Condorito Has Answers for Everything: Magdalena Suarez Frimkess
Michael Ned Holte

A vast cosmology animates the surfaces of Magdalena Suarez Frimkess's hand-built ceramics. The artist's eclectic imagery includes familiar characters borrowed from the printed pages of comics as well as other elements drawn from around the world and across time: Zuni patterns, Japanese flower and bird pictures, Futurist abstraction, candy wrappers. She is also known to take her immediate surroundings as her subject—landscapes seen while traveling, family members, local cyclists, skateboarders observed outside her Venice, California, house and studio—irreverently colliding all of these together to articulate a worldview that is both global and unabashedly nonhierarchical. Such a position is also decidedly personal, developed over the course of ninety-one years of quiet, careful attention to the world around her.

While Suarez Frimkess returns to Minnie Mouse, Olive Oyl, Betty Boop, and the Tasmanian Devil often enough to consider them her avatars, no character has appeared more often in her ceramics than Condorito, an anthropomorphic, sandals-wearing condor who is the eponymous star of Chile's popular daily comic strip. *Condorito* was created by René Ríos, better known as Pepo, and made its debut in 1949—the same year Suarez Frimkess moved from Caracas to Santiago. She moved to the US in 1963. The artist has referred to Condorito as her philosopher: "Condorito," she remarks, "has answers for everything."[1] In the tradition of the *pícaro*—the protagonist of a picaresque narrative—the clever condor relies on his wits while exposing society's hypocrisies. When he's not landing jokes, he's getting knocked off his oversize feet by them. The reliable structure of each *Condorito* comic strip ends with one of the characters—often its hero—falling out of frame, or out of a window, heels-over-head, typically accompanied by an emphatic, onomatopoetic

¡PLOP!

This predictable pratfall is typically a response to a perfectly delivered joke. *Condorito* is rife with humor that is equal parts linguistic and visual, heavy on puns and double-entendres aimed at a regional Spanish-speaking audience, though the appeal of its physical humor is generally broad. This parallels the layered messaging of Suarez Frimkess's ceramics, which play with familiar imagery while slyly addressing highly localized and personal trials and tribulations. Family members and domestic vignettes often appear alongside and intersect with characters pulled from popular narratives. Sometimes a damsel in distress—a bound and gagged Olive Oyl dangling above hungry sharks, for example—insinuates self-portraiture. In many cases the artist transposes the linear form of the episodic comic strip onto a circular vessel, suggesting allegorical repetition without clear beginning or end.

Suarez Frimkess's studio is structured to similar ends, and is continuous with the house she shares with Michael Frimkess, her husband and longtime collaborator. The blurring of art and life, in this case, is less theory than everyday reality. For some five decades the couple worked in close concert, generally with Michael throwing the pots, Magdalena painting them with colored glaze, and Michael firing them in his custom-designed high-fire kiln. The pots are technically extraordinary in ways that may be, to an untrained observer, invisible. Michael developed a technique where he "throws dry," adding no water to the clay on the wheel so that the walls of each pot are remarkably thin, light, and strong. Though he is quick to deem many of his vessels "tests" or "experiments" based on his own stringent technical evaluation, he is just as eager to characterize Magdalena's redemptive ornamentation of these so-called castoffs as "masterpieces."[2] While her pluralistic sense of decoration actually follows closely from Michael's eclectic approach, with its mix of classical, ornamental, and pop motifs, Magdalena approach to hand-building ceramics is completely her own. In 1962, her mentor Paul Harris called her "the most daring sculptor now working in Chile" in the pages of *Art in America* and encouraged her to move to the US, which she did the following year.[3] Her ceramics today reveal a startling continuity with her elemental and sometimes anthropomorphic sculptures of the early 1960s, manifesting a style that is as casual and gestural as her partner's thrown vessels are rigorously classical. Magdalena emphasizes the work of her hands to the same degree that Michael seeks to render the evidence of his invisible. Today, she tends toward overtly vernacular forms—cups, mugs, figurines, tiles, craggy "tortilla plates," and tablet-like slabs that often serve as stand-ins for comic book pages. Ceramics are hot stuff right now. No longer relegated to the margins, clay—perhaps more than any other medium previously tagged and quarantined as a craft pursuit—has entered the mainstream of the art world. Many young artists have embraced the ceramic medium without concern for a previous generation's assumed artistic hierarchies or prohibitions. Suarez Frimkess has been claimed as an influence by a number of significant artists in Los Angeles—Karin Gulbran, Ricky Swallow, Mark Grotjahn, Shio Kusaka, and Jonas Wood among them—some but not all also working in ceramics. At ninety-one, she seems largely unaffected by the vicissitudes of art world fashion, taking all the recent attention in stride. As a student of Condorito, she knows her picaresque story will always begin again tomorrow.

1 Author conversation with Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, 2016.
2 Author conversation with Michael Frimkess, 2014.
3 Paul Harris, "Sculptors in Chile," *Art in America* 50, no. 2 (Summer 1962).

77 Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, *Untitled*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and kaufmann repetto, Milan / New York. Photo: Marten Elder
78 79 *GRAPEVINE~* installation view at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, 2013. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen


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