

ART & DESIGN

# Biennial's Bright Young Things, Ages 77 and 84

## Frimkess Ceramics Have Their Moment at Hammer Museum

By JORI FINKEL JULY 15, 2014



Michael Frimkess and Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, with Ricky Swallow, right, at the Hammer Museum. Credit Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

LOS ANGELES — Prominent artists like Cindy Sherman and Mark Grotjahn have bought the work. Galleries on both coasts are beginning to promote it. Now the expressive, comics-inspired pottery of the husband-and-wife team Michael Frimkess and Magdalena Suarez Frimkess (he's 77 and she's 84) has become a sleeper hit of the Hammer Museum's biennial, thanks to a younger generation of local artists who have been bringing it to light.

"I think they are a real discovery for people here," said Michael Ned Holte, a co-curator of the biennial. "I'm seeing a lot of artists not just interested in this work but obsessed with it."

The Hammer biennial, called "Made in L.A.," is considered the West Coast's answer to the Whitney Biennial: a snapshot of current trends from 35 artists billed as new or underrecognized. Underrecognized, of course, is rather subjective. While one gallery features small, elegant bronzes by Ricky Swallow, 39, a closely watched sculptor with major galleries on his résumé, another showcases the colorful pots by the Frimkesses, who struggled for decades to land an occasional gallery show, with long dry spells in between.

In his review of the biennial, Christopher Knight, art critic for The Los Angeles Times, said the Frimkesses "have been making compelling art for a few decades more than most of the others have been alive."



"Condorito Vase (Greek)," a 2004 work by the Frimkesses. Credit Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

But the fine print of museum labels reveals a connection across the generations: A handful of the couple's pieces are on loan from collections of Los Angeles-area artists. One of the most striking pots in the show — a classic, Greek-style vase painted with lively scenes of the popular Chilean comic book character Condorito — comes from Mr. Swallow and his wife, the painter Lesley Vance.

"I'm a deep fan," Mr. Swallow said during a recent visit with the couple to the show, which runs through Sept. 7. "Once you see their work, it's impossible to walk away from it."

Mr. Swallow first learned about it two years ago from Karin Gulbran, a Los Angeles painter-ceramicist who helped Ms. Frimkess land a solo show with White Columns in New York this spring. Mr. Swallow included their work in a 2013 group show at David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles and introduced

them to the "Made in L.A." curators. The Frimkesses currently show their work through the men's wear shop South Willard, where their prices now range from \$600 to \$14,000.

One afternoon last week, Mr. Frimkess, who has multiple sclerosis and is recovering from a broken femur, rolled his wheelchair closer to a display table filled with their artwork. "Ricky is our savior," he said of Mr. Swallow. "We've been kicked to the side for 30 years."

Ms. Frimkess was more sanguine when asked about the recent attention. "Better late than never," she said, smiling.

The Hammer is showing 19 examples of their work spanning the last two decades. For most, the pair used a tag-team sort of collaboration: Mr. Frimkess throws the pots – without input from his wife. Then she paints the surfaces – without consulting him.

Most of their pots have classical forms, nodding to Chinese temple vases or, in the case of the piece lent by Mr. Swallow, a Greek wine jug known as a volute krater for its looping handles. Mr. Frimkess achieved the thin walls of this pot – and its beveled neck – through an unusual technique: throwing the pot dry by using very hard clay without adding water.

The surface features vivid paintings of Condorito, a bohemian birdlike character given to clownish mishaps.

"He's my philosopher – Condorito has answers for everything," said Ms. Frimkess, who has described her own life as a soap opera. She was born in 1929 in Venezuela and was living in Chile with her first husband and two teenage children when she moved to New York in 1963 on a fellowship to the Clay Art Center, in Westchester County, N.Y., where Mr. Frimkess was an intern. The two moved to Los Angeles in 1964 and later married.

Mr. Frimkess, a Los Angeles native, had studied in the 1950s with Peter Voulkos, the California master who boosted the reputation of ceramics as an art form. (Mr. Frimkess once described Mr. Voulkos as both a "mentor" and "tormentor.") But it was a bit later, during Mr. Frimkess's time on the East Coast, that he learned the ancient dry-throwing method, using it to copy Greek vases from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This technique – and, he said, his devotion to creating a superfast-firing kiln – were radical enough to challenge the ceramics establishment and to sideline his career. (Others say that multiple sclerosis, diagnosed some 40 years ago, had limited his productivity.)

Mr. Frimkess saves his toughest criticism for himself. "There's nothing here that I would call a masterpiece," he said of the forms on display. "They are all attempts." He pointed to a handsome vessel only to note "its neck should be taller."



Detail of "Cartoon Pot," a 2013 work work by the Frimkesses. Credit Stephanie Diani for The New York Times

Mr. Swallow shook his head. "That's something that I admire about Michael, even if it drives me crazy: Works that I find successful, he sees as failures," he said. "Michael is one of the most stubborn people I know in setting strict parameters for quality."

Mr. Swallow went on to praise Ms. Frimkess's "postmodern or punk-rock" narrative flair – the way she brings together images from art history and pop culture, war and family life, Chilean and American landscapes, into collage-style compositions. One vessel, "Guernica Pot," reconfigures images from Picasso's nightmarish vision of the Spanish Civil War; another, "Deaf Bertha," is her take on Berthe, a deaf woman painted by Toulouse-Lautrec. "Michael says I never listen to him, so I found a model that Toulouse-Lautrec painted," Ms. Frimkess explained.

The Hammer is also showing "Mickey Mouse Circus," a lumpy-looking jar with a rather homely Minnie Mouse on top, like a slumped wedding cake figurine. The Frimkesses say they are aware that Disney takes its intellectual property rights seriously. That hasn't stopped them from making versions of its characters.

"Nobody's put a gun in my back not to do it," Ms. Frimkess said.

The Mickey Mouse pot is an example of one of Ms. Frimkess's solo creations, for which she shaped the clay as well as painted it. While Mr. Frimkess is less active and throwing fewer vessels these days, she has picked up the pace by making and showing more of her own works, typically smaller pieces like tortilla plates and tiles.

Does she have any interest in throwing on a wheel? "Not really," she said. "That's Michael's work. I don't compete with the master."

Correction: July 25, 2014

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article, using information from the Hammer Museum, missed the title of a work by Ricky Swallow. It is "Paired Cones No. 1," not "Paired Cones No. 2."

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