the couple's influence on a younger generation of West Coast artists.

Magdalena Suarez Frimkess is on view at White Columns through April 19;
whitecolumns.org.