

Magdalena Suarez Frimkess: The Freedom in her Ceramics

Harper's Bazaar proposes a series of interviews with female artists of the 1920s and 1930s: today we will meet Magdalena Suarez Frimkess



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Magdalena Suarez Frimkess is a Venezuelan Artist, born in Caracas in 1929. She now lives and works from her home in Venice Beach, California. Without wifi and cell service, she is surrounded by her ceramic sculptures which hold her at international acclaim. In 2022, LACMA will hold a retrospective of her work. She studied painting and sculpture at the Catholic University of Santiago, Chile, and then was awarded a scholarship to study in the united states where she eventually met her husband Michael Frimkess, an iconic figure in the world Californian ceramics of the 1970s. Her life has been spent behind the scenes, often adorning her husbands praised ceramic works.

Magdalena Suarez Frimkess's ceramics weren't exhibited until much later, when she turned 84, when White Columns in New York offered her a solo show in 2014. It was a revelation, and the discovery of an enormous talent for many and finally recognized in its totality and complexity. A special thanks goes to Francesca Kaufmann of kaufmann repetto gallery for mediating between the artists and I.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, portrait.
COURTESY PHOTO

Mickey, Minnie, Popeye the Sailor, the Witch on a broom, flowers, pigs, but also children, skulls, medicines, erotic scenes reminiscent of the Lupanare of Pompeii, pop imagery, and many, many other themes. Your ceramics seem to me sculptures that embody and mix the world that hosts them and at the same time override it. What are your sources of inspiration and in what direction do you reinterpret them?

Magdalena Suarez Frimkess: I don't know what the menu for that day is, I don't know it myself.

Francesca Kaufmann: So you are just improvising, day by day?

M.S.F.: You can call it that way, yes.

F.K.: Is there a recipe to the day

M.S.F.: Sometimes. Sometimes I will do that when I am lying down thinking of something, maybe I will do that, but not often.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, *Project: Magdalena Suarez Frimkess*, installation view, White Columns, New York, 2014.

COURTESY OF WHITE COLUMNS, NEW YORK

F.K.: So you sit there, and go from that?

M.S.F: Yes, and from that its like a chain reaction. I do Mickey Mouse, then comes Minnie, then Popeye and they all seem to get together somehow. I didn't expect anything, so far I have been getting too much feedback, I don't know how. That's the puzzle.

F.K.: Yet, This is totally deserved

M.S.F: You know, I don't plan to do anything. If I did it was because I felt like doing it for fun. For myself. And then people find things in my work, but I wasn't even aware, so I am learning something that I didn't know.

What is the message you expect to express with your works?

M.S.F: I don't know the message, I don't like messages.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, *Untitled*, 1999. Glazed ceramic. 24,1 x 14 x 14 cm.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KALPAMANN REPETTO MILAN / NEW YORK. PHOTO: ANDREA ROSSETTI

F.K.: Why don't you like messages?

M.S.F.: Because it's like putting my thoughts in another person's head. That person should be free to whatever they think the message is.

F.K.: So everybody should interpret your work their own way? That's a good, democratic approach. And maybe this is why you find freedom in your work.

Which are the ceramists you loved most and who influenced you the most?

M.S.F.: I don't have anyone in particular, I just did it myself as practice. I did it for money [to make a living] and then I did the cartoons, and I would get more involved in the cartoons. So the only one would be Michael [Frimkess], because he also worked with cartoons. Then I took it a bit further.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, *Untitled*. 2008. Glazed ceramic. 17,8 x 17,8 x 2,5 cm
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KAUFMANN REPETTO MILAN / NEW YORK. PHOTO: ADAM KREMER

F.K.: But for example, weren't you looking at Japanese Pottery?

M.S.F.: Yes, all the influences that I could think of, and all the books in the world.

F.K.: You were aware, you were looking. have a look of books on ceramics here.

M.S.F.: Yes, and I never stopped looking for more. I remember I got a book on Aztec pottery, from the Library in Santa Monica. I told my father-in-law, "I want this book." He told me to take it, and to tell them I lost it and then pay the fee. So I kept it and I paid the fee. Then I started studying further, because the cartoons have a parallel, I would say. You won't believe it. It's amazing, you can see the whole world through these cartoons. The Aztecs portray cutting the heart out as human sacrifice, and I joked and said "eat you heart out", like they say in the cartoons. Both of these examples work with human trauma in a similar way.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, *Untitled*. 2003. Glazed ceramic. 25,4 x 20,3 x 11,4 cm.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KAUFMANN REPETTO MILAN / NEW YORK

E.K.: Do you think you were influenced subconsciously?

M.S.F.: Of course I was influenced. I learned a lot from these cartoons. And to me, the Aztec illustrations are like cartoons too. and now I can see the similarities in this between cultures of all over the world.

E.K.: Yes, and in a way they are all trying to illustrate something

Your artistic career has seen you be recognized at an already advanced age, after years and years of intense work. Was it your choice, a contingency or a coincidence?

M.S.F: I didn't recognise this until I was 15 years old. But then it was about economics, marriage. I was told a woman is not supposed to think about a career as an artist. She is supposed to cook and shop and all those things. So I gave up on my career for a few years and got married to a Chilean military man, became a mother.

F.K.: So, the question here is more that you have been recognized much later?

M.S.F: There's been a lapse. And then again a lapse. My life became lapsed, and now I'm being recognized: the last lapse was the last one.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, *Made in L.A. 2014*, installation view, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, June 15 – September 7, 2014.

Over the years, the world of art has been subject to a strong machismo, which still exists today. Have you encountered discrimination and sexism in your long career?

F.K.: Have you encountered Machismo?

M.S.F: A lot

F.K.: Like where?

M.S.F: Out there in Chile, in my country too. We are talking about the 1940s. That's a long time ago. Women in those days were very seldom in an art gallery.

F.K.: Who are the women you admire?

M.S.F.:When I was 15, in Venezuela and I started art school, arts plastica. The women there were older than me, and I learned alot from them. They were free thinking. They were admirers of Isadora Duncan, the dancer and performance artist. They absorbed everything and I would learn from them. Then in Chile there was Rosa Vicuna and Teresa Vicuna, a family of sculptors. And Roser Bru, a Catalan artist who immigrated to Chile. She just died not long ago. Roser came to visit me, and she introduced me to Luchita Hurtado because she saw the similarity in our lives.



E.K.: And when was that? When were you introduced to her?

M.S.F.: That was a long time ago, probably in the 1970s. When I was living in Echo Park. We used to meet at the farmers market together. And then we lost touch because, I forget, something happened and I couldn't go anymore.

E.K.: And then you went to her talk, I think, somewhere?

M.S.F.: No, that was later, before that, she used to invite me to all the happenings at the Getty Museum. You know, they gather the artists and give them food and what not. So, she was there in a wheel chair and I went with my daughter Delia. She saw me once and said 'Magdalena, you see me in a wheelchair. I am not disabled, I just dont want to walk a lot'. And then the time after that was at the lecture.

E.K.: Ok, well that is a good number of artists that I would also like to research.

E.K.: What about the Americans that you admire?

M.S.F.: Lee Bontecou, Georgia O'Keefe of course. Many other artists.



Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, *Untitled*. 2016. Glazed ceramic. 20,3 x 10,2 x 7,6 cm.
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND KAUFMANN REPETTO MILAN / NEW YORK. PHOTO: DAWN BLACKMAN

E.K.: Do you have a message or an advice to give to the new generations?

M.S.F.: Just live your life, nobody gave me any advice anyway. Keep doing what you like.

E.K.: So maybe persistence is something you would advise

M.S.F.: Yes, persistence of course. But this was unconscious, I didn't plan it. I believe in destiny.

E.K.: Sometimes you can guide your destiny

M.S.F.: Yes, and I try to analyse myself, psychologically, my own self. Why did I come back this way? It was because I left my father, and I was feeling guilty about that. I wanted to come back to Venezuela to see him before he died. So the excuse was to get a scholarship in America, so I could visit my father. And so I did visit him.

E.K.: And why would the scholarship in American take you to your father in Venezuela

M.S.F: So either way, I'm not in Chile. And the coincidence was that when I arrived at the airport, nobody was waiting for me, and it was very strange. And I dreamed that would happen to me, and my dream came true. I had my father's address and I said please take me to the address. That was my destiny. They tried to ruin my destiny but they didn't. I stayed there one week with him. He was very proud of me, and he made an article in a Venezuelan magazine, because he was proud of me.

E.K. So your father wrote the article?

M.S.F: No, he knew the people in Venezuela who worked at the magazine, so he took me there and showed me off and they wrote an article. We helped each other.

Do you have a dream in the drawer?

E.K.: The last question is; Do you have a dream in your drawer?

M.S.F: I have dreamed to be in this place, and I am here. To meet Francesca. This is a dream that has come true.

E.K.: So you have nothing else?

M.S.F: Well, I could go back to Venezuela, but everyone is against me. The situation is not good.