

Magdalena Suarez Frimkess: The Finest Disregard

This supplement is produced in conjunction with the publication for the exhibition *Magdalena Suarez Frimkess: The Finest Disregard* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, August 18, 2024–January 5, 2025. It contains gallery photography, interpretive content, press clippings, and additional materials about the exhibition's installation that were unavailable at the time the catalogue went to press in March 2024.

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Exhibition Introduction

Over a seven-decade career, Magdalena Suarez Frimkess (Venezuela, b. 1929) has produced a large body of work that includes utilitarian objects, figurines, and tiles, as well as drawings, paintings, and even fashion. Variouslly described by admirers as hilarious, melancholy, macabre, lovable, deeply strange, contrarian, even sinister, the ceramic objects of Suarez Frimkess evoke equal parts humor and unease. Their fragility and precarious balance at once augment their expressive power and suggest imminent collapse. Born to a working-class family in Maturín, Venezuela, Suarez Frimkess trained in painting, printmaking, and sculpture in Caracas; Santiago, Chile; and New York, before settling in the bohemian enclave of Venice, California, in the early 1970s.

Magdalena Suarez Frimkess: The Finest Disregard challenges the notion of her work as the product of a self-taught or naive artist, foregrounding her complex relationship with craft and technique in handmade ceramics, drawings, and paintings, as well as in collaborative works made with her husband, ceramist Michael Frimkess (United States, b. 1937). Aspirations to craft excellence have never been a primary concern in her practice. In an article published in *Art in America* in 1952, Paul Harris remarked: “The work of Magdalena Suarez—the most daring sculptor working in Chile—is distinguished by the finest disregard for whatever is supposed to be so.” More than fifty years later, that assertion is helpful in understanding Suarez Frimkess’s relation to technique, particularly when it comes to her ceramic work produced in the United States, where she had to redirect the scale and ambition of her projects.

The artist draws from an eclectic repertoire of motifs to model and decorate her pieces, mining pop imagery and her library of art history books, catalogues, and magazines. In her studio, one encounters figurines inspired by Japanese horses or vintage cartoons; vases ornamented with motifs from the Ancient Americas, Latin American poetry, or portraits of her personal pantheon of heroes such as Celia Cruz and Angela Davis; and utilitarian vessels decorated with flower patterns or scenes from her daily life. Anything she comes across in her day’s activities may be transposed into subject matter. At the age of ninety-five, Suarez Frimkess continues to command her own narrative.

José Luis Blondet
Exhibition Curator

Installation Images





Exhibition Design

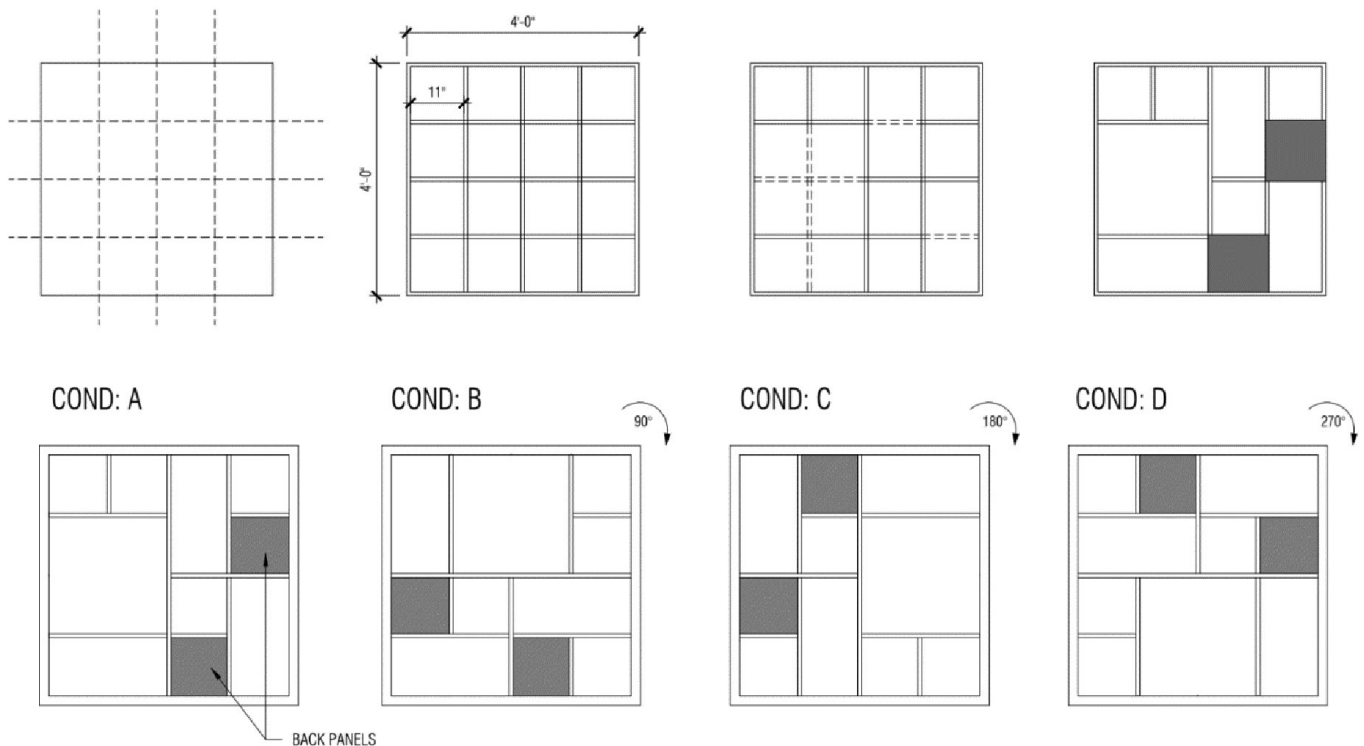
Given the variety of the objects both in scale and type, the idea was to create a system that could accommodate and valorize objects of all kinds. To do so, we created a modular shelving unit whose flexibility offers several display options. Starting with a four-foot by four-foot grid system, we reworked the basic schema to create many different sizes of cubbies. Back panels were added to allow a vertical display for objects such as tiles and plates.

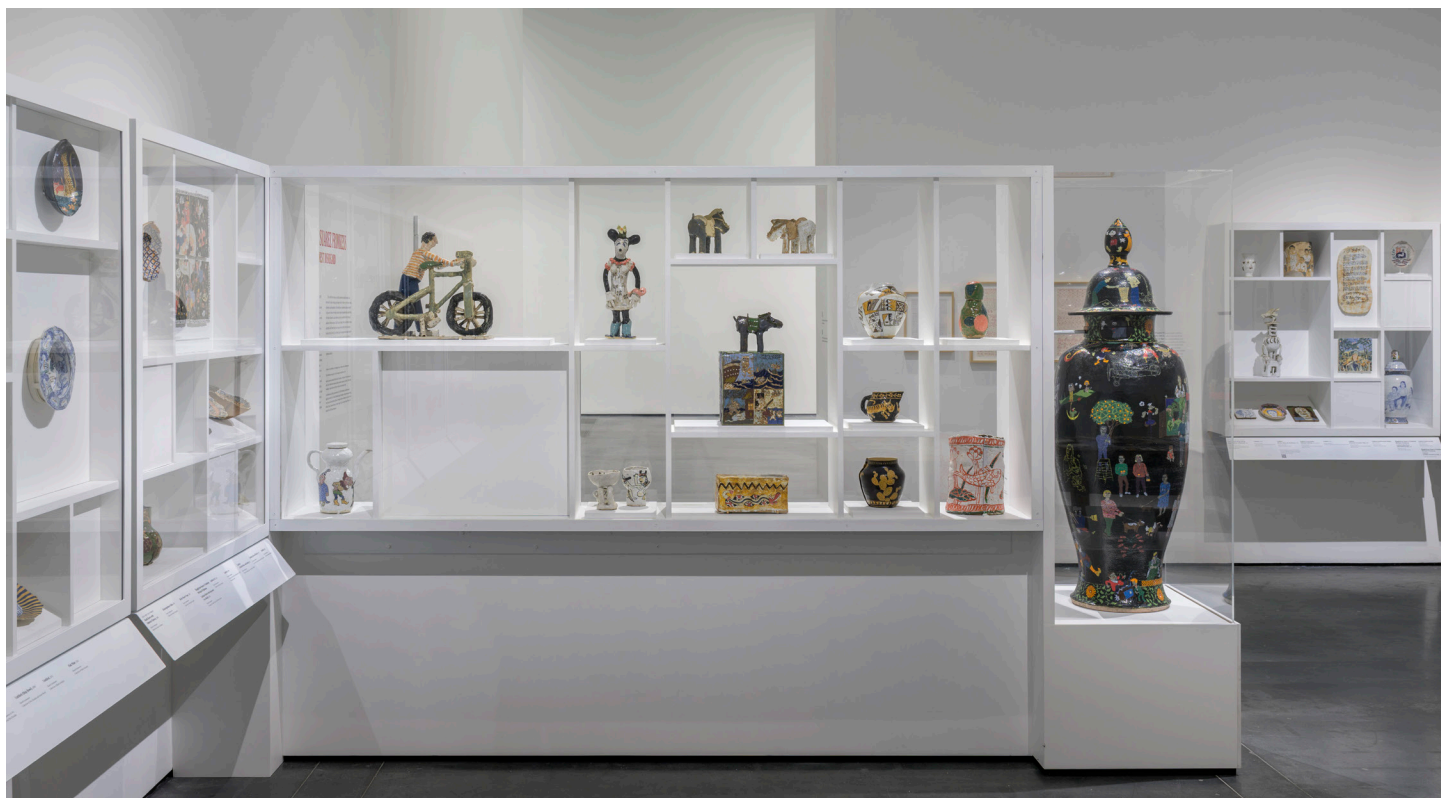
To increase its flexibility, the module could be rotated ninety degrees, allowing four display options. We played with the orientation of the cabinets to avoid visual repetition and create a more dynamic display along the walls.

When entering the space, the visitor is greeted by an entry cabinet that loosely follows the design of the shelving system and gives a preview of the content of the show. The cabinet's glazed back allows the visitor to get a first glimpse of the central space where the large-scale artworks are placed, while also stimulating curiosity to further explore the space. Both the layout of the gallery space and the casework design ultimately create an intimate space that speaks to the scale of the objects displayed.

Noemi Dolci

National Science Foundation Exhibition Design Fellow





Filming *Her Finest Disregard*

On a Saturday morning in March of 2024, I walked into Magdalena's pink home with my cinematographer Erick Turcios, and sound person Daniel Bonilla—each of us originating from a Latin American country. It immediately thrilled Magdalena that we all spoke Spanish. I think it helped her feel comfortable, and for the rest of the production she made us smile and hold back our laughter with her candid remarks and sassy quips.

Aside from a cordless landline phone, Magdalena's home is unmediated by modern technology. To her pride, she owns neither a cell phone nor a computer. Her world is predominantly analog and natural. I wanted the music to reflect this reality, and therefore worked with a young composer, Mia Garcia, who produced a beautiful Venezuelan-inspired score using traditional instruments. She and her collaborators even produced a cover of Magdalena's favorite song, "Sombra en los Médanos," a Venezuelan folk song written during the years when she was a child.

Fernando Sanchez

Media Producer, Web and Digital Media

Her Finest Disregard is a slice-of-life film capturing Magdalena Suarez Frimkess in conversation with curator, José Luis Blondet, and can be viewed at: <https://vimeo.com/947063686>



Top left, top right, and bottom right: Film stills from *Her Finest Regard*; bottom left: Magdalena Suarez Frimkess and Fernando Sanchez during the filming of *Her Finest Regard*

On Seeing the Exhibition

It was a surprise. I admired the display they did—José Luis [Blondet] and the crew created an excellent display. The whole thing was done perfectly. I was surprised because I didn't expect to see all of the works [that were exhibited]. The collectors took care of my work for many years. It made me proud of myself. The people who worked on the show deserve a lot of attention. There was a lot of work I had forgotten about—I was shocked that it was mine. It helped me appreciate myself more, and to see that I hadn't wasted my time. I'd made all of the work for fun, without expecting anything.

Magdalena Suarez Frimkess

Venice, California, October 2024



Selected Press Clippings

LA gallerist Louis Stern . . . says that Suarez Frimkess renders this imagery as the ancient Greeks did their own tales of monsters on vessels. “In 500 years, it could be viewed as Western mythology of the 20th century,” he says. “They are all the icons we grew up with.”

— “Magdalena Suarez Frimkess Gets Her First Museum Survey,”
ARTnews, September 25, 2024

<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/magdalena-suarez-frimkess-artist-who-is-why-important-1234718205/>

For decades, this force of nature has made a daily ritual of manipulating earth, water and fire to create perfectly imperfect stoneware dishes, bowls, teacups and vases as well as animal and cartoon character figurines. Using her own made-from-memory glazes and stains, she painstakingly renders an idiosyncratic visual language: flowers, Aztec pictograms, Japanese patterns, classic Popeye and Felix the Cat and Mickey Mouse comics, even one of her recent CVS prescription labels. Her deft brushwork, dazzling sense of color and unpretentious approach transform her humble, charming ceramics into artworks that captivate the eye and engage the heart and mind. . . . “This is a show you have to see in person,” [sculptor Ricky] Swallow insists. “You don’t want to be the fool who said you saw it on Instagram.”

— “At 95, Magdalena Suarez Frimkess Gets Her First Major Museum Retrospective. ‘The Work Keeps Me Alive,’”
Los Angeles Times, August 20, 2024

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2024-08-20/magdalena-suarez-frimkess-interview>

Considering her medium and subject matter, Suarez Frimkess sits art-historically somewhere between Grayson Perry and Andy Warhol. Sometimes her compositions are whimsical and nostalgic, other times they are unsettling and a little sinister. But such classifications feel wholly inappropriate to this unique body of work. Suarez Frimkess herself calls her aesthetic “serious and funny at the same time.”

— “Why This Mischievous 95-year-old Is Messing with Mickey Mouse,”
CNN Style, September 26, 2024

<https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/26/style/magdalena-suarez-frimkess-lacma/index.html>

Some viewers might sense antagonism in Suarez Frimkess’s dissonant collaborations with her husband, the jarring syncretism of her dual national identity and her droll view of American pop culture. . . . But at its heart is something that looks, to me, like love. Simultaneously precious and cheeky, the work is ignited by the sparks of her partnership.

— “The Love in Magdalena Suarez Frimkess’s Ceramics,”
Frieze, August 29, 2024

<https://www.frieze.com/article/magdalena-suarez-frimkess-the-finest-disregard-2024-review>

Image Credits

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1: Cover of *Magdalena Suarez Frimkess: The Finest Disregard* exhibition catalogue, showing *XXL Minnie Mouse*, 2009, collection of Karin Gulbran

