

## EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: From Life  
Subject: Viola Frey  
Discipline: Visual Art

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Artist Viola Frey at work on her large-scale sculptures. Still image from SPARK story, 2004.

## SECTION I - OVERVIEW

### EPISODE THEME

From Life

### SUBJECT

Viola Frey

### GRADE RANGES

K-12 & Post-secondary

### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Art

### OBJECTIVE

To introduce students to the life and work of ceramic artist Viola Frey, and to inspire students to think about the histories of figurative sculptural traditions and women in the arts.

### STORY SYNOPSIS

Over many decades, veteran ceramic artist Viola Frey created hundreds of colossal, larger-than-life figures, many of them brightly glazed in a rainbow of colors that have become the favorites of many collectors. SPARK visited Frey in the last months of her life when the artist was in her seventies, continuing to work from a wheelchair with the help of a mechanized lift and devoted assistants to create her monumental figures.

### INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

- To introduce students to the work of ceramic artist Viola Frey
- To raise student awareness about ceramics as a sculptural art form
- To illustrate the life-long accomplishments and contributions of an established woman artist
- To provide inspiration for the consideration of art and artists
- To provide inspiration for the study of women artists

### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

- Individual and group research
- Individual and group exercises
- Written research materials
- Group discussions

### EQUIPMENT NEEDED

- Video podcast of SPARK story “Larger than Life” about Viola Frey
- Computer with Internet access, navigation software, speakers and a sounds card, and color printer
- Audio recording and playback device (such as tape cassette player, CD player-burner, computer audio program, etc.)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers
- Pencils, pens, and paper
- Some form of soft, sculptural material, such as clay, Plasticine™, or Playdough™
- Basic tools to mould and create texture on sculptural materials (i.e. tongue depressors, pencils, string, pins, fabric, etc.)
- Paint (acrylic or tempera depending upon sculptural materials – check your product information for color recommendations)

### INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

- Bodily-Kinesthetic - control of one’s own body, control in handling objects
- Interpersonal - awareness of others’ feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
- Intrapersonal - awareness of one’s own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
- Spatial - ability to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems
- Logical-Mathematical - ability to detect patterns, reason deductively, think logically



See more information on [Multiple Intelligences at www.kqed.org/spark/education](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education).

## SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

### CONTENT OVERVIEW

From the mid-1950s to her recent passing in 2004, Viola Frey broke boundaries in ceramics, breaking the association of her medium with small-scale craft to a world of monumental sculpture. In the SPARK story “Larger than Life,” viewers watch Frey working in her studio on a series of colossal clay figures for a show in New York.



Viola Frey sculptures on view at the Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco. Still image from SPARK story, January 2004.

SPARK followed Frey in the months just before her death when, in her early seventies and physically impaired from a number of strokes, she relied greatly on her studio assistant of 17 years, Sam Perry to help her realize her seemingly ceaseless flow of ideas. Despite her physical limitations, Frey continued to be prolific until her death, going to her studio six days a week and often working on five or six massive sculptures simultaneously. Producing these figures was so important to Frey that it was her work in the studio that helped her recover from her physical setbacks, and kept her going.

Frey’s sculptures are at a scale nearly unprecedented in ceramics. Traditionally, ceramic artists produce small objects, either by hand-building or working on a potter’s wheel. But Frey’s figures are nothing short of monumental, many of them standing in excess of 10 feet tall and weighing thousands of pounds. To build her pieces, Frey first allowed the clay of the SPARK Educator Guide – Viola Frey

entire figure to dry. The figure was then sawed into pieces, each of which was individually glazed and fired in a kiln. Once fired, the 100 pound (or more) pieces were painted by Frey and then reassembled into the final sculpture. In contrast to their larger-than-life scale, many of the colossal figures that Frey produced were inspired by the artist’s collection of ceramic kitsch. She reused many of the forms of these much smaller objects in her work.

Frey was a longtime resident of the Bay Area, and her influence was (and will undoubtedly continue to be) felt on multiple levels. Frey showed her work regularly and had several public artworks, including one at San Francisco’s Moscone Convention Center. She was a member of the faculty of the California College of the Arts from the mid-1960s until her death, teaching ceramics to several generations of artists. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, Frey helped to redefine the place of her medium in the art world, along with fellow Bay Area ceramic artists Robert Arneson, Manuel Neri, Peter Volkous, and others. And, lastly, as a woman working in a field (sculpture) often dominated by men and accomplishing in her works a scale taken on by few, Frey distinguished herself as an exceptional artist.

### THE BIG PICTURE

In the 1960s and 70s, a group of Bay Area artists including Viola Frey, Robert Arneson, Peter Volkos, and Manuel Neri sought to establish ceramics as a valid and widely recognized fine art form. Prior to this movement, which came to be called the “Revolution in Clay,” the medium was considered to be limited to the category of crafts, not worthy of consideration as fine art. This was due to the fact that up until that time, the majority of people working in ceramics made smaller scale, utilitarian objects by either hand-building their pieces, or more often, through using a potter’s wheel.

Despite the fact that artist-made pottery of this kind boasted long traditions in the Far East – mostly in

Japan and China—until the 1960s ceramics was relegated to a secondary position in the Western hierarchy of art. The artists associated with the ceramics revolution used various means to overcome this prejudice. Frey, Arneson, and Neri all developed new techniques that permitted them to build works at life and, in the case of Frey, larger-than-life scale. Pushing the size of the work in this way, meant that all three of these exemplary artists also pushed the medium to its limits, discovering new techniques for construction, firing, glazing that forever changed the field. The imposing and sometimes unsettling quality of the work of these artists demanded that art world institutions take them seriously as figurative sculpture.



Sam Perry, Frey's studio assistant assembles a large figure. Still image from SPARK story, 2004.

And, it was not just scale that mattered. Peter Voulkos, for example, drew on the Japanese tradition of fine ceramics, transplanting and recasting this lineage in the US. Voulkos used forms characteristic of Japanese pottery, marrying them to an emotive aesthetic inspired by the spontaneous and energetic paintings of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem De Kooning and other American Abstract Expressionist artists in the 1940s and 50s. Due in large part to the efforts of these artists, ceramics now holds a place within the international fine arts world.

### RESOURCES – TEXTS

Chadwick, Whitney. Women, Art & Society. New York: Thames and Hudson, revised edition, 1997.

Garrels, Gary and Janet Bishop, eds. Robert Arneson: Self-Reflections. San Francisco: SFMOMA. 1997.

Kuspit, Donald. Viola Frey: Plates 1968-1994. New York: Nancy Hoffman Gallery, 1994.

Nash, Steven A. Arneson and Politics: A Commemorative Exhibition. San Francisco: The Museum. 1993.

Plagens, Peter. Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Slivka, Rose. Peter Voulkos: A Dialogue with Clay. New York: New York Graphic Society. 1978.

Slivka, Rose and Karen Tsujimoto. The Art of Peter Voulkos. New York: Kodansha International. 1995.

Viola Frey [Exhibition Catalogue]. San Francisco: Rena Bransten Gallery. 1998.

Viola Frey [Exhibition Catalogue]. San Francisco: Rena Bransten Gallery. 1994.

### RESOURCES – WEBSITES

Art Archives – An extensive interview with Viola Frey for the Archives of American Art. - <http://artarchives.si.edu/oralhist/frey95.htm>

Nancy Hoffman Gallery – A gallery that represents Frey, including images of her work and a detailed biography. - <http://www.nancyhoffmangallery.com/artists/frey.html>

Conversations.Org – An article on the work of Viola Frey. - [http://www.conversations.org/frey\\_1.htm](http://www.conversations.org/frey_1.htm)

Peter Voulkos – The Web site of a fellow West Coast innovative artist working in ceramics. - <http://www.voulkos.com/core.html>

### RESOURCES ON WOMEN ARTISTS

Bluffington College – An excellent survey women artists compiled by Professor Mary Ann Sullivan, corresponding to Whitney Chadwick's seminal book Women, Art & Society. - <http://www.bluffton.edu/womenartists/contents.html>

Berry, Michael and Matina S. Horner (Introduction), American Women of Achievement. Chelsea House Publishing (Reprint edition), 1989. – This 50 book series includes titled dedicated artists, such as Georgia O'Keefe.

Broude, Norma, and Mary D. Garrard, Feminism and

Art History: Questioning the Litany, Harper and Row, New York, 1982.

Callen, Anthea, Women Artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement, 1870-1914, Pantheon, N.Y., 1979.

Chadwick, Whitney, Women, Art & Society, Thames and Hudson, London, 1990

Chadwick, Whitney, Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, Thames and Hudson, London, 1985.

Danneberg, Julie. Women Artists of the West: Five Portraits in Creativity and Courage. Fulcrum Publications, 2002.

Epstein, Vivian Sheldon. History of Women Artists for Children. 1987.

Harris, Anne Sutherland and Linda Nochlin, Women Artists: 1550-1950, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Knopf, New York, 1976.

National Museum of Women in the Arts, The – Web site for a national museum dedicated to women artists, including a library, educational materials, and links. - [http://www.nmwa.org/resources/edu\\_slides\\_high\\_school\\_packets.asp](http://www.nmwa.org/resources/edu_slides_high_school_packets.asp)

Nochlin, Linda, Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays, Harper & Row, New York, 1988.

Pollock, Griselda, Vision & Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and the Histories of Art, Routledge, London, 1988.

Rubinstein, Charlotte Streifer. American Women Sculptors : A History of Women Working in Three Dimensions. G K Hall, 1990.

Stux, Erica and Vernon M. Neppe. Eight Who Made a Difference: Pioneer Women in the Arts. Avisson Press Inc, 1999.

Turner, Robyn Montana. Rosa Bonheur (Portraits of Women Artists for Children Series). Little Brown & Co., 1991. – One of a series of books about women artist, including Mary Cassatt, Georgia O'Keefe and Frida Khalo.

Varo Registry, The – An electronic registry of artwork by contemporary international women artists. - <http://www.varoregistry.com>

## **BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS**

GALLERIES & MUSEUMS EXHIBITING  
FIGURATIVE AND/OR CERAMIC ART

Asian Art Museum

200 Larkin Street – Civic Center

San Francisco

415/5581.3500

<http://www.asianart.org>

Rena Bransten Gallery

77 Geary Street (btw Kearny & Grant Streets)

San Francisco, CA 94108

415/982.3292

<http://www.renabranstengallery.com>

Braunstein/Quay Gallery

430 Clementina St.,

San Francisco, CA

415.278.9850

<http://www.bquayartgallery.com>

deYoung Museum

Golden Gate Park

San Francisco

415.750.3600

<http://www.thinker.org/deyoung/index.asp>

Oakland Museum

1000 Oak Street

Oakland

510.238.3401

<http://www.museumca.org>

The Berkeley Potter's Guild

731 Jones St. (at 4th St.)

Berkeley

510.524.7031

<http://www.berkeleypotters.com/home01.html>

San Francisco Craft & Folk Art Museum

Landmark Building A, Fort Mason Center

San Francisco

415.775.0990

<http://www.mocfa.org>

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMoMA)  
151 Third Street  
San Francisco  
415.357.4000  
<http://www.sfmoma.org>

San Jose Museum of Art  
110 South Market Street  
San Jose  
408.294.2787  
<http://www.sjmusart.org>

Susan Cummins Gallery  
12 Miller Avenue  
Mill Valley  
415/383.1512  
TRAX Gallery  
1306 3rd St. (1/2 block south of Gilman St.)  
Berkeley  
510.526.0279  
<http://www.traxgallery.com>

UC Berkeley  
Worth Ryder Gallery  
Kroeber Hall, 1st Floor  
UC Berkeley  
510.642.2582  
<http://art.berkeley.edu/gallery>

University Art Museum, Berkeley  
2626 Bancroft Way  
Berkeley  
510/642.0808  
<http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu>

Virginia Breier Gallery  
3091 Sacramento St.  
San Francisco  
415.929.7173  
<http://www.vbreier.com>

## SECTION III – VOCABULARY

Also refer to the Visual Arts Vocabulary on the Spark Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.

### **Bricoleur**

A French term for a kind of handyman that collects refuse to be recombined in future jobs

### **Ceramic**

The art of making things of baked clay, like pottery and tiles

### **Chauvinistic**

Prejudiced belief in the superiority of one's own gender, group, or kind

### **Glaze**

A coating of colored, opaque, or transparent material applied to ceramics before firing

### **Hand-building**

An additive technique of forming clay by hand, without the use of a potter's wheel

### **Icon**

An important and enduring symbol

### **Kiln**

A Brick-lined oven used to bake or fire ceramics

### **Kitsch**

Something that appeals to the masses' taste and is often of poor quality; excessive sentimentality, especially in the arts

### **Prolific**

Producing abundant works or results

### **Scale**

A proportion used in determining the dimensional relationship of a representation to that which it represents

### **Solace**

Comfort in sorrow, misfortune, or distress; consolation

## SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

### STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES & DISCUSSION POINTS

#### Looking at & Responding to Sculpture

Ask students to watch the Viola Frey story closely. Pause the video on some of the sculptures as they are shown. Invite students to examine a singular piece or group of pieces and, working in small groups, discuss the following:

What comes to mind when looking at the sculptures, such as associations with objects, people, etc.?

Study a particular work or group of works and think about the initial impact. Look at size, scale, surface texture, patterns, composition, color, etc. What is the first impression that it/they makes?

Look closely at a particular work and examine it in detail. Describe exactly what you see – can you identify narrative details, characteristics of the natural world, facial or body features, exaggerated features, realistic color, non-realistic color, abstract elements? How do the elements contribute to the overall effect of the sculpture?

What feelings, moods, or atmospheres do the sculptures evoke? Discuss how the different visual characteristics and elements express different attitudes, moods, and/or emotions.

Consider the relationship between sculptures and viewers. What is different about the scale relationship in Frey's work compared to others? How does size make the sculptures unique? What does size have to do with their presence?

Invite students to share their responses with the entire group. Finally ask students to write 500 words about one or more of the sculptures using the questions above.

#### The Figure

Invite students to consider the traditions of classical figuration and perspective and compare it to the

approach of artists who do not employ such systems of seeing/creating. Largely in the West (Europe, Britain and the US) the technique of correct perspective and classical figuration deeply influences how we look at imagery and expect spaces, objects, and people to appear. Introduce students to artworks by artists who employ these systems and discuss how perspective and figuration determine representation. Consider main ideas like proportion, shape, and anatomical accuracy. Then show examples of other artists have solved creative problems, not using the systems of perspective and classical figuration.

Challenge students to make comparisons between the approaches, asking:

- *How does Viola Frey create figurative sculptures?*
- *How would you describe Viola Frey's use of perspective and human proportion?*
- *Does her work challenge your understanding of traditional figurative imagery? If so, how?*
- *How does Viola Frey use color and texture to communicate about the figure?*
- *How is Viola Frey's approach to the figure and to ceramics different from other artists?*

For more experienced students, embark upon a group activity looking at the tradition of figurative imagery, including Western and non-Western art forms and cultures. For instance, using images from books and the Internet, ask students to make comparisons between the sculptures of the Renaissance and the sculptures of Nigeria or Japan. How does each culture approach the figure? What characteristics do the artists include? How are they visually presented? What do they look like? What attitudes, beliefs, or traditions do they represent? Consider scale (the relationship of sculpture to viewer), color, proportion (the relative size of parts of the sculpture of other parts), characteristics (size, shape, color of eyes, legs, hands, etc.), and decoration. What differences exist between the

Western and non-Western approach? Consider what relationship cultural attitudes have to representation?

### **The Figure in Art in History**

As an art historical project, consider the development of figurative sculpture in Western art. Challenge students to create a timeline beginning with Ancient civilizations. Identify the image of the body in the first cave paintings of Lascaux, France, articulating what these images demonstrated in terms of knowledge of image-making and knowledge of the body. Important points on the timeline would include images from the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Classical, Neo-Classical, Modern, and Contemporary artists. Using books and the Internet to conduct research, invite students to identify 20-30 important images of the body. Then, challenge students to discoveries made at the same time that gave people new understanding of the body, of imagery, and/or of artistic endeavor, such as the first post-mortem examination, X-ray technology, the system of perspective, MRI technology, particular religious beliefs about the body, etc. Create the timeline using text and images, assembling a visual representation of the body in Western culture.

The same activity can then be done with a non-Western culture, such as Oceanic, Japanese, Chinese, Indian. When completed the projects can be presented alongside on another and students can then write short comparative essays. The same activity can also be undertaken paying attention to the differences between how male and female artists have depicted the human body over time.

### **Art vs. Craft**

In the narration in the SPARK story Frey refers to her work simply as fine art or art rather than as ceramics. Initiate a conversation with students about ceramics. Ask students to name different types of ceramics (such as utilitarian forms (pots, bowls, etc.) commemorative works, abstractions, figures, landscapes, etc.), writing a list on the board. Brainstorm specific examples of sculptors known by the group to illustrate each type. For each sculptor named, ask students about the work they have seen and where they saw it. Have they seen examples recently and are there good examples of each type in galleries or public locations they know of in the Bay Area? Encourage students to visit the galleries and look for examples of each category listed.

## **RELATED STANDARDS**

### **VISUAL ARTS**

#### **Grade 7**

##### **1.0 Artistic Perception**

1.1 Describe the environment and selected works of art, using the elements of art and the principles of design.

1.2 Identify and describe scale (proportion) as applied to two-dimensional and three-dimensional works of art.

##### **4.0 Aesthetic Valuing**

4.3 Take an active part in a small-group discussion about the artistic value of specific works of art, with a wide range of the viewpoints of peers being considered

#### **Grade 8**

##### **1.0 Artistic Perception**

1.1 Use artistic terms when describing the intent and content of works of art.

1.2 Analyze and justify how their artistic choices contribute to the expressive quality of their own works of art.

1.3 Analyze the use of the elements of art and the principles of design as they relate to meaning in video, film, or electronic media.

##### **3.0 Historical & Cultural Context**

3.3 Identify major works of art created by women and describe the impact of those works on society at that time.

##### **4.0 Aesthetic Valuing**

4.1 Define own points of view and investigate the effects on their interpretation of art from cultures other than their own.

4.2 Develop a theory about the artist's intent in a series of works of art, using reasoned statements to support personal opinions.

4.3 Construct an interpretation of a work of art based on the form and content of the work.

4.4 Develop and apply a set of criteria as individuals or in groups to assess and critique works of art.

4.5 Present a reasoned argument about the artistic value of a work of art and respond to the arguments put forward by others within a classroom setting.

### **Women Artists**

Until the mid-1960s women artists were largely excluded from the canon of art history, rarely acknowledged for their contribution to artistic work and progress. A number of texts published from the 1960s through to the present day address the reasons for this exclusion. Ask students to name as many artists as they can, both male and female. Afterwards, tally the number of male artists and compare this to the number of female artists. Before conducting any research, talk as a group about some of the reasons for this difference. Talk about issues such as women's rights, gender equality, right to vote, religion, etc. that have affected the art historical canon. Then, assign students different readings from

the women in art text resources listed in this Educator Guide and ask them to write short, 500-word essays on different women artists, noting when they were first exhibited/known about, their artistic activity, and their present status.

### SPARKLERS:

\* In the SPARK story, gallery owner Rena Bransten acknowledges that Viola Frey's work rides a line between kitsch or figurines (objects that are overly sentimental or vulgar) and high art. As a group talk about the differences between high and low art. Ask students to create a list of objects that they consider "art" and another list of what they consider kitsch or "low art." Once the lists are completed, review the items on each list and develop a definition for each side.

\* Viola Frey has suffered a number of strokes that have limited her mobility. In the face of this, Frey works 5 hours a day, 6 days a week, producing numerous sculptures each month and actively showing her new works. Talk about how Frey faces her limitations and exceeds them. Talk about how colleagues describe her dedication. Name other examples in which people have exceeded physical limitations and achieved their goals. What does this require? How is Frey still able to work in the studio? Ask students to name an activity they love to do and then identify a limitation or challenge. How would they resolve these in order to keep doing it?

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.

Find more KQED & PBS arts educational programs and view our community gallery of student artwork at <http://www.KOED.org/ArtsEd>



### RELATED STANDARDS

#### VISUAL ARTS

Grade 9-12 – Proficient

- 1.0 Artistic Perception
- 1.3 Research and analyze the work of an artist and write about the artist's distinctive style and its contribution to the meaning of the work.
- 1.5 Analyze the material used by a given artist and describe how its use influences the meaning of the work.
- 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing
- 4.1 Articulate how personal beliefs, cultural traditions, and current social, economic, and political contexts influence the interpretation of the meaning or message in a work of art.

Grades 9-12 – Advanced

- 1.0 Artistic Perception
- 1.6 Describe the use of the elements of art to express mood in one or more of their works of art.
- 2.0 Creative Production
- 2.4 Demonstrate in their own works of art a personal style and an advanced proficiency in communicating an idea, theme, or emotion.
- 2.5 Use innovative visual metaphors in creating works of art.
- 3.0 Historical & Cultural Contexts
- 3.2 Identify contemporary artists worldwide who have achieved regional, national, or international recognition and discuss ways in which their work reflects, plays a role in, and influences present-day culture.

### RELATED STANDARDS

#### SOCIAL STUDIES

Grade 6

World History & Geography: Ancient Civilizations

- 6.4 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures of the early civilizations of Ancient Greece.
8. Describe the enduring contributions of important Greek figures in the arts and sciences (e.g., Hypatia, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Thucydides).
- 6.7 Students analyze the geographic, political, economic, religious, and social structures during the development of Rome.
8. Discuss the legacies of Roman art and architecture, technology and science, literature, language, and law.

Grade 11

United States History and Geography: Continuity and Change in the Twentieth Century

- 11.8 Students analyze the economic boom and social transformation of post-World War II America.
8. Discuss forms of popular culture, with emphasis on their origins and geographic diffusion (e.g., jazz and other forms of popular music, professional sports, architectural, and artistic styles).
- 11.10 Students analyze the development of federal civil rights and voting rights.
7. Analyze the women's rights movement from the era of Elizabeth Stanton and Susan Anthony and the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the movement launched in the 1960s, including differing perspectives on the roles of women.