

# FRIEZE



## The Love in Magdalena Suarez Frimkess's Ceramics

The artist's first institutional survey at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art assembles her eclectic ceramics, some of which she made with her husband

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BY WILL FENSTERMAKER IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 29 AUG 24

Twice a year in Venice, Los Angeles, during the mid-century revival of the bohemian enclave, an artist couple organized an outdoor market on Abbot Kinney Boulevard to sell their ceramic wares. For Michael Frimkess, that meant stylized sculptures drawn from classical forms that he fired in a homemade kiln. By the late 1970s, Magdalena Suarez Frimkess was on to something much stranger. Exhibited now in 'The Finest Disregard', at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, there's *Mickey* (2004), a lumpen, discoloured mouse, and *Donald Tea Pot* (2014), with the Disney duck rendered awkwardly on a wobbly, misshapen vessel. Pueblo kachinas recur, as do Mayan warriors who disembowel their enemies with obsidian clubs.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, *Mickey Mouse Circus Jar with Minnie Mouse Finial*, 2008. Courtesy: © Magdalena Suarez Frimkess; photograph: © Museum Associates/LACMA

The exhibition is Suarez Frimkess's first museum survey, and it contextualizes the Caracas-born, Los Angeles-based artist's eclectic body of work among her influences and peers. Her showcase alongside LACMA's encyclopaedic collection comes thanks to an impressive community of collectors. Mark Grotjahn has lent a tea set adorned with Taz the Tasmanian devil, and a charming, untitled tile decorated with canna lilies is on loan from Cindy Sherman. Many works are donated by the married artists Shio Kusaka and Jonas Wood. It makes sense: fuse Kusaka's playful yet finely wrought updates to classical ceramics with Wood's critical eye for bougie interior decoration, and you'd get an artist with the sensibility of Suarez Frimkess.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess and Michael Frimkess, *Mercado Persa* (Persian Market), 1996. Courtesy: © Magdalena Suarez Frimkess and Michael Frimkess, kaufmann repetto, Milan and New York, and the Michael Frimkess Trust; photograph: © Marten Elder

Wood even drew one of Suarez Frimkess's most captivating works, *Mercado Persa* (Persian Market, 1996), the largest of many she made in collaboration with her husband, a protégé of the preeminent Otis College ceramicist Peter Voulkos. In the 1970s Suarez Frimkess began applying her aesthetic vocabulary to her husband's work, overlaying Greek volute-kraters, Adobe Zuni pots and Chinese ginger jars with cartoon characters, national icons and scenes from their lives. Organized 'according to colour and movement or whatever distracted me at the moment', as she's quoted in the exhibition's catalogue, the black-glazed *Mercado Persa* depicts Snoopy piloting a biplane and the cast of the comic strip *Blondie* (1930–ongoing) alongside medallions of Simón Bolívar and George Washington and other such fragments. Wood's depictions of pottery (his drawing *Tall Black Frimkess*, 2016, is on view) typically feature idealized, flat vases incongruously layered atop real three-dimensional spaces, but Suarez Frimkess has done something of the inverse. Here she incorporates coarsely painted flashpoints, such as her childhood in a Catholic orphanage and her immigration to the US, with the motifs of American pop culture into a dizzying, zoetropic narrative.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, 'The Finest Disregard', 2024–25, exhibition view. Courtesy: © Magdalena Suarez Frimkess; photograph: © Museum Associates/LACMA

Some viewers might sense antagonism in Suarez Frimkess's dissonant collaborations with her husband, the jarring syncretism of her dual national identity and her droll view of American pop culture; even the museum seems unsure of how to incorporate her iconographic play. (Confusingly, the catalogue condemns lazy 'discovery narratives' applied to 'outsider artists', even as it plots how Suarez Frimkess's deliberate 'de-skilling' and career 'in the shadow of the Otis group' mirrors them.) But at its heart is something that looks, to me, like love. Simultaneously precious and cheeky, the work is ignited by the sparks of her partnership.

Oddly enough, artists in antiquity would've been well equipped to understand Suarez Frimkess's irreverent practice. The ancient Romans had several words for 'face'. There's *facies*, or appearance, and *visus*, or gaze. And then there's the *vultus*, the true face, hidden from sight. In his 1985 essay 'An Idea of Glory', philosopher Giorgio Agamben described the *vultus* as the revelation of the face in all its nakedness, which again sounds to me like a definition of love. Come face-to-face with West Coast mass media, it's the *vultus* – the ethereal mechanics of an emergent zeitgeist given crude muscular shape – that Suarez Frimkess sees and portrays.

*Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, 'The Finest Disregard' is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art until 5 January 2025*

*Main image: Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, 'The Finest Disregard', 2024–25, exhibition view. Courtesy: © Magdalena Suarez Frimkess; photograph: © Museum Associates/LACMA*