

This Mickey Mouse-Obsessed Ceramicist Is Getting Her First Retrospective at Age 95

L.A.-based, Venezuela-born artist Magdalena Suarez Frimkess' new show at LACMA is nearly a century in the making.

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE  AUGUST 18, 2024 10:00AM



The artist in her L.A. studio. Even after living in the city for 60 years, she doesn't consider it an influence on her work.

COURTESY OF MARY WIGMORE

"I'm a survivor," says Magdalena Suarez Frimkess. "Since I was a kid, that's been the definition of my life. Whatever I have to do, I do it. I'm still surviving at 95." For decades, this feisty nonagenarian toiled away in relative obscurity at the Venice studio that she shared with her husband and longtime collaborator, the classically trained ceramicist Michael Frimkess, 89. Yet in the past decade, the Venezuela-born Suarez Frimkess also has been thriving.

In 2014, she and her husband were included in the Hammer Museum's influential "Made in L.A." biennial, and this month, Suarez Frimkess' funky ceramic sculptures — 178 of them — will be showcased in *The Finest Disregard*, her long overdue retrospective at LACMA (Aug. 18 to Jan. 5), curated by Jose Luis Blondet. Her works depict figures from her family, art history, her upbringing and scenes involving some of her favorite pop icons: Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Wonder Woman, Santa Claus, Betty Boop, Olive Oyl and the satirical Chilean cartoon character Condorito.

“Don’t you think it’s about time?” Suarez Frimkess asks with a punchy laugh. “I’m still in shock in a way, but I think I deserve it.” She’s not the only one. For years, the couple’s ceramics were the best-kept secret in the L.A. art world. “We had to make a living. [My husband] made the pots and I decorated them and we had sales [at the studio],” she recalls. What once brought in \$25 or \$50 now can fetch five figures at auction, and her collectors include everyone from Cindy Sherman to L.A. power art couple Shio Kusaka and Jonas Wood, who donated several works to LACMA. Despite being seen as a grande dame by many L.A. ceramicists, Suarez Frimkess doesn’t feel connected to any artist community, nor does she think L.A. influences her work, even though she’s been living in the city for 60 years. Her narrative is more akin to a Pablo Neruda poem, rendered in rough-hewn clay, painted in glaze, stretching back to her childhood.



An untitled work from 2013 that’s one of the pieces in Magdalena Suarez Frimkess’ retrospective at LACMA MAGDALENA SUAREZ FRIMKESS, UNTITLED, 2013, LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART, GIFT OF JONAS WOOD AND SHIO KUSAKA, ©MAGDALENA SUAREZ FRIMKESS, PHOTO © MUSEUM ASSOCIATES/LACMA

Suarez Frimkess was born in Maturín, then moved to Caracas, where her mother could receive treatment for tuberculosis. After her mom died, she says, “My father didn’t know what to do with me.” He sent her to a Catholic orphanage, where the nuns introduced her to painting. By the time she was 14, she was studying printmaking and painting at Venezuela’s top art school. She moved to Chile at 18 with her partner, an older man, and raised two children while studying art in the 1950s. By 1962, *Art in America* had dubbed her “the most daring sculptor working in Chile” for sculptures dealing with the body employing everything from plaster to pantyhose. That year, Suarez Frimkess made the tough decision to leave her family to pursue a career in New York, where she met Frimkess in a residency program. They moved to L.A. two years later.



The 2015 piece Fish Plate MAGDALENA SUAREZ FRIMKESS, FISH PLATE, 2015, GLAZED STONEWARE, 7 1/2 X 7 1/2 IN. (19.1 X 19.1 CM), ©MAGDALENA SUAREZ FRIMKESS, PHOTO BY RUBEN DIAZ, COURTESY OF MARK GROTHJAHN.

Despite a lot of “great works” (as she puts it) being sold out of the studio early on, there are masterpieces on view at LACMA, including tables, plates, bowls and jars filled with her characters. Says the artist of her cartoonish, if charismatic, inspirations, “They help me to survive.”



The 2008 work Mickey Mouse Circus Jar With Minnie Mouse Finial. MAGDALENA SUAREZ FRIMKESS, MICKEY MOUSE CIRCUS JAR WITH MINNIE MOUSE FINIAL, 2008, COLLECTION OF KARIN GULBRAN, © MAGDALENA SUAREZ FRIMKESS, PHOTO © MUSEUM ASSOCIATES/LACMA