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Oral history interview with Michael and Magdalena Suarez Frimkess

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Michael and Magdalena Suarez Frimkess
Identifier:	AAA.frimke01
Date:	2001 March 8-April 17
Creator:	Frimkess, Michael, 1937- (Interviewee) Frimkess, Magdalena Suarez (Interviewee) Karlstrom, Paul J. (Interviewer)
Extent:	83 Pages (Transcript)
Language:	English .
Digital Content:	Digital Content: Oral history interview with Michael and Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, 2001 March 8-April 17, Transcript Audio: Oral history interview with Michael and Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, 2001 March 8-April 17, Digital Sound Recording (Excerpt)

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

Biographical / Historical

Michael Frimkess (1937-) is a ceramist from Venice, California. Magdalena Frimkess is a ceramist from Venice, California. Paul J. Karlstrom is the director of the West Coast Resource Center, Archives of American Art, San Marino, California. Michael Frimkess was a leading innovator of the California fine art clay movement that grew up around Peter Voulkos and his "pot shop" at the Otis Art Institute. An element that distinguished the vessels that made Michael Frimkess's reputation was the surface decoration based on popular culture and a Pop Art sensibility. This signature style, consisting of small figures mimicking classical or pre-Columbian friezes, was further developed by Frimkess's wife Magdalena (Suarez Frimkess) who eventually, as Michael's multiple sclerosis progressed, did most of the painting of the vessels.

Biographical / Historical

Magdalena was born in Venezuela and was sent to an orphanage at age 7, when her mother died and her father was unable to support her. Later she moved to Chile where her two children were born. When she was offered a fellowship to the Clay Art Center in New York her companion told her she would have to choose between that and him and the children. She reluctantly chose art, but kept up with her offspring

who eventually moved to California. Her sculpture career was to a large extent subsumed after she met and married Michael Frimkess.

Scope and Contents

An interview of Michael Frimkess and his wife, Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, conducted 2001 March 3-April 17, by Paul Karlstrom, for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, in the Frimkesses' studio/home, Venice, California.

Scope and Contents

Frimkess speaks of his early life in East Los Angeles, growing up in a multi-ethnic neighborhood, and later moving with his family to Hollywood; his interest in modeling figures beginning at age 3; studying with Peter Voulkos at Otis Art Institute beginning in 1955; his animation for United Productions of America, where he worked on Mr. Magoo as an "in-between"; his drug use; playing the saxophone and his goal to "blow" like Charlie Parker; Voulkos's "pot shop" at Otis; following Voulkos to the University of California at Berkeley to learn bronze casting; and Vouklos's teaching methods. Frimkess also discusses his interest in classical Greek and Chinese proportions and simplicity of design in his ceramics; how playing music has helped him to be more ambidextrous and develop dry throwing; Clara Rosen as a mentor; his spiritual connection to other dimensions when throwing; his isolation from the craft community because of his multiple sclerosis and the controversy over his technique; the article he wrote "The Importance of Being Classical" (Craft Horizons, March/April 1966) and its impact on his career; Super Mud and other conferences; using his ceramics to express his political ideas about America as a melting pot; his imagery; plans for his upcoming exhibition in Korea; and his lack of production over the past 20 years. Michael Frimkess recalls Paul Soldner, Michael Cardew, Ken Price, Garth Clark, James Melchert, Ron Nagel, Richard Shaw, and others. There is also a discussion with his wife Magdalena including such topics as her childhood in an orphanage in Caracas, Venezuela, where she began painting; her studies in Chile with artists Sewell Semen, Norman Calber, and Paul Harris; her scholarship to the Clay Art Center in Port Chester, N.Y., in 1963; meeting Michael at the Clay Art Center and their relationship; their financial difficulties; setting up joint studio in which he threw pots and she glazed them; Michael's lack of participation in the craft community; and the state of his health.

Scope and Contents

Magdalena Frimkess also provided another informed perspective on the events described by her husband.

General

Originally recorded on 6 sound cassettes. Reformatted in 2010 as 12 digital wav files. Duration is 6 hr., 2 min.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Art -- Study and teaching -- Chile
Ceramicists -- California -- Interviews
Decorative arts

Potters -- California -- Interviews
Pottery -- Study and teaching -- United States.

Types of Materials:

Interviews
Sound recordings

Names:

Clay Art Center -- Students
Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
Otis Art Institute -- Faculty
Otis Art Institute -- Students
Rosen, Clara
University of California, Berkeley. Department of Art -- Students.
Voukos, Peter, 1924-2002