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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Viola Frey, 1995
Feb. 27-June 19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Viola Frey on February 27, May 15 & June 19, 1995. The interview took place in oakland, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

Session 1, Tape 1, Side A (30-minute tape sides)

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Viola Frey at her studio in Oakland, California, February 27, 1995. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom and this is what we hope will be the first in a series of conversations. It's 1:35 in the afternoon.

Well, Viola, this is an interview that has waited, I think, about two or three years to happen. When I first visited you way back then I thought, "We really have to do an interview." And it just took me a while to get around to it. But at any rate what I would like to do is take a kind of journey back in time, back to the beginning, and see if we can't get some insight into, of course, who you are, but then where these wonderful works of art come from, perhaps what they mean. So, you were born in. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Lodi. Lodi, California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Lodi, California, in 1933, I believe, and what about your family background?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I was born on a grape ranch. My mother and my father were born in North and South Dakota, and basically they come from the same branch of Huguenots that fled France, went into Germany, and then into Russia. And from Russia they came to the Midwest. Basically, you know, started out with sod houses and up from there, and turn of the century, in the 1920s, they came to California just once, and most of them never went back again, you know, and they would lease out or rent out their homestead.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's like a migration, almost. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . of Freys.

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that is the family name?

VIOLA FREY: Well, my mother's name was Mettler, M-e-t-t-l-e-r. And the other is Frey, F-r-e-y, which is a name that I see in France a lot, and being a Huguenot, I think, is part of the background. Because they were the ones who were the weavers, the metalsmiths, the potters, the engineers, all of that. You know, Bernard. . . .

[Interruption in taping]

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. And when I was in France I saw many exhibits about Catherine de Medici and that first terrorizing of all of the Protestants. And Bernard [Palisse], who was a big. . . . You know, the guy that burned his living room furniture to fire his kilns, he was a Huguenot. But still he was used by Catherine de Medici to make all of the embossed silver for the court. But then I later saw Bernard Palisse standing in bronze in front of the [Sed] Museum in France, so. . . . But. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But, of course, you as a child didn't make that connection. This is something that you. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, there's no way that I ever could make this step without yesterday's step. And so that's the background. They all ended up in Lodi, the same city. My mother was basically about seven years older than my father. He grew up in the twenties when everything was optimistic. You know, he wore white linen suits, had a sports car, went to see Tom Mix. . . . I mean, the whole California dream. Every. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tom Mix?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, the whole bunch.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, the cowboy [movie hero-Ed]. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, they all went to racetracks and all of that. And then came the Depression. Which was, obviously, very depressing. And so you always have small town politics. I mean, that's where I grew up. And no matter where you are there are always going to be conflicts. I mean, that's when I noticed. . . . I had two grandmothers. One grandmother [_____-Ed.], whom I barely can remember, spent her time with friends quilting. I mean, that's all I remember about her. The other grandmother [_____-Ed.] had much more power, and she spent her time being in charge of things. And basically the other thing I remember about my grandmother is that. . . . It was a huge yard and there were two palm trees, two rose trees, two pomegranate trees, two . . . and, I think, redwood. In other words, the California dream was that you had to have a curved driveway with palm tree, redwood tree, and rose trees, all of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And, no doubt, orange trees.

VIOLA FREY: There might have been. Yes, especially if you were in Southern California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

VIOLA FREY: I don't remember the orange tree. And so that was my early lesson in the exercising of power.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mentioned that one grandmother was somehow representative to you of a more powerful presence.

VIOLA FREY: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was that your maternal or paternal?

VIOLA FREY: Paternal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your dad's. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, my dad's mother.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why was that? Why did she strike you that way?

VIOLA FREY: Well, because she was in charge of this, you know. . . . I thought it was a huge house, huge front yard [chuckles], horses and cows on one side and big vineyard and all of that. And she had a husband who didn't do any of the book-working stuff. In other words, she was in charge of all of the books. Very important early lesson. [laughs] Whereas the other grandmother lived in town, her husband was in charge-or my maternal grandmother was in charge. [from the context probably meant to say "maternal grandfather was in charge"?-Trans.]. And all I remember about her is that she made quilts. But that wasn't enough.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that was something that interested you, nonetheless, the making of a creation of _____.

VIOLA FREY: Well, it interested me, yeah. But it interested me much more to see the exercise of power. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you've been quoted as making this observation in other things that have been quoted about you, so obviously this is a theme, or an issue, very early on. When you were a child it arose.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And did it in a sense establish at a fairly early period a goal for you? Did this help form any personal goals? How you wanted to conduct your life? Where you wanted to make _____?

VIOLA FREY: I think so. I knew that I wanted to make a mark. And I knew that when I was in New York City-I worked at MOMA [Museum of Modern Art-Ed.] and lived out at the Clay Art Center in Port Chester; this was in the late fifties-that in New York I had to survive in order to be an artist. And when I came back out to California I realized that I had to be an artist in order to survive. So New York was very important for me. I mean, it did, you know, complete its magic in terms of having come to that decision, and so. . . .

[Interruption in taping]

VIOLA FREY: . . . [father]. And all ranchers are basically gamblers. You can't imagine going, you know, year after year and . . . it's a roll of the dice. You never know. I mean, the weather, bugs-anything can make the crop fail.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What were they? The crops, the family crops?

VIOLA FREY: Just the grapes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Table grapes? Or was that [moving into]. . . .

VIOLA FREY: It was an old vineyard. It was a [zinfandel] vineyard. Was one of the . . . maybe even the first zinfandel vineyard planted. It had very narrow rows, and so my father had to have made a narrow sulfur machine. It was so narrow it had a tendency to tip over when it turned. [laughing] Because it was made for horses to go through the rows, and I mean, now they're planted differently on vines and trellises and everything but. . . .

And then certainly the other example would have been my father. And I can remember having this discussion with my brothers where we decided that we would not clean up our father's piles of accumulation of stuff. That had been done to my grandfather. My uncles had gotten in there and just taken stuff to the dump. Victrolas and. . . . Wonderful stuff, in our minds at least. And even old farm machinery, everything that my grandfather had, cleaning up the yard and then my father had these shacks filled with stuff. He had almost five hundred radios and TV sets. These were. . . . Stupid, you know, I mean. . . . And he'd fiddle with them, get some of them to work, and. . . . You know, nothing cost that much then, certainly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He just collected these things? Accumulated these devices?

VIOLA FREY: It was he found them all interesting, yes. So he was a collector. And farm implements. And real live tractors. When he died some of the tractors went to a tractor museum. Can you imagine that? A tractor museum! [laughs] And I knew very early that my father was interested in that thing that so preoccupied us in the sixties, this conflict between nature and man. Or the industrial versus nature. What do they call it? The. . . . Hmm, I'll remember the name. They had a name for it. And he would watch who would win-whether the tree would win or the piece of rusty, [italic, metallic] tool or machine would win. One of the trucks was parked out there. Trees had grown up around it. The tires were still inflated. And it was like a [_____-Ed.] Magritte thing. I mean, there's no way you could have gotten the truck in, you know, with the trees around it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's amazing!

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. And over a period of years he would put in all different kinds of grapes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This period we're talking about then is probably, would you say, from the late. . . . You were born there in Lodi, of course, and they had come in the twenties.

VIOLA FREY: Yes. This would have been in the. . . . I mean, when did they come to Lodi?

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the twenties, I think [you said-Ed.].

VIOLA FREY: The teens, maybe. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the teens? So this activity of your father's presumably is ____ ____.

VIOLA FREY: Came from the crystal sets and all of that that they had played around with. So by the time I was there in like, I guess, the forties, the fifties. In the forties he would go and pay a lot of money to have those vacuum tubes repaired for radios because he wanted them all working. But in terms of how he treated farm machinery and nature it was very interesting. He wouldn't disturb either one, and I just thought it was funk. You know, some people believe that's the basis for funk, the dialogue between those two aspects. And so things got just more and more overgrown. You know, nature and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was no doubt then, well, perhaps up to the mid-fifties, because isn't it true that in the later fifties, then, you left?

VIOLA FREY: I was gone.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were gone.

VIOLA FREY: I left then. And basically never came back. [laughs] I graduated in '55. This would have been in the early fifties.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. [pause] Would this in some way constitute a kind of family-or at least on the part of your father-an aesthetic that you were able to observe?

VIOLA FREY: Well, there were no museums in Lodi. There was one in Stockton. I didn't see that until I went to high school. So it didn't come from museums. It didn't come from art books. I did look at art books, though, because living out in the country we could get forty books at a time from the local Carnegie library and that was very important, to be able to go to the library. And I soon got into the adult section. [laughs] Not the little kiddies' books. And basically went through it alphabetically. You know, A to E; never got to XYZ. But, you know, read all of Dickens, read all of that stuff, just. . . . You know, so the reading, the books were important.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was this encouraged by your family? Or was this something you discovered on your own?

VIOLA FREY: Well, my mother would go in and. . . Well, I'd go in with my bike later. But in the beginning basically my mother would drive me in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I guess what I'm asking after is. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Encouraged. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . the sort of cultural or intellectual environment of your family. It was a rural family but nonetheless some interest in literature, I guess.

VIOLA FREY: I would say that they were open. So whatever they lacked in education they made it up in openness, you know. And so I remember early on doing watercolors. And in the beginning my older brother and myself were sort of equal but I soon surpassed him. You know, because we would run to the parent and they'd have to be the judge. "That's very nice. Go and do some more."

And that brings to mind, you know, [Lewis-Ed.] Mumford's, in Art and Industry, where he talks about the three stages for an artist. Stage one is when you run for approval and you get patted on the head and say "That's wonderful, you know. Do more." And the second stage is when you look around you-and for me that second stage would have been when I . . . I was like eleven years old, and I entered this drawing show at the Sacramento Library and I copied a Matisse drawing, and it got in! [laughs] And then I realized, you know. . . . I loved Matisse anyway at that age. I figured that wasn't really the point. The point was not to draw like Matisse but to draw like yourself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You came to that realization on your own? I mean. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's extraordinary, I think. How do you suppose that _____?

VIOLA FREY: I was lucky. I think. . . . Well, it's very true. I mean, I couldn't avoid it. I saw this drawing and it looked like, you know. . . . I looked at Matisse, I loved Matisse, I did the drawing like Matisse. It got in the show but it was like, "So what?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, but you were rewarded for doing that, see? You got into the show.

VIOLA FREY: Ummm, yeah. But I didn't know enough to know that. . . . It was better than being rejected, let's put it that way. And then that second stage, according to Mumford, is when you have to make something more beautiful than someone else. You just have to make it as beautiful and as seductive as you can. And then the third stage is where you don't have time to finish everything so perfectly. And I think the main point of that is that you don't want to give up any of the prior stages. You still want to seduce and you still want to be patted on the head. You know, so you never outgrow that childishness, you know. Now what was the other thing we were on? We were talking about. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really the environment, if you want to say, _____ the _____ artistic environment. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Okay. I did a lot of writing then, and basically I got into UC Berkeley. I was going to be a writer. Hah! I did a lot of it and a lot of it was based on the environment that I was in. I really learned. . . . I don't want to say I hated those grapevines, but I was like five feet tall and the grapevines were five feet tall. And basically it forced me to look underneath the vines, in the bushes-you know, to really look at nature. Because there was nothing out there other than rows and rows of the stuff. And in the far, far distance, some days you could see this row of hills with a little snow on their peaks-which from Lodi you can see whatever the mountains are that surround it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is something you wanted to escape, I gather.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, I felt it was suffocating. I didn't have . . . I didn't go to a museum. . . . But my father did look constantly at National Geographic, which we got from the library, and that was an important insight into the world.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you said you were accepted at Berkeley. You graduated from high school.

VIOLA FREY: And I went to Stockton [Dopp, Dove, Dub] College.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that a community college, a junior college?

VIOLA FREY: A junior college, community college.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did you study there?

VIOLA FREY: I did art, and at that time I thought I might be a teacher. I just lied. [laughs] And I later got to realize that, hey, there were no women out there teaching. That whole generation of women were gone. I mean, they were dying, in the fifties and the sixties. [Maya, Myra, Mayo] [Grotell], Lauren Grayson. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know Lauren, _____.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. [Tashika] [Takiyesu, Take Yesu]. And they weren't being replaced. They were being replaced by men. But anyway that's. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But this is something that you. . . . So already at that stage you're in community college. Is this right, that at that time you envisioned as one possibility for you being a teacher. What kind of a teacher then, an art teacher?

VIOLA FREY: An art teacher.

PAUL KARLSTROM: At what level? College?

VIOLA FREY: College level.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you aspired to a higher education.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, and then I had a whole. . . . I think the reason for that would have been my high school art teacher [_____-Ed.]—we're all influenced by people—and she had gotten her MFA from California College of Arts and Crafts. And that was like sort of important, because she had. . . . I don't want to say [a] snotty attitude, but she had this superior attitude that came from the fact that she did the watercolors. She got her degree in painting, from Arts and Crafts. And that was sort of important. And she really wouldn't let me take ceramics, which was in the shop department.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the shop department, okay.

VIOLA FREY: [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not yet. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Auto mechanics, agriculture. You know, so. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you studied art already then in. . . .

VIOLA FREY: High school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in high school. But that then was reinforced, that was what you concentrated on in junior college, community college.

VIOLA FREY: No, at community college I was doing the kind of courses for Berkeley.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, right.

VIOLA FREY: In other words I took geology and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you took some art there?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, some art, yeah. And from there I got a scholarship then to go to Arts and Crafts. I think the tuition was....

PAUL KARLSTROM: What happened to Berkeley? Because you said that it was. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I went to Berkeley to register and I looked. . . . To me, my lasting impression is of barbed wire and. . . . [laughs] I marched all the way through to where you deposited your cards, and I said, "I'm just kidding myself, but I really don't want to go to Berkeley." I just thought Berkeley was a way to be respectable. And so I told one of the guards, "I'll be back later." And they had to escort me back out. You know, because there was no way you could get out. You couldn't believe. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Unless you went through the whole process, you mean, you couldn't turn back on the. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, I was at the end of the process. And I couldn't just back out, back up. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

VIOLA FREY: So I felt that was very lucky.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So much for your career as a writer. At that point, you were. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, yeah. You know, because I think artists certainly have the imagination to write, and it's just that over a period of time I think that the visual took over.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think then that this interesting world that your father helped create back in and around the vineyards. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . with all those wonderful things that he accumulated, do you feel that you really were interacting with them? Did you think of them as creations?

VIOLA FREY: I think so, because I think I saw this junk. And my other opportunity to see beauty would have been with the women-the pretty dresses, their hats, handbags as they went to church on Sunday.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did your family go to church? Were you a religious family?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Catholic?

VIOLA FREY: . . . very much involved in it. No, it was a Zion Reformed Church, which is the national church of Switzerland. Because the Huguenots fled all over. And so it was a church that was brought over from Europe, and it's amazing how quickly things disappear. My grandparents were really involved in the church. You know, we all have our wealthy uncles and things like that to irritate us as kids, and I wasn't really irritated but it always created conflict because you had the wealthy banker uncle-my mother's brother-and then you had the more rancher-types of my father's family belonged to a related but different church. So I always had this two sides, you know, of issues-whatever that means.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that made you more broad-minded. It was a broadening experience. Or did it make you turned off. . . .

VIOLA FREY: To religion? Yes. [laughs] Absolutely. But a lot of people have done that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure.

Session 1, Tape 1, Side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is continuing the interview with Viola Frey. This is the first session on February 27, 1995; this is tape one, side B. And we're still, more or less, in Lodi although we're getting you out of there on to further education at, well, a community college but then, almost at UC Berkeley, and then saved, practically by the bell, I guess. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, by common sense. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And was this like an epiphany, some kind of revelation that you. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. I felt that I wanted to be an artist, that I was just fooling myself. I can remember saying that to myself, "This is just foolish. This is not really what I want to do."

PAUL KARLSTROM: But where did that leave you? Here you had your. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, I went back to Arts and Crafts then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, you had already checked out Arts and Crafts?

VIOLA FREY: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You hadn't been enrolled, though? Didn't you go from the community college. . . .

VIOLA FREY: To Arts and Crafts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . to Arts and Crafts. . . .

VIOLA FREY: And then I went to Arts and Crafts. I didn't go to Berkeley. You know, but you had to have good grades to be admitted, you know, so I mean that was sort of nice, you know, but ultimately not enough.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what. . . . Let's just trace this again. You went first then from community college to the California College of Arts and Crafts-for some brief period, presumably-and then while you were there you went ahead with the application to Berkeley? I'm a little confused on this.

VIOLA FREY: I don't remember. I don't remember the time thing. But I remember going through registration at Berkeley. It was like either before I went to Arts and Crafts, or had been in Arts and Crafts for a semester, something like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I'm sure that we can figure that out sometime, but it's in a way more interesting or more neat in terms of chronology if in fact you were at Berkeley and you said, "Wait a minute. This isn't for me."

VIOLA FREY: That's what I said, yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: "What is it I really want to be?" So, one way or another. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I did get to Arts and Crafts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. And you knew about it? Oh, yeah, you said your teacher. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I got a scholarship to go to Arts and Crafts. I think the scholarship was like, I don't know, for the whole semester was a hundred and twenty dollars. [laughs] It was. . . . You know, it was still money.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was not grand but it. . . . Now was your family. . . .

VIOLA FREY: [No, Though] it kept the college going.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was your family in a position to help you with your fees there?

VIOLA FREY: Not too much. A little, yeah, a little bit but not. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your parents were upper middle class economically?

VIOLA FREY: Ooh, what do you call a grape rancher other than a gambler?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't know. Now that's right, you said gambler earlier. [chuckles]

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. I mean, we were never without food. We always had clothes. We had an old car.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds pretty middle class. Without the pejorative. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not bourgeois necessarily.

VIOLA FREY: It wasn't bourgeois, you know. But there were a lot of windows into the upper class. For a little kid it was. . . . [chuckles] They were basically very hard working people, but. . . . I'm trying to think, what are some of the bad things? Well. . . . [pauses, thinking]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you said now you're not real close to your siblings. How many siblings did you have?

VIOLA FREY: Three brothers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Three brothers.

VIOLA FREY: And one of the really bad things that happened was that my brother my older brother had a bad earache so he was out of school, and so basically I got a year ahead of him. And, of course, when you're in high school that's not nice. [laughing] Because they remind you of all of that over and over again. I did a lot of illustrating for our school newspaper, for the sporting events.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, did you?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. And Bob Arneson did the same thing. He did a lot of sports illustrations.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you obviously were interested in art or in drawing. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Art, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and so forth "really" very early on.

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes, when I was in. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You had a talent.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, when I was in high. . . . Oh, yes. I mean, I learned very early, when I was even in grammar school, that I could make little things-little drawings and things-and I could sell them for twenty-five cents. [laughs] And I did. And I did oil portraits of fellow students and neighbors and the like, and what I noticed was that my portraits got to look more like the people. In other words, when I first did them they did not look like who I was painting. But when some time had gone by then the paintings looked like the people I painted. I don't know whether they changed or whether I changed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: To you they looked more like the people.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They became . . . they, then, matched up to the images you had created.

VIOLA FREY: [laughs] Yes. Yeah. I don't know whether that was just fate or chance.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think this has any connection with, for you, an early notion that you could construct or fabricate a kind of reality?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I know in high school we had to do portrait drawings of each other as students, and I remember in the beginning all my drawings looked exactly like the people that I was drawing. But then the later ones no longer did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it was really a different kind of reality that you had come to?

VIOLA FREY: I don't know whether I could no longer see it or whether it was really there. You know, in other words, whether it changed in my eyes and I was no longer able to see that it looked like the person I was drawing. Because I know there was one student that could draw anyone. You know, she could draw them right down to the last little detail. She would be like someone that worked at a carnival. She could draw accurately what was in front of her. And mine got less and less accurate. I don't know what that means.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interesting. Anyway, well, of course we don't want to make too much of that at this point. But it's an interesting observation that your work then began to deviate from observed . . . you know, strictly reproducing anything, whether it's a tree or a person.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. And I'm sure that there were. . . . I don't know, it's of no importance. I'm sure there were ways that one could have. . . . What I did intuitively, I don't know, I was never able. . . . And that may even happen now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you mean?

VIOLA FREY: Well, when I draw the model now, that same thing may happen. Not quite so bad. It can still happen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In terms of distortion, do you mean?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, in terms of looking like the person afterwards. Not while I'm doing it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting. Have you ever checked this with others?

VIOLA FREY: . . . out with a psychiatrist? [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, no, no. I was thinking with the subject.

VIOLA FREY: No, I've never. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or with anybody else?

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you obviously remember this as something. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I remember that from high school, yeah. Already a failure. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, or looking at the world in a different way.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: _____ much [if, as] anybody looks at your work. Although we don't want to jump from that to where we are now, that is something of some importance. Well, what about. . . . You made this break with Lodi. I gather from what you say that that was pretty much it.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And, to a certain degree, with your family. How long did your parents live?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I guess. . . . It's a good question. I was in San Francisco living in the Victorian house, so it had to be after 1965-I got the money from my father when he died. Before 1974, something like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did he die first?

VIOLA FREY: He died second.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, second. So your mother predeceased, as they say. Were you real close to them?

VIOLA FREY: No. They didn't beat me; they didn't hit me. I always felt that I was being rejected because I wasn't beaten. Like all the other kids with their stories of getting whoppings, you know. Never got hit. I always felt a sense of alienation-which, I think, is probably typical of artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you were saying at lunch, with your brothers, for instance, that there really was no commonality, that their world. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, it wasn't. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Somehow I guess there was no point of contact or overlap with your world as an artist.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you felt that, presumably, then with your parents as well, with your whole family.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So when you left you really did. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, it wasn't as if they weren't interested, but. . . . I see it at school with kids I [used to] see. . . . The guys would. . . . The girls would come in and they'd wash the tools for the guy sitting at the wheel, you know. Watch every move. But then later they weren't that interested in it. You know, in other words, those things only last for a certain length of time when it comes to the arts. No one else is that truly interested in what you are doing. And they can give like sort of lip service to it. You know, if I had done outreach, and made them participate, all of that kind of thing, it might have been different. But that wasn't me. I didn't. . . . You know, like I said I was always into counting the amount of time-the potential amount of time in the future.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Then, And] you remember this from fairly early on, that this was a concern of yours?

VIOLA FREY: Time. I literally didn't ever. . . . And, of course, my brothers were always getting into accidents, having their cars totaled, walking away from it, all of that. But I never learned how to drive on purpose, because I never wanted to go back to the country again. Now it shouldn't have been that horrifying of an upbringing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, it sounds fairly nice, all things considered.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, your father, especially, sounds quite interesting or at least created a kind of a world around him that was interesting to a child, to you.

VIOLA FREY: Well, he was interested in his own hobbies and his own. . . . You know, I was really young. Yet for him. . . . The day that he died he phoned and said, "I'm not going to make it this time." He didn't phone me; he phoned my sister-in-law and said, "I'm not going to make it this time." He was someone that was anti going-to-the-doctor. When I was in graduate school at Tulane University, he had a major heart attack, a thrombosis or whatever, and he never wanted to go back. I think he lived another twenty years. He never took his heart

medicine, nothing. You know, so. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hard-headed, you might say?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not like you. You don't have any of these qualities. [said tongue-in-cheek-Ed.]

VIOLA FREY: Oh, know. [laughs] Yeah, so you inherit some things that you may not want to know about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so you finally found yourself-and happily, I guess. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . at California College of Arts and Crafts. What about that? What was the experience? This must have been, well, mid fifties?

VIOLA FREY: '55. I graduated in '55. So I would have been there two years prior to that in '53. And, basically, what I found at Arts and Crafts was a very multi-disciplinary, very open program. I think that was just through my eyes and through the auspices of some of the faculty that was there. So basically I was able to. . . . I had my own things. I mean, like I refused to major in craft. I disliked the word craft. And if I was a craft major, which I had to be in order to be a ceramics major, I would have had to take book-binding, and that's one course that I refused. I just drew the line at book-binding. It's the one course I wish I would have taken now, you know. I mean, you know, that's the way it is. Because I love books, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

VIOLA FREY: And so I majored in. . . . A lot of painting. You had to do a lot of diverse things from. . . . There was time when you could. . . . I could take design, I could take. . . . I had to take design. You had to take painting, you had to take all of the areas. The reason I ended up a lot in ceramics again, which I did in the community college or junior college-which you called them then-was that in throwing. . . . And small sculpture pieces. I always did both things. And I think the reason I was drawn to ceramics, again, is because it had people of all ages in it. It seemed more like the real world. It was a community. That was a time when for a hundred and whatever dollars you could take the course for a semester, and you had these older ladies especially. Some of them were wonderful people, who would come back and take these courses forever. At that price it didn't matter. And ultimately those people moved on and went to, you know, Studio One, Studio Two community centers. And when I looked at what they were doing at that time I could see that what they were doing. . . . They ended up with beautiful pieces, and so that really intrigued me. But I basically did sculpture, drawing, painting, and throwing. And the phrase that always went through [my] mind was "jack-of-all-trades, master of none," you know. Because you see such divisions in what you're doing. You don't really see that it's by one person or anything. That gets obscured. But anyway like my drawing teacher, I could do three-dimensional modeling for him. He loved my drawings, and, basically, in high school I went to a summer course that was taught by someone that teaches at, that was teaching at that time at Arts and Crafts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who was that?

VIOLA FREY: An old Italian master type drawing. What was his name? [_____-Ed.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: But this had some influence on you, right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, I mean, I knew about Arts and Crafts. And of course at that time. . . . And when I graduated that was. . . . I got a lot of awards, you know, lot of, you know, that kind of stuff. Which didn't hurt. There was a big show at the City of Paris, which was a department store in San Francisco, and every year they would have this big West Coast ceramic show, and we all submitted pieces. Didn't matter if you were. . . . Everyone was a student, practically. And so we all submitted pieces and I won first prize. And it was a scandal. It created so much bitterness in the art community because. . . . I don't know if Peter Voukos won second or third. But it was a scandal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were still a student, and that was in the late fifties, that was about when?

VIOLA FREY: About '55. And from there I went to Tulane University, where [_____-Ed.] Coykendall was there for just a year because. . . . One of my teachers was Charles Fiske, who had been a. . . . I guess. . . . Well, he had met George Rickey at Olivet College. Olivet College was one of the first colleges that had guest speakers from everywhere. I mean, it was. . . . And Charles Fiske kept in contact with George Rickey, and so [Vernon] Coykendall went to Tulane for a year, and then [Catherine, Katherine] [Choy, Choi] came back, and so I got to know her. She had just graduated. She was the only person in this country that I knew of that was teaching ceramics anywhere. And so she had been at Mills [College], she went to Cranbrook. From Cranbrook she went to

Tulane. And she had set up Clay Art Center in New York City. But so. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was actually in what? Port Chester??

VIOLA FREY: In Port Chester, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How far is that from. . . .

VIOLA FREY: On the New Haven train about twenty minutes, thirty minutes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because I gather you. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I lived at the Clay Art Center. We had the first kids that would come through would be the stopping post that would come through from Big Sur that hitch-hiked back to New York. You could tell them all because they had little bells on the bottom of their clothes and they jingled a lot. [laughed] And so we'd give them a place to stay and then they went on into New York City.

And so we slept in the different offices. It was, you know, living right there with your work. And Catherine Choy and all of us, we had this lofty idea that we would promote clay as an art form. And so it was properly set up with a board of trustees. We had John [Kennedy, Canaday] . . . I don't remember who the other people were, but well-known museum-curatorial types. We were serious. [laughs] At that time, no one talked about production pottery because it didn't exist. And there were some people that later died. Ted [Bienfeld, Bee-en-feld] died. Took a freighter out to somewhere, died of hepatitis. He'd go into New York City with pots on his. . . . We just thought him eccentric; we didn't realize that he was doing production stuff.

But at Tulane it was just so hot. Bugs everywhere. I couldn't wait, and for the fan. . . . Oh, it was. . . . Coming from California or the Bay area, that muggy hot weather from New Orleans was really oppressive, and so Cath and I we drove from New Orleans to New York. Up, you know, south. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so you became friends. Did you go there to study with her?

VIOLA FREY: Well. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You knew she was there. There was some reason you went to Tulane.

VIOLA FREY: I went because Vernon Coykendall went to Tulane. And then Charles came with us and then he went to Paris where his father had retired out of the military. They had an apartment in Paris, so he lived there for a couple of years. Then he came back to New York, and then he came back to the West Coast and then I came back to the West Coast. So we knew each other in New York, you know, so. . . . I think once I laid eyes on Charles, that was it. I took care of that. Enough of that now! [laughs] You know, so. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about back, just briefly, to Arts and Crafts. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . which of course is your venue. I mean, after all, you teach there now, and this. . . . I was curious. I understand that Diebenkorn was teaching there at the time.

VIOLA FREY: You know I took painting from Diebenkorn. And I worked up in the studio with Charlie Gill, and all of that. But because I was sort of in ceramics and I wasn't really a painting major-but was I?-and all of that. And basically Diebenkorn never talked to any of us much. But we always watched where his eyes were going. Did he pause there, you know, ten seconds longer, and if he did, what was he looking at? Was that good or was it bad? And, of course, at that time we were taught nothing. I don't know why any of us thought that we should be taught how to make stretcher bars. You know, I mean, it didn't seem quite right that the instructor should have been responsible for teaching us that. But no one else was volunteering, and so we had stretcher. . . . Even Diebenkorn's paintings are not squared, you know. I mean, they're slightly askance. The thing is that we respected Diebenkorn's eye because he was an artist that was painting out there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He had a reputation.

VIOLA FREY: He had a reputation as an artist. He had a studio. While I was at Arts and Crafts, I never once saw an artist's studio. That's why to see these people actually working in the ceramics department was, I think, really important.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you interested in the Bay area figurative group then at that time? I mean, were you and your fellow students, [I guess, perhaps], aware of what was going on in the Bay area? What had been going on in the California School of Fine Arts _____.

VIOLA FREY: I wasn't so much-I guess, for one thing, since I had chosen not to drive for a number of reasons,

one of which was the fear of dying before I was in my forties in a major automobile accident. [laughs] What was the question again?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you didn't get around, I guess, as much since you didn't drive. Is that right?

VIOLA FREY: Yes. But I used that as a way to bring people to me. [laughs] Isn't that wicked? But it's absolutely true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Saves time.

VIOLA FREY: Listen, saved a lot of time. And made sure that I was always the focal point. And so I didn't go to a lot of openings, you know, that were far out, you know, far-flung places, and the social life was more centered around the ceramics department. Fridays were always a day when alcohol was passed around. [laughs] But I soon learned. . . . I remember in New York I saw two of those pots and I figured there's something wrong here. This is silliness, you know, so. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I gather then that you really didn't. . . . There were interesting things going on at that time, of course, in the Bay area. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, there were.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . but I gather from what you say that you were pretty focused to the ceramics activity in that group.

VIOLA FREY: But it was a large activity. It was not about just throwing. It was a lot about color-because of the influence from China, I guess, and a little bit from Europe. And at that time, when I was a student in 1955, Rosanjin. . . . One of my best friends was Noriko Yamamoto, who's an artist, I think, now on the east coast. She was from Japan and she had been the translator for Rosanjin, and basically. . . . She was weeping, she was so upset, because it was a very crude and rude world. I mean, the feuds were colossal between things like Elaina B. Netherby, and on and on. I mean, Elaina B. Netherby was someone who had become engaged to her assistants with a clay wedding ring. [laughs] I mean, I don't know, you know. And she'd count every pot that she had. So if you tried to get an Elaina B. Netherby she'd, "Four thousand four hundred and thirty two." And then she'd count again. "Four thousand four hundred and thirty one." I know this story from someone who actually went through that, and had actually ended up with a pot because she didn't know where she was. She counted once and then she counted again and got another number, and then she counted again and got another number. So at the point, it was safe for him to snatch a little piece out. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Slip one away.

VIOLA FREY: And she had wonderful [lusted, lustered] things. But she was a real tyrant, and so, you know, you would make rude jokes about anyone else, just as they made rude jokes about us. So it was a really feisty, vital. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Competitive.

VIOLA FREY: . . . very competitive. . . . And so, other than through Diebenkorn, later when I went to New York I saw Diebenkorn's first show. . . .

Session 1, Tape 2, Side A

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, continuing an interview with Viola Frey. This is the first session on February 27, 1995. This is tape two, side one. And we were cut off. We were talking about your experience in the Bay area as a student at Arts and Crafts and then we were talking about Diebenkorn. You said that you ____ when you. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. But I certainly was aware of the openness of everything. I certainly was aware that Manuel Neri did ceramics. I was aware that there was no tradition in the Bay area. I was certainly aware. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So did your students, though, talk about it in that way? This is the way you saw the situation in which you were. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, there were no neo-traditional potters out there. There were barely any painters that we knew. Again, since I was not in the social crowd, being a woman-I mean, unless you want to do like Joan Brown, which was not something that I was into. She survived very well. What, did she marry Manuel twice?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, she was married to him.

VIOLA FREY: Twice, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: One of four.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you know her?

VIOLA FREY: Not really. I've met her a couple of times. I don't know if I was isolated. I really wasn't. I belonged to the San Francisco Potters' Association. Well, the work was always different than everyone else's and so it just allowed me a lot of space, I think, to evolve and, you know, I was protected. Well, anyway, Diebenkorn's first show at the Poindexter Gallery, which was figurative art and he had a big spread in Time magazine, that he had jumped the boat from abstraction. . . . As a matter of fact, we didn't call it abstraction. We called it nonobjective. And I must say, when I had the workshop-which was about a four- or five-week-long workshop at Tulane with Rothko-he said, there's nothing nonobjective about this. This is a landscape. This is a still-life. You know, so he'd demolish us. We'd attempt to do something nonobjective, and then he would say, "No way." He'd always find a horizon line or a table line. I know I've said this before but, I mean, that is. . . . He did say that when he painted the color red he was painting "the sensation of a red apple against a red tablecloth." And I thought that was a very interesting remark, because at that time I was taking painting as well as ceramics with Catherine, and I used yellow everywhere. You know, whenever I wanted to highlight something I got out my mighty yellow. It's pretty ugly. And I see beginning students doing that even now, with the yellow. They mistake the color for light. And so that started an interest in the study of color and light. So I've never separated those two. And anything else in New York that sent me back to the West Coast, I'm trying to think. I know the Diebenkorn show, the figure. . . . I figured, "Hey, you know. . . ." The West Coast was still for the figure. This was 1960, late fifties, you know, that the figure still had a chance out here, because in New York, from the fifties where people did things because they wanted to; they didn't do it for the money. There was no money in any of it, and basically that was, I think, our basic thing too was that no one made any money at any of it. And so what difference did it make? You did what you wanted to do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And even in New York that was still to a degree.

VIOLA FREY: Still true to a degree, um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even though there were more galleries.

VIOLA FREY: Oh, in the fifties there weren't too many.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Isn't that amazing? We think of it as just riddled with galleries everywhere you turn.

VIOLA FREY: There were sort of alternative galleries. It wasn't. . . . Not that many. And at that point I didn't realize that this was just the first generation-that there was a second, a third, a fourth, the fifth, on and on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean, of abstract [____tors, ____ters]?

VIOLA FREY: Of abstract painters, yeah, expressionist painters.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you, I gather, were always interested in figurative work, is that right?

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was there any phase that you had. . . . Was there a [Viola nonobjective phase]?

VIOLA FREY: A little bit with Diebenkorn. . . . Yeah, with Diebenkorn, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But as a student, really?

VIOLA FREY: As a student, oh. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not subsequently?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes, subsequently. Yes, when I got involved in light and color in the late sixties, and did a series of. . . . I spent about a year, maybe two years, on it, but did what I consider to be just beautiful pots about movement and bright, beautiful, [lustre, luster] colors, and the paintings were aluminum leaf with paint on top, or some of them were gold leaf, some of them were silver leaf. And basically I put these paintings up, and I thought, you know, there was so much about the phenomena of light because you turned the light switch on and it would change. And I figured, "I'm not going to sell these. I'm going to keep these for myself." I mean, in other words, I couldn't buy anything out there that I liked better up on my walls. [chuckles] And in my house in San

Francisco, I did a whole wall with aluminum leaf, mainly because you couldn't see exact anything in a wall of aluminum leaf. And dealt with, you know, color and after images. And then I taught color and light in the painting department at Arts and Crafts. And basically decided not to do it anymore because it was costing too much money to provide the materials, to make your own paints, and to work in a place that wasn't a studio. So I think what Arts and Crafts gave me was a knowledge of the studio experience, even. . . . When I got to New York I didn't [need to, really] see an artist's space. To me a studio meant a connection with the kilns, with ceramics and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about your time in New York? It must have been pretty heady stuff for a young artist.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. I learned very quickly how to lie. You had to say, "I have relatives here and I'm going to stay here all of my life, and I want to work my way up in the firm," you know. And basically because of the reputation that Arts and Crafts had in New York City-many of the art directors were from Arts and Crafts-and so I always got in with an appointment, you know. And so I worked for . . . I think it was Continental Can Company in their bag department designing paper bags, you know. So needless to say after a year I quit and then I went to work. . . . I had a choice of two museums. One, I could go to the Metropolitan Museum and work, at a low salary, or at a much higher salary I could work at the Museum of Modern Art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now you were a bookkeeper, is that right?

VIOLA FREY: I ran the IBM machine making up the bills. I made up a bill to pay Dora Marr for the portrait of Dora Marr by Picasso. Can't remember how much it was. Whether it was \$49,000 or thirty. . . . You know, not a huge amount of money. And so I did all the billing, all the accounts for what went into an exhibit, and you realized that to set up one of those design shows that they did at that time, just the cost of the pedestals and all the building they did was like \$70,000. But it was a nice place to work. That was a time when [Nelson?-Ed.] Rockefeller was involved in it. If you were higher up in the museum you got invited to his inaugural ball. And it was right after the big fire. It was a nice place, and you had the cafeteria and you had a dining room that you could go to. Whenever I go to MOMA now, it looks like a shopping mall to me. But every once in a while someone that's behind a counter giving a ticket away still. . . . You know, a recent graduate-art student type graduate-that's working at MOMA. Or in the restaurant or whatever. So people still seek out museums as places to. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: To be close to art.

VIOLA FREY: Art students can be close to art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what about that for you? This must have been a wonderful opportunity. Did you manage to sneak out of your office and spend time in the galleries?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yeah, sure. I mean, that was. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, was there a real education in Modern Art? Certainly. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I think so. I grew to love Dubuffet, and there was a Picasso retrospective. No, it was a great place. And I really learned that art was important there. Which was a big shock when I came back to the Bay area after New York. It was like everyone was still making these pots, you know, and from color they had now become brown pots! So New York was important.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Are there any stories, were there any individuals that you got to know back there at that time?

VIOLA FREY: Well, other than Catherine Choy, Henry Okomoto, who was also from my home town, Lodi, was involved in setting the center up. There was Jeff [Schlanger], who also turned very eccentric. He bought the train station from [Trudy, Trudi] [Petrie-Raben], who had been a designer for Royal Berlin and her husband was the architect for Sears and Roebuck. Big deal. And they lived in this Quaker Ridge train station, which was an old deaccessioned train station. And Jeff Schlanger bought the train station. And we would do portraits of each other-you know, all kinds of different challenges and that kind of thing. So it was really a group environment, but again it was a studio brought together by the kilns and by the communal need for clay and all of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So your social life then, your experience there in New York, was pretty much around the Clay Center even though you commuted in to work in New York at the Modern.

VIOLA FREY: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I gather you weren't participating a great deal in the art world of New York itself.

VIOLA FREY: No, because I would commute back and forth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. So you were there during the days in Manhattan.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Well, it was not that easy. I mean, if I'd wanted to live in New York City. . . . It took me two years; at the end of two years I was finally able to get-it was a rent-controlled apartment-that I could afford. And this was an apartment where all the woodwork was rounded, you know: so many coats of paint, shiny enamel paint. So I think I very wisely decided to leave and to come west.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, so how did that come about? Presumably at one point you maybe were tempted to make a career for yourself. . . .

VIOLA FREY: In New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in America, in [America's art ____].

VIOLA FREY: But in New York clay was a no-no. I mean, there were no kilns anywhere. We had about the only kilns. It had to do with the gas supply into New York City or something, and the fire department. There were just too many barriers. I mean, if you were a woman you had no way of getting artist space in New York, because you had to con the building superintendents into letting you rent. And the people that did. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why was that?

VIOLA FREY: Well, because they had their city laws, and basically you had to be able to hide your living space at a moment's notice.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. Was that easier for men to do?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, absolutely!

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why? Just because of their preferred treatment by the superintendent?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. And you had to be able to build your spaces. There were no women doing that. There obviously were some women in New York that. . . . And I did, by the way, when I was at MOMA see Louise Nevelson's piece there in the late fifties. So she wasn't completely unknown. But they're just so few. And so you added up all of those barriers, and that was an enormous one, finding a space to work. An apartment you could find. But an actual work space was enormously difficult. I would have. . . . Looking back, even then I knew that getting a place where you could even put a kiln in was impossible.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it really wasn't an option, finally? Since you were interested. . . .

VIOLA FREY: No. Not unless I wanted to stay at the Clay Art Center forever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what was the moment? How did it come then that you finally decided, "Well, enough of this. I'm going to go back to the Bay area." Can you remember how that came about?

VIOLA FREY: I did fly, I didn't take a train. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you make that decision to make a break and come back?

VIOLA FREY: I guess Charles had come back out here to the west coast-Charles Fiske-and I realized in New York that. . . . Hey, I mean, the first winter I didn't know what frostbite was, you know. [chuckles] I mean, I was not used to snow and cold climates like that. Basically, my blanket was a second-hand, really beautiful sculpted carpet, but our bathroom was just filled with snow. I went in there one morning and there was snow everywhere. Around the toilet, everywhere, just. . . . Someone left the window open. So the weather was part of it. The fact that I had to get two sets of clothes all the time, and I figured out that, just in that respect alone, that it would cost less to be on the west coast. Because, I mean, you added up the cost of boots, you know, the warm coat, warm clothes. Since I worked in a business-like environment I had to. . . . You know, you had to have seasonal changes of clothes. I figured in California it was just one season. And that was a big reason, was the weather.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about the. . . . So this was the 1960, I think. Is that right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was, of course, an interesting time out here. The sixties are often viewed as the great-maybe the great decade-of art activity in ____ ____ California.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And certainly with an unprecedented art market appearing all of a sudden in Southern California. You were in New York looking then back in a westerly direction.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember that there was a sense that perhaps the west coast was a reasonable alternative for a professional?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes, because there was interest in the figure on the west coast. I knew that. The weather was good. And my good friend Charles had moved back out. And those reasons were just about equal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now what about other artists that you would talk with there that weren't originally from the west coast? Do you remember what their [attitudes]. . . .

VIOLA FREY: We were all from the west coast at the Clay Art Center.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Everybody knew it.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. [laughs] Catherine Choy, Henry Okomoto. Jeff Schlanger was from Philadelphia. Basically. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you had this portable community.

VIOLA FREY: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Basically, it's like a space capsule.

VIOLA FREY: That's right. Absolutely, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interesting.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, so we. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about. . . . I was interested by something you said which I hope we can perhaps get into more a little later, but this is your perception or your awareness that there was really. . . . There were obstacles, you mentioned, to setting yourself up.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said that you became aware that there were greater obstacles for women than for men. Would you say that this was a moment that you. . . . I don't want to say became a feminist, because then I'm assuming something. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . but became more aware of this as an issue?

VIOLA FREY: Well, if I could say the whole thing about the feminist thing, which I was certainly very well aware of. But I came from a generation of farmers' wives, so to speak, and they were independent. And I had examples-role models-of people that were independent. But at the Clay Art Center Catherine Choy had a choice between. . . . Well, an option. She had three people she could marry-she was being forced to marry-a Chinese contemporary percussion composer, who was in New York City, Henry Okomoto who was a Japanese, and then a sculptor whose name I don't remember. She would have preferred marrying the Caucasian sculptor, but her family flew out from Hong Kong, and they all wore the pants. And the ugliest Chinese that I've ever heard-very guttural Chinese sounds. And they literally twisted her arm to get her to marry. So she had a full-fledged wedding, Chinese/Caucasian. And then she had a full-fledged funeral, Chinese/Caucasian. And we all felt that it was suicide, because by that time they were living apart. She told me, "What are we supposed to do?" She said, "It's just so boring just to sit in a room and just stare at each other." She was talking about her husband. And so Dr. Koo, who was a well-known Chinese scholar in New York City, told me, he said, "Well, at least we saved one of them."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh!

VIOLA FREY: They were both threatening suicide.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was that?

VIOLA FREY: This would have been 1959, I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so this happened while you were there?

VIOLA FREY: While I was there, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you were obviously close to her.

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were good friends, right? That must have been traumatic.

VIOLA FREY: Well, yeah. I mean, you could see that it shouldn't have happened. It was just a cultural. . . . Umm. . . She couldn't pull loose from her culture. And it shouldn't have happened because one of her brothers had actually married a Kansas City red-haired nurse, so there was precedent for it. But they threatened to withhold the money for the support of the center. Just a lot of things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So the funding came, then, from the folks, is that right?

VIOLA FREY: To support her, the funding came from an older lady in New Orleans whose name I can't remember.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that how then she ended up at Tulane?

VIOLA FREY: No, no, no. This was from an outside source that said-I was there-she said, "Catherine, if it fails, you just walk away. I mean, there are no strings on this money." And so we basically. . . . We rented the Clay Art Center. We all contributed to it. So it was like a commune but with a lot of direction.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you feel as if you were part of, like a counter-culture phenomenon in some ways? A bohemian.... Did it have the sense of a bohemian collective at all? Or were you not that self-conscious about it?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I knew it was weird. [laughs] That I knew. I mean, because. . . . I mean, there were no production potters out there outside of Alfred. I just know that when I got back to San Francisco I really started to explore different traditions-the painting tradition, especially. And within that-you know, the still-life, the landscape, all of that. Because ceramics had its own tradition, but we were not into tradition, we were not into craft. Because we're not stupid. We could see that whenever they had these so-called craft shows that what would happen, you would have 500 ceramic pieces submitted, and then you'd have a hundred textiles and 50 metal arts and all of that. And they would whittle down the ceramics so that they would look like there was equal numbers in all the areas.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even though there were many more submissions. . . .

VIOLA FREY: And so the Craft Council was not. . . . We did not look at it. . . . The whole question of art and craft, we just found it sort of hateful. The American Craft Museum, our favorite name for it is the American Crap Museum. I mean, I think it's improved, but we definitely had an anti-American Craft Council view. But that was the west coast. I mean, nothing they could do to us or for us. So when I did get to San Francisco I started to paint on my own and to draw. I don't know whether we're into that segment yet. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: If you would be so kind, I'd like to turn [the tape over].

Session 1, Tape 2, Side B

[Throughout this tape side, PAUL KARLSTROM is sometimes nearly inaudible-Trans.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, we're continuing this interview with Viola Frey. This is the first session, tape 2, side B. And I think what we've succeeded to do today, this afternoon, is get you through your wanderlust phase, we'll call it, your traveling around to different educational institutions, spending time in New York, but then, finally, after these different experiences, for reasons that you've suggested, casting your lot with the west coast, and the Bay area in particular, and I guess all that that, at that point, for you represented.

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I guess that in a sense. . . .

VIOLA FREY: And San Francisco. I mean, I made a definite choice to live in San Francisco, because I didn't ever want to go to the country, and Oakland was too far into the country so far as I was concerned. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Too close to Lodi.

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yeah. In San Francisco I can remember. . . . You know, this San Francisco Potters Association

once when Bob Arneson was in the audience. I remember seeing his first exhibit of his toilet pieces at that shop that handled marble across the street from the San Francisco Museum. I can remember at Arts and Crafts, Bob Arneson was there as a student.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, he was? When you were there?

VIOLA FREY: The year that I was there in '55, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh!

VIOLA FREY: He'd come back because he had to teach ceramics in a high school or something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I see, so he needed a course, a refresher.

VIOLA FREY: So he needed a course. I never took umbrage at the fact that he stole Jackie Maybeck's green pots and signed his name on them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ohhh!

VIOLA FREY: [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you knew him, then, from. . . . Well, you were earlier telling me. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, I was in the upstairs room; he was in the lower room. You have to realize that the upper room had status.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was in the lower room and you were in the upper!

VIOLA FREY: He was in the lower room. [laughs] Working on these huge hand-built pots with little figures on top. They were immense for the time. And so he always had a lofty impression of me. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really! Did you talk about your work? Or about clay? Or about its possibilities? Or breaking with traditions? All those things that art historians hoped you were talking about?

VIOLA FREY: No, our main entertainment was Penny Dhamers, who later taught at Berkeley. But she would always have dirty feet. People didn't wear shoes then, you know. And she would come in and read us our weekly New York Times.

PAUL KARLSTROM: While you were working?

VIOLA FREY: While we were working, yes. To keep us up on current events.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How responsible!

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, that's funny.

VIOLA FREY: With dirty feet up on a counter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you remember those dirty feet?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yeah. [laughs] So there was much more of a communal. . . . I guess because I had been in a commune in Port Chester basically, they never interested me again. Whereas some of the people that I knew later really did get into communes. Equal distribution of all the proceeds including the one artist that owned and lived in the building, she had to-this is Squeak Carnwath-she had to distribute the money that she got from her artwork, her ceramics that she sold!

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was this?

VIOLA FREY: This was, I think, in the late sixties. And she and her husband. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was an artists' communal building?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Well, no, Squeak Carnwath and Gary Knecht, her husband, had purchased this house, and they turned it into a commune because they felt . . . for all the reasons that everyone felt at that time. Peace marches, ecological reasons, and the like. And they did things like gather recycling stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [How intense].

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

VIOLA FREY: But Squeak was an artist, so she did art work, and then she had. . . . But they insisted that it be distributed among them, the little twerps. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Where was this?

VIOLA FREY: This was in Berkeley. Where else? [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: In Berkeley, of course.

VIOLA FREY: They got out of that, needless to say. I mean, that was the clincher on the deal when. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, you were too smart to hook up with anything like that.

VIOLA FREY: That's right, yeah, yeah. And that's when I first met Squeak was when she came in. Both Gary Knecht and Squeak Carnwath had just graduated from Goddard College, which was a very. . . . Not graduated. Had been at Goddard College for a couple of years. And, I guess, dropped out, and then I was in the ceramics department at Arts and Crafts-in the Pot Shop, we called it, and she came in and I saw her and we had a long conversation, and so forth and so on. Later when she tried to register there was no room and so I let her in. But she was already into clay and drawing. You know, so I've gotten to know an enormous number of people by being at Arts and Crafts, in early stages of their career.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, when did you know. . . . I mean, you said that you were aware of Manuel Neri's work-from an early day, presumably. When did you meet? Or was there any direct contact between you?

VIOLA FREY: I don't think there was any direct contact. And it's possible that people knew me more than I knew them. Which I suspect was the case.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, were you interested in the kind of thing that he was doing?

VIOLA FREY: Manuel?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

VIOLA FREY: Chopped up women?

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs] Well, I wasn't thinking of the. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Axed women. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I wasn't thinking of the _____. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . so much as the painting on the sculptures.

VIOLA FREY: I was aware of his work, yeah. He had been at Arts and. . . . He had been at all the colleges, including Arts and Crafts. And I certainly knew about Nathan Oliveira. He had been at Arts and Crafts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was he teaching there when you were a student?

VIOLA FREY: I don't know if he was teaching, but he was certainly there. In the printmaking department as an undergraduate student.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did his work interest you?

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

VIOLA FREY: Well, I was aware of his work. I mean, I liked it but it didn't improve over the years. Let's put it that

way. That's just my own opinion.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, of course. Well, this is your interview.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Not really. They all went off. . . . I mean, in other words, people like Charlie Gill and Manuel Neri and Joan Brown, and all of that, they had their own alternative gallery, and, believe me, "clay" was not part of that alternative gallery that they had. [says "clay" in a disparaging voice-Trans.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you felt then even in the Bay area. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and I'm guessing this is . . . now we're talking about around 1960 after you returned and were really starting out as a professional. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . when you were going to carve out a career, that, even here, in the most open. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I wouldn't say I set out to carve out a career.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No?

VIOLA FREY: No. I worked full-time. I worked at Macy's for ten years, from 1960 to 1970, while I lived in San Francisco and I worked that job down from a 40-hour-a-week job to the last couple of years just 5 hours a week. It became sort of a hobby. And basically that was on Sundays, I think it was. [chuckles] It did not interfere with my week. And I think after I'd been there a year I was already down to 24 hours. And then I was a what you'd call guest artist or shop manager, plus I taught a class at Arts and Crafts. So between those two and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But presumably your intention was to establish yourself as an artist. And when I say carve out a career, I mean. . . .

VIOLA FREY: It seems so knowledgeable and aggressive. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I mean, wasn't that your ambition? Wasn't that your goal? To be able, hopefully, to support yourself as an artist?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No one thought you could ever. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

VIOLA FREY: We never thought we could ever support ourselves.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, okay, I see what you mean.

VIOLA FREY: All of my work that I threw at Arts and Crafts I would give to the ceramics department to sell in what we used to call seconds sales. Even as an undergraduate student I did that. And then somehow the last sale, I looked at some of the stuff that I had given and I figured, "I'd pay seven dollars for that piece. I'd pay seven dollars for that piece myself." And so basically I removed them from the sale and that was the last. . . . Then there never were any sales anymore, and I realized that those sales had been riding on my back for all those years. I don't regret that. I mean, many of those pieces were unsigned. And I never made a lot of anything, always a lot of variety. But you do have to be aware of changes. I remember being at the San Francisco Art Festival in the late sixties and figuring out that I had changed and my audience had changed. That the audience was no longer the adventuresome, quirky audience. They had become really interested in production work. And my stuff simply was not production. You know, there were colorful urns with sculpture on them and everything. And so that was my last time at the San Francisco Art Festival.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you felt-again, I'm [interpreting] this from what you said-that that other group of prominent younger artists, the avant gardists. . . .

VIOLA FREY: All male.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, mostly.

VIOLA FREY: Except for Jay de Feo and Joan Brown.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And Sonia [Getkoff], I guess.

VIOLA FREY: I don't know her.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A few people like that. But mostly. That, even with them and their openness and open-mindedness. . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . still clay was something the other . . . that they themselves didn't see that as fitting in.

VIOLA FREY: Well, clay did reflect the conscience of the times. In ceramics. . . . I mean, I can't tell you the flood of penises that were made. The guys loved teapots because, "Hey, that's a penis there." I mean, it was gross, you know. And what I find equally interesting is in the eighties all the women, [through, from] [Judy?-Ed.] Chicago on, making vaginas. Now, I mean, it's hard for a man even to do a ceramic penis anymore because it's so reminiscent of the sixties. So there was a lot of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which was done in part because it could be done. In other words, there was an opportunity for them to bring in this kind of, what shall we say, forbidden iconography and imagery.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, but. . . . No one said anything, but I do know that there were faculty people when they were looking critically at students' work in the sixties, they would tell them, "Well, I can't talk about that kind of work." They just refused to say anything. And the women would walk away, some of them a little angry, discouraged. But I don't see why now it should be so opposite. [chuckles] You know, why now there should be just the feminist imagery, so there you have it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Very interesting point. Very interesting point. So, it was pretty male-dominated, even. . . .

VIOLA FREY: In the sixties, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . this kind of imagery. There was, perhaps, more and more limited imagery was acceptable, women making these kinds of things.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, my great lesson in life was to learn that these guys. . . . I mean, they had more upper body strength than I have, for one thing. And then they also went on to Peter Voukos to build wheels, Paul Soldner to build clay mixes and wheels. He's someone that poses still, at 65 or something, naked with his wheels. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, ____ ____.

VIOLA FREY: And I realize that everyone. . . . You know, people were exploring all these different areas and I realized that-this must have been in the middle sixties-that there were all these different paths, all leading to nowhere. And so, at that point, I said, "No more; I'm not going to do that." And sort of the punch line was when twins came in the department, and they sat down and threw-both of them; they were twins-and so I had this double image of two of them making these huge pots in a production style. And I thought, "That's it! I can't compete with twins." Like I say, one of life's lessons.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what was it then that you. . . . Here you had a moment somewhere in the early sixties, I guess. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . where you looked around you and saw some of the other work that was being done and you described some of the iconography. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . ____ ____, especially of the men, but a kind of liberation working its way out, a sexual liberation. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. It was part of the society of the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and, for you at least, this seemed to be, I gather, leading nowhere, that it was perhaps narcissistic, [flash show, craft shows, lash-show]. . . .

VIOLA FREY: But I knew that I could not build using wood. I was taking college prep courses in high school. I could not . . . you could not take shop courses, so I had no skills other than. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was a very practical consideration, then, to a large extent.

VIOLA FREY: That's right. Being a woman you just weren't trained that way, and I could build anything with my hands but I couldn't hammer and saw and all of that, use power tools-none of that. And so I couldn't really participate in this building frenzy of stuff, people showing their macho thing, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you think of it in those terms at that time?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That this was. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Macho, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . telling you more about the artist than-I won't get into trouble and say their problems-but self-referential and perhaps posturing a bit.

VIOLA FREY: A lot of ego. But tremendous, enormous energy, you know, swooping around everywhere.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, do you feel that you got support. . . . I mean, I, as you know, interviewed some years ago Joan Brown and Jay de Feo, and even back then I was aware enough to ask them, _____

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . "What was it like trying to be an artist, make art-compete if you will-as a woman here in the Bay area?" And I won't tell you their responses right now, but I would put the same question to you, because this does seem to be an issue that had an effect on choices you made.

VIOLA FREY: I further isolated myself, you know, by living in San Francisco and commuting to Oakland, doing the reverse commute. And then by working nights that was, it didn't leave time to go to openings, even if I could have driven. That was a time in sixties when you could buy a Peter Voulkos pot for seventy-five dollars. So not a lot of money to be made, so to speak. So no one did it for money. And, I was certainly aware that there were no women teaching in colleges all around the country. Very early in the sixties, '61, '62, I was in a young-American show that was a big thing, with hand-built pieces. So the question is what was the. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I mean, did you feel that you were working at a disadvantage?

VIOLA FREY: Double disadvantage. [chuckles] You know, not only not being one of the mainstream-except, strangely enough, on the west coast it was made mainstream. I do feel you have to have a sense of alienation and you have to be an outsider in order to ever become an insider. And the double comes from always being committed to the studio. You know, I had a loyalty so I contributed to the sales at Arts and Crafts to help support the place. We made peace badges for the Vietnam marches. So your question is, was I aware of. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I think I've explained that I have been . . . that I was aware at the time. Yes, absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that you were handicapped as a woman.

VIOLA FREY: But I also felt that the women had bought into the little house in the suburban tract, the appliances, and the vacations, and the cars, even then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even the artists [really, women]?

VIOLA FREY: There weren't that many women. They didn't really count.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There were a few.

VIOLA FREY: Well, there were a few. But I mean. . . . And then in the sixties they wanted to have all these encounter groups. And I always had to say to myself, "I don't have the time for that." You know, I mean, they wanted to find a way out of their suburbia condition, and I knew that if they had done it right in the first place they wouldn't have ended up there. Because, obviously, when you look at the history of farm women, I mean, the only time they ever ended up in a suburbia is when they went and retired into a town like one of my grandmothers did. She lived in town and was no longer part of anything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you really were then, as you say, double handicapped, but in a sense isolated because there was no-again, I gather this from what you're saying. . . .

VIOLA FREY: From my standpoint.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . no community, even here in the Bay area in which you felt comfortable in terms of a group of peers or colleagues.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Bob Arneson later was the only one.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's ____ interesting.

VIOLA FREY: But it's not that we had to see each other every couple of years, even-like who cared, you know-but I knew his work was out there, and I liked that, and he liked seeing my work out there. It's lonely like being the only one, so to speak, you know, to do a large scale anything. And a lot of it is just having the will to do it. Just even wanting to do it is always the big question. A lot of people have talent but they don't have the guts to really do it. I have to say that the isolation was what I saw-I mean, I was winning awards, I was exhibiting. . . . So other people saw me as being visible. And I was!

PAUL KARLSTROM: And part of the community, yeah.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: As part of the community. But of course the way you perceived it is. . . . I mean, where's the truth anyway, on something like this. But did you. . . . Well, I've learned a couple things, and one of them certainly is that you're jealous of your time, and. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . this to a degree precludes certainly socializing to. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. All of my socializing was always done within the context of work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And presumably your contacts were people around CCAC generally, is that right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. And people would come in to see me. And then they would come to see me at my house in San Francisco. Then they'd come to see me in my backyard studio in Oakland. You know, then they'd come to see me here. You know, so as far as I'm concerned, it worked out fine! [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, ____ ____ ____, there's nothing wrong with that. But it's always, in a sense, self-referential, isn't it, that they come to your work?

VIOLA FREY: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And, of course, there's nothing wrong with that.

VIOLA FREY: No, but it. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's just a different way then of interacting with the broader world than ____ just with [artists and, artisans] and never if you ever have any exchanges or maybe you'd visit the other ____.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, we'd visit each other's studio occasionally. I remember in the seventies-late seventies-when. . . I was not stupid. I mean, I knew by '74, '75 that New York was interested in the work, and Monique Knowlton had a really good gallery in New York at that time. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who was that?

VIOLA FREY: Monique Knowlton. Wanted to show my work in '75. And ultimately I wrote her a letter and said, "The prices are not high enough to warrant even sending them back to New York." And that was the truth. I mean, you know, a life-size figure was \$600. I mean you couldn't even get it back to New York for \$600! And so basically I canceled out of New York in '75. And then from '75 to '80 I didn't really show or sell anything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: '75 to '80?

VIOLA FREY: Which was really another important experience.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then there were no opportunities here, I gather, locally. Gallery opportunities.

VIOLA FREY: Well no, I'd had before with Leslie Wenger and Hank [Baum]. Leslie closed up. She got scared in that big recession in the early seventies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, I remember it, yeah.

VIOLA FREY: I mean, that was where I had some life-size figures, and she said, "No one's going to buy a life-size

figure," and I said, "You wait, Leslie." The price was \$600, and of course they all sold. But I also realized you have to be careful who you sell what to. This one gal bought one of the reclining figures and she put it in an outdoor chaise lounge, where she allowed her little child to crawl over it, breaking off an arm, breaking off both legs. She later wanted me to fix it. And I said, "Well, I'll buy it back." You know, because I wasn't going to fix it. And so I realized that, "Yes, you can sell them cheap but what use are they going to be put to?" So I knew that you had to have a level where the work would at least be safe-or safer.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, your work is so inviting, attractive, in terms of [I think, ethnic] interacting.

VIOLA FREY: Perhaps, but still. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm not saying you should. . . .

VIOLA FREY: No, no. Well, now we can't, but I mean these were a little bit more. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fragile?

VIOLA FREY: Well, they were just life-size, so maybe that was a little bit more inviting. But, nevertheless, it was a good lesson to know that. And I was using like a lot of local color. I wasn't dealing with light, and so I had a basement studio in San Francisco, and when I moved from San Francisco to Oakland I knew that going to a suburban part of Oakland was like committing artistic suicide. Because you couldn't get any gallery people to look at you if you were working in a house, even with a backyard studio. Forget it. You know, I didn't ask even, but, I mean, it was just bad. You had to be in industrial space to get people to look at your work. And so I worked there for five years just in an attempt to create a large outline from abstraction to the figure, and then to improve the work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think next time. . . . This is actually a good stopping point because our tape's going to. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Okay.

VIOLA FREY: . . . stop.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . stop.

VIOLA FREY: Stop! Stop! [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what I would hope to do, and I hope you're agreeable, is to then talk more specifically about the evolution of the work and so forth.

VIOLA FREY: About San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Thank you.

MAY 15, 1995

Session 2, Tape 1, Side A

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, Viola, how are you today?

VIOLA FREY: Pretty good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Everything considered.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you've been. . . . We're back in the studio. Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution, a second session with ceramic sculptor Viola Frey in her Oakland studio. The date is May 15, 1995, and the interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. This is tape one, side A.

Well, Viola, the . . . in our first session, which was back in late February, as a matter of fact, we focused more on your biography, the story of your early life, especially.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Education, family experience, relationships, and then we got you to Tulane for a period of time, and then up in New York to Port Chester at Clay Center. We heard about that, and then finally we got you back to the Bay area in 1960 and we talked about the early sixties here, what you were up to-we touched on that, anyway-your contacts and experiences. And so I think we have some pretty good biographical background.

We can, of course, turn to that as we need to. But today what I'd like to do, as I already mentioned, is to turn to your work itself, focusing on two areas: the technical aspect-which, of course, everybody's interested in-but then of course, in addition, the content or the iconography-the meaning of the images that you choose. And then I suppose part of this topic is why these images or your expressive interests are best served by the medium of clay. That's kind of the theme.

But before we do that, for my first question I'd like to find out how you see yourself in relationship to three of your Bay area colleagues. All of them are involved with clay. And you probably know. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, I know. Curious, isn't it?

PAUL KARLSTROM: And one of them, of course, you can't get around, Pete Voulkos.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Bob Arneson. And then, finally, one that I see certainly some superficial connections with, is Manuel Neri.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I wondered if you could tell us what you feel your relationship is, the relationship of your work to theirs, what you share, but how you differ as well. I mean, how do you place yourself with these three artists? Maybe one at a time.

VIOLA FREY: Yes. Well, I mean, they certainly have their own place. And certainly were in the art world a lot sooner than I was, so to speak, so it's just interesting that Bob Arneson, Peter Voulkos, were around a lot earlier than I was. Even though I was doing clay. But being a woman it was almost impossible unless you wanted to live with them or indulge them in whatever way-which was not my thing-so. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so you really didn't have. . . . And excuse me if I'm asking you a question. . . .

VIOLA FREY: That's okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . from last time. But despite their presence here, in terms of personal contact and perhaps even influence, you don't feel that this was important to your work?

VIOLA FREY: Not particularly. I guess the. . . . But certainly just the fact that they were around created a very rich context, which I was certainly aware of.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how do you feel. . . . People are going to inevitably draw comparisons. I mean, after all, Voulkos gets credit for sort of opening up the possibilities of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We're going to talk about your plates, and then Voulkos has his plates. [But they're the same, Which are the same, Probably the same.] But these comparisons are inevitably going to be made.

VIOLA FREY: Well, Peter Voulkos' plates are about Japan, and it's a different culture. I eliminated Japan from my thinking many years ago.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it was there at one time?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes. But I realized that I would never become a Japanese potter, so that was out of my . . . out of the realm of possibilities. And then Bob Arneson was very. . . . Of all the figures, he was perhaps the most influential, because I used Bob Arneson as a figure to bounce off of. In other words, I knew I didn't want to be another Bob Arneson. And so that meant I did work that was not. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, consciously different from his?

VIOLA FREY: Consciously, yes. Oh, yeah, you always have a very conscious effort. And in this case certainly. And I never was, [it was, with] how to do what I wanted to do. And I did like Bob Arneson's work but I wasn't Bob Arneson. So I had to find my own way. And that was a more. . . . Well now, I wonder what that way was?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Me, too. Do you have any idea? Reflecting upon that, what fundamental _____. . . .

VIOLA FREY: With this [blank, black] mind of mine? [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, but, you know, working on it as a problem-or a question-because, again, it is inevitable.

. . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, oh yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . people are going to. . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, I appreciate that, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . "Oh, here's a [school] in the Bay area and, look, here's Viola Frey, and Neri, Arneson. . . ."

VIOLA FREY: And I think we had a similar attitude about the beginnings of clay, the beginnings of it all, and probably Peter Voulkos, as well. And all of us had a basic work ethic, I think, that carried us over a lot of problems.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, Voulkos, the work ethic is an interesting term there, because whether it was genuine or feigned, many of the Bay area artists tried to position themselves with the worker. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . [which] of a blue collar [aspect, asset].

VIOLA FREY: I did a series of pieces that were about the worker. And I know this was in an exhibit down in Los Angeles and then some women came in and they looked at the work, and they said, "Boy, this is us." And it was always the artist as a worker wearing a worker's smock. Which was fortunately a nice blue. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, then that's enough reason right there to choose it. But back to you and Arneson and trying to determine what that different path that you chose might be. One of the things that strikes me is that both of your work seems to be very personal, in a sense, self-referential. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [The, From] personal experience. I mean, concerns and fears, and certainly with Arneson this seems to. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You can just read . . . almost read Arneson's thinking and his. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Violent nature. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, everything. And then there's the scatological side and everything else, but he doesn't hold back anything.

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that at least seems to me to be one similarity between his approach using that medium, and yours.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does that seem right to you?

VIOLA FREY: You mean about holding back?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, no, but about the. . . . Not holding back so much. I think that there is no holding back certainly in Arneson and perhaps not with you, but the autobiographical-the sharing, the personal.

VIOLA FREY: Well, yes, the fact that the men came from my experience in New York. Because in New York coming from the San Joaquin Valley and exposed to all of these men in suits in the sixties was very impressive. And they were like rivers, rivers of these suits. And working at MOMA and all of that. And also finding then that the art world was. . . . Well, in effect that-oh, I don't know-that the-I don't know whether I've already said this-but that you had to survive, that you had to be an artist to survive. And that was the initial point, that in order to survive you had to be an artist, and then you had to be an artist in order to survive. I felt it was a wonderful equation. And so to a greater extent there was a job of how to position myself in relation to Bob Arneson's work. And ultimately it all comes together anyway, you know. Nothing really matters. And what you think is so close is not so close-or whatever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So did you worry then that you might lose your identity as an artist, as an individual, if you

didn't pull away from Arneson?

VIOLA FREY: I think there is always that danger, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [You, I] think he defined the territory to a certain degree, at [one, that] point.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But nonetheless he was very influential.

VIOLA FREY: Because of the over-scale size. But I was always into over-large-size pieces.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I see.

VIOLA FREY: So even when I was in college I made things that were over-sized. So I was first, so to speak, in that respect, but, you know, who cares?

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting. Do you suppose Arneson saw some of your pieces, and he saw that, "Hmm, good idea."

VIOLA FREY: Well, I think he. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is it possible?

VIOLA FREY: Well, he was always very politically slanted. I was never that interested in specific stories or narrations. So the work is much more broad.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You think universal, would you say?

VIOLA FREY: I would say that, yeah. My stuff is more universal in that respect, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interesting. I may have asked you this before but since we're talking about Arneson-and I promise we won't talk about Arneson all the time. . . .

VIOLA FREY: No, it's all right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . but in terms of. . . . Here you were in the same area-or, for that matter, Pete and Neri, but in this case Arneson-did you have that much personal contact?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, Bob. . . . I think we all got a basic liking and understanding of each other's work. But contact not so much. There was a time in the seventies, in the middle seventies, when Bob Arneson came and he. . . . Well, in other words, he purchased a plate. Peter Voukos came. And they were all very complimentary. The back yard was just stuffed with work, with just. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: They came to your home?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, my studio. Yes. [Well], to see all of my work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were still in San Francisco then?

VIOLA FREY: No, I was in Oakland.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, you were in Oakland by then.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, but at my home studio. And it was like a tribute from both of them-from Arneson and from Peter Voukos.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you felt that?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes. Yeah. Couldn't help but feel it, yeah. And that was nice.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now did you. . . . This may seem like a naive question. . . .

VIOLA FREY: No, go ahead.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . like a graduate student's question, but I can't help but ask it. On those occasions when you did have contact with these other very prominent clay artists, [part of them], did you talk about . . . well, about the medium? Did you talk about these issues about. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Always about how clay was being stomped on, sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean, wasn't being. . . .

VIOLA FREY: We didn't complain too much though. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Weren't getting respect, is that it?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, right. Needed more respect.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles] That's the usual. Well, that's certainly come about. What about Manuel? What about Neri? Again, a very natural connection was going to be made by the use of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, Manuel also, when he came through, in the back yard studio, he liked a really big plate, which he got. And that was the only kind of tribute that I was able to deal with was direct. You buy it, it's yours. [laughs] I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The best [compliment].

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about the. . . . If people are looking at the history of California art, or American art, or sculpture, it seems to me they are going to make this connection. Not just because of geography. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . but because of the figure and sculpture, then the painting. The painted figure. . . .

VIOLA FREY: That was always very important, the fact that things were painted. And the use of color with the sculpture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how do you feel again that Neri. . . . What kind of influence may there have been either way that you can think of? You were aware of his plaster pieces and of bringing paint into the sculpture of the figure.

VIOLA FREY: [pauses] I don't think. . . .
[Interruption in taping to answer knock at door]

PAUL KARLSTROM: We were talking about the. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I think with Manuel his subject matter was also so violent that I was a little bit repelled by that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really? Because of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Chopping [everything off].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because of the abuse of the human, usually female, figure?

VIOLA FREY: Yes. I was aware of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you or did others at that time see it in any way in terms of misogyny? Abuse of women?

VIOLA FREY: Not really, no. But I was aware of it. Now, whether individually they were aware of it I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you saw it that way, though? You saw it as a kind of statement, whether it was intentional or not?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. It was not my kind of statement. But it was fine for him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about de Kooning, in that connection? Parallels are drawn between de Kooning sometimes and Neri, and the fracturing, fragmentation of the female figure image.

VIOLA FREY: Well, in terms of painting, I think there was. . . . I guess my ties to painting were closer than my ties to clay, or it was almost equal. But I think with painting it was again very violent, and very aggressive, and all of that. And sort of coming from the background I did I had not much appreciation of that kind of attitude.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that's from when you were growing up, you mean?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you see this then as a specifically sort of gender thing? Maybe a fundamental difference between men and women?

VIOLA FREY: Well, there was that, obviously.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And ____?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes. There were students that did things that were feminist in nature, and they were just absolutely battered by the guys. Whereas the guys were all doing, you know, teapots with penises. Everything, everywhere, they would make them. And so it was interesting, that part of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, do you feel that. . . .

VIOLA FREY: So, I guess I wanted to pull in the male and the female.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you mean?

VIOLA FREY: Well, both. In other words, that there was more of an equality between the sexes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so this was almost like a response, then, to what you saw going on in the work of some others, especially men at the time?

VIOLA FREY: Yes. Oh, it was enormous. One incident: There was twins. I can imagine being attacked by twins, so to speak. And they were both great throwers and they came in, and they threw like. . . . I could throw just one pot at a time, but they were twins, they could throw two. And it was at that point when I decided enough of this, that this was silliness.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean, these were men, right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so what you're saying, I guess, is that there was this competitive edge, this macho. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, [but, and] it was very much dominated by the men. The feminist-type art had no chance at all. It was like unless you worked with steel or something that was more compatible to. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, to what? Big scale and. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, I ____ big scale, so I can't really complain. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's right but. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, metal and square, straight lines. There was a time in sixties when L.A. Fetish finish came in with a vengeance, and a lot of the artists had responded to that. You know, Ron Nagle, a whole group of artists had. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so this was something that you saw evidenced in classes here, students here, looking at this phenomenon probably as a means to attention and success, I suppose. Is that right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: As an aesthetic?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. And it sort of did dominate. Sometimes the faculty even would just attack in such a gross way that the student would be weeping, they'd be so upset at the way they were treated. It was pretty ugly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is male faculty?

VIOLA FREY: Yes. They could not. . . . They would just say, "I cannot critique or look at a work like this."

[Interruption in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Picking up again here, I think it's interesting that you, now, and I don't know if you felt this way at the time, saw one of the aspects of your own work, one of its functions that arose, if you will, as like a balancing. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, as a balance, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . to what seemed to be a prevalent, maybe even aggressive. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes. Derision, aggressive. Yeah, derision and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about. . . . Well, let's move on because I think that you've expressed what you feel is your position. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in relationship to these other very important presences working in clay, fighting the good fight for what they used to call the crafts, getting respect.

VIOLA FREY: We hated the word "crafts."

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm sure. [chuckles]

VIOLA FREY: So we never used it. Yeah, we didn't. All of us didn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what term did you use? I mean, this moves us actually then into what is our next topic.

[Interruption in taping]

VIOLA FREY: [laughs] Just as long as we don't have ____.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, moving into the area which I think is very important-that is, the area of material.

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your world of clay had. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, Bob you know had his [clay club, Clay Club].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, tell me about it.

VIOLA FREY: Well, yeah, because he was very much into pushing that around about clay being such a great medium, and, you know, the whole, the world's largest hobby, the biggest, fastest-growing hobby, and all of that. And so. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you a member?

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or was it an informal thing? It wasn't a real club, was it?

VIOLA FREY: No, but with Bob it was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs] What would happen? They would have meetings? People would come?

VIOLA FREY: No, not meetings. They would just. . . . You know the brick and the [assemblage, silver] that Bob used in those earlier years before everything became very political. Bob, I think, was destined to be a political artist, but he needed all of that time to scratch and get at it. And clay was a wonderful material to be stuck in, because you could find your way, your own way. And I think that's what Bob did with it; I think that's what I did with it, was to find our own way. We had no guidance in terms of the art world. There was no one to tell us what to do. So. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it gave you, then. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Freedom and a challenge.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . the latitude. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how would you describe your own way? After all, you're the subject of this, not Arneson.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, can you, is it possible?

VIOLA FREY: Large, over-size-scale work. A balance, you know, in. . . . Whether it was with endangered species or whatever I did, there was always a balance.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why is the scale. . . .

VIOLA FREY: . . . important to me?

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . so important to you?

VIOLA FREY: Because I think the bigger you are the harder you fall. [laughs] So, I mean, I don't want to say there's malignant intent, but there might be. I'm not sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you're really setting. . . . Do I understand this correctly then, that in a certain respect you're setting not individual pieces, but types [out, up]?

VIOLA FREY: Types, yes. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so sort of exposing them in a way. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, if you're talking about the man in the suit, it's. . . . [pauses] Oh! You'll have to forgive me, my mind goes sort of blank at times.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know. That's all right. I mean, remember this tape recorder, no matter how long the pauses are, they're not going to hear in the transcript anyway.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, and any time if you just want me to turn it off for a moment I can do that.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Well, the man in the suit was about power, but it was about power to do good and power to do bad. And so that's the. . . . And that suit has been around for a long time. I once said that I-I was on a panel with Manuel Neri-and I said, "Give me fifty years." Manuel said he wanted all time, you know, and I said, "That's a little more than I need. I just need fifty years." Because fifty years is about the length of the memory of a previous generation.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so you feel that in your work that you really are operating in a temporal sense within a very specific period of time, presumably your own life?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're not aspiring to try to archaeologically go back to earlier?

VIOLA FREY: No. I might, but, I mean, that wasn't what I have been up to.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Although your chosen form-sculpture and for that matter clay-goes way back. And figures, the figure....

VIOLA FREY: Well, that was always for me. . . . Archaeology was always an influence, because that's the. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was it a conscious thing? I mean, it's something that. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. You couldn't get through ceramics in a college and not be aware of archaeology and the ancient past. Because there's such affinity between that work that is out there, you know, that is archaeological in nature that if you paid. . . . There's no way of ignoring it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So do you feel, sort of turning the question around a little bit, that the choice you made. . . . At some point very early on, I think, you made the choice that sculpture was your, I guess, primary medium, clay was your material, and so then you moved from there.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But are you aware of any [sort of] conscious connection that you made, in making that choice, a conscious connection to this tradition and what it may have meant in the past, in ancient times?

VIOLA FREY: In terms of the ceramic tradition, th

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, the use of clay and sculpture-sculptural figures and the meaning that these figures may have had for cultures in the past. Was that something that you wanted to plug into? But in modern times, of

course.

VIOLA FREY: I think the model was always there, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, you certainly weren't moving in the prevalent direction of abstraction.

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's very much the other way. It's the figurative tradition ____ ____.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, but when I did my outline in my backyard in the middle seventies, that was one of the options, was abstraction. And just the [forces], whatever you want to call it, took over and the figure dominated. Which was completely not expected on my part.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really? Not expected?

VIOLA FREY: No. Because I liked abstract things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why do you suppose that was that the figure sort of won out, if you will, in terms of your chosen....

VIOLA FREY: I think because of my background. It comes from, you know, grandmothers-very strong grandmothers-it comes from personal experience, which a lot of art comes from, anyway, starts from. You know, the National Geographic was a magazine that I looked at a lot, when I was. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I can remember you saying that.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, when I was a. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's turn this over now.

Session 2, Tape 1, Side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Viola Frey, session two, tape one, side B. Viola, you mentioned the National Geographic, that at an early stage you ____ ____.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, it's all in color, you know. They had a lot of color in National Geographic. But you got it at the library, and since we were in a rural location we were able to check things out including bound volumes of National Geographic. And I used to copy things from the National Geographic. And so I noticed this woman that appeared throughout the pages, and I called her Mrs. National Geographic [_____] (Grosvenor?)-Ed.]. She was the one that funded the whole thing, and she was photographed riding things like an ostrich, which was an amazing sight in a magazine. Seated at the base of a pyramid. This is in issue after issue, she would appear. And then she would be on a path in Africa with tribal leaders around her.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

VIOLA FREY; Yeah, she was a wonderful figure. And she would be dressed like a proper lady would have dressed at that time. This would have been in the 1950s and sixties.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And she was somehow an important personage for you?

VIOLA FREY: Yes. Oh, yes, because she was out in the public; she wasn't private. And I saw her as a figure of substance. She had her own money, for one thing. And so she became the model for the first of the Grandmothers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. I somehow thought in my readings that these referred to your own grandmother, but at least women you knew in your community, in Lodi.

VIOLA FREY: That's right. But I did. They looked just like her. She was just typical, stereotypical. And the grandmothers-certainly in my community-certainly looked like that-you know, with the gloves. And I didn't ever use the gloves [in the sculpture-Ed.]. I couldn't bear to cover hands up, felt they were too important. But other than that the clothes all. . . . All the clothes that I've used on the women that I've done I had to go to flea markets or to second-hand stores and have that moment of recognition where you recognize something and then you have to look again. It's that André Breton moment where you can't discard; it jerks your head around.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that's how these costumes. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, they're all real dresses. I never could make anything up.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what did you do with these dresses? Put them on a mannequin, a ____ [vine]?

VIOLA FREY: On a clothes hanger, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just hang them up?

VIOLA FREY: That's enough, yeah. Because you could get the clothing details-and shoes, especially the shoes-without having a model.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you actually. . . . Did you dress up models, though, on occasion and maybe photograph them or draw from them before translating it to your sculpture?

VIOLA FREY: Ummm, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No. So you really worked from these finds.

VIOLA FREY: Yes. I had to have the finds in order to make them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the name of the. . . . Do you remember the name of the woman in National Geographic? What was she? The publisher?

VIOLA FREY: She was the publisher, the editor, or. . . . She was the big-wig, the person who controlled it all, you could tell. No one else got photographed at the foot of the pyramid, believe me, but she did. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: How interesting. So here was a successful, powerful woman, and that must have been part of the appeal for you.

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, in a sense-although I doubt that you would ever want to limit yourself in this way. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . there was an undercurrent from the beginning of making a statement, a kind of feminist statement.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Putting women at center stage.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. That's probably true. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you felt, presumably, that through your own work this is how you were achieving it for yourself.

VIOLA FREY: That's right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that makes sense. That makes sense. What about. . . . I don't want to get too much at this point- because I'm not sure if I'm up to it-into technical aspects of your work. I know that you. . . . Or at least, I. . . .

VIOLA FREY: My work was always larger than anyone else's for the time. You know, when you look back, of course, what looked large when you made it does not necessarily look large now anymore. But when it was being made they were always large.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I know that this is covered elsewhere, but I suppose we ought to touch on it a bit. And I don't to dwell, again, on the technique. But on the other hand, you set for yourself a challenge. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . a problem. And tell me how you met that challenge. I'm thinking especially of ____.

VIOLA FREY: Changing [the, to] clay bodies, which was really important. Changing it to a body that would go large. Which, in clay, you always have those technical problems. And the painting that went with it. I did do a lot of painting in the seventies and early eighties.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean not painting on the figures but. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Just straight painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . straight painting. Why did you do that? That seems almost divergent.

VIOLA FREY: Because I thought that was the only way to establish oneself as an artist was to show that as an artist that I was multifaceted, that I could work in other media. So no one could put me in a box and limit me. That was the basic. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It seemed to be pretty important for you. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . that goal of not getting boxed in.

VIOLA FREY: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why is that? Is there. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Probably because I had so many boxes around me, you know. When you count Arneson, Voukos, they all had their own little containers, you know, that they were part of. I think that was probably an influence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about when you were growing up? I don't want to go back to biography too much, but it seems not unreasonable that your desire for some latitude, some scope. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . might reflect certain limitations that you had in your experience as a child or as a young woman.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, probably.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is there anything specifically that you can think of?

VIOLA FREY: Just being stuck in the middle of a vineyard wasn't enough for me. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Some people would think that's great. You could drink wine all the time.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. No, I had to go on the back of the truck to the winery. No, it was not idyllic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's right. I think you've told us already that you were determined early on to get away from that.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, that's it. That's true, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: To set it behind you. Why don't you tell me, step by step, but in simple terms how you came to create, from a technical standpoint, the methods that created these large figures. How do you do it?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I guess it comes early because it has to do with hand construction and understanding that clay doesn't have to be thrown on the wheel, it doesn't have to be modeled carefully, that you could use it with a certain sense of freedom. That was all part of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why don't you take me step by step through the process-can you do that?-of making one of these big figures?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Well, I start from the ground on up, which is very logical when you think about it. The other people went through a lot of different ways. My work is very direct. Arneson would have worked with molds. His heads were made from molds. Now it wasn't until very late in his career that he worked directly. So my work is very direct, I guess, as I would describe it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you make drawings, initially, to get the concept?

VIOLA FREY: No drawings. I draw because I feel that as an artist you have an obligation to do that. So the connection between the drawings and the sculpture is much more indirect.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So they're not studies for your big pieces? These drawings are. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Just indirectly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Indirectly.

VIOLA FREY: What they are are the world. In other words, as an artist you only do what you can do, you know. You can't do any more or any less than that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you said you start from the ground up and. . . . Think of me as somebody very unsophisticated about the medium.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Well, I mean, but you know about being in a garden. You plant a seed and it grows. And that's basically the same way that these things are thought of.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's the seed, then?

VIOLA FREY: Oneself, I guess. So it's probably very primitive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, take an example. Let's be specific about this. You know, you can choose a work that would be, say, a particularly prominent, interesting one. Well, choose one of your best known and meaningful works.

VIOLA FREY: Okay, like perhaps the two figures in the Metropolitan Museum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

VIOLA FREY: The Two Grandmothers. And they are very similar but they're not identical. So I always like the idea of having the eye be active, not passive. Not allowing the viewer to be passive when looking at the work. And so doubled, you would do that, because they'd look from one to the other, and they'd never be able to rest. So there are a lot of formal issues in the work, so to speak. More so than with. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like what? Speak of the formal issues.

VIOLA FREY: Well, not being passive. The activity that the eye. . . . The fact that the hand always had to get involved in the work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Meaning your hand? The artist's?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, the artist's. The hand of the artist was important. And that's why the surfaces are the way they are. They're not smooth. They're not carved and cut down because I don't think that the work has any resting place, you know? It's always coming and going.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The Grandmother series was done in the late seventies, is that right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because, I mean, here's one example in this catalog, I guess from one of Rena Bransten's shows?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is, probably '88, was this show. Well, I mean, for instance, here's the double grandmothers right here, not the one. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, those are the ones that are in the Metropolitan.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, these are the ones? Yeah, so the Met acquired these then. These are from 1982.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is called Double Grandmothers in Black and White [Dresses].

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. A lot of thinking about what is a double? And what's a twin? You know, I didn't want to make twins. I hate the idea of twins, anyway.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why, because of those guys in art school?

VIOLA FREY: Well, because those little old ladies to that go around identically dressed as twins.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like those ones in San Francisco that everybody knows?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. But. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how did you construct these?

VIOLA FREY: From the ground up, from the feet first.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And are these in blocks? Are these in separate blocks, which is the way you do some of your.
. . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, all of the big. . . . I mean, that's how you solve the. . . .

VIOLA FREY: You have to separate them. Because my other problem was, if I wanted to participate in the world and not be an [art burt artist, good artists, output artist] I had to have work that could move. And I would have had almost insurmountable problems if I had had work that was monolithic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you come to this revelation that this is the way to do it? Because I don't know of other examples of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe I'm just ignorant, but it seems to me this was, for you at least, a kind of discovery of your own....

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . the way to achieve this.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you create these elements-again, technically-speaking. . . . It's like a puzzle almost, isn't it?

VIOLA FREY: Well, it becomes a puzzle. . . . Well, for me, they become almost part of the piece. And you can see how much more cleaner the divisions are now than they were in the beginning. But in the sixties I cut figures apart after I made them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

VIOLA FREY: And that was so stupid. We all do stupid things and that was. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so that's how you made them that they could move around, you mean?

VIOLA FREY: No, that's how they could be moved. But not easily.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

VIOLA FREY: You know, they still had to have an armature. I was not someone. . . . From the high school time I know that I was never anyone who could deal with wood or saws because I was not allowed to take wood shop. [chuckles] You know, that's just the way it was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Gee, your career could be entirely different if you _____. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, it could. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so you then, actually, in the more primitive, early stage, to solve that problem of large scale that then still could be moved around, you would cut them up and then so they could be disassembled and reassembled?

VIOLA FREY: Right. But not easily. Not easily enough.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so then you finally figured out at some point, "Well, wait a minute. Why not just create. . . ."

VIOLA FREY: Well, I looked at buildings, architecture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

VIOLA FREY: If you look at architecture, it's the mind that says, "I'm going to look at every damn brick," or "I'm going to look at the piece as a whole." So it's a mental problem. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So then you really began to create modular works. Not interchangeable modular.

VIOLA FREY: No, but modular, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Then do you fire them all. . . .

VIOLA FREY: In pieces, and that's the other thing that makes it possible, that low tech equipment that's used. And I really like the electric kiln, which also made this stuff possible-the increase in scale from electric kiln versus working with a gas kiln.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's intriguing. What about the painting? What about the colors that. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, the painting came from the outdoor workspace where I look at them in a natural light. And so one day would be a rainy day and everything would be cool and gray, and then the next day it would be warm and so forth. So all of that was part of the. . . .
[Interruption in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: We were talking about outdoors and the importance of that for your color, right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what did you just say?

VIOLA FREY: Local color is what I used when I lived in San Francisco and had just an indoor space. And so in Oakland, I had to work outside, and the reason that. . . . I thought all of these things out methodically. Nothing was left to chance. I mean, I felt that I needed space to look at the work outside, not just an indoor light. Well, you can imagine if you want to look at something for a long time-in my case, it turned in some instances into a year or longer of looking at the work-that you had to keep it interesting and a fixed- light position never becomes interesting. If you talk to artists or people that look at work, after a while they no longer even see the piece under fixed light. And I wanted that mental activity of someone actually looking at the work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you know what this sounds like to me? Very much like what the impressionists discovered. And I never would have thought of that in connection with your work, but what you describe-at least as you've described it now-has very much to do with the changes that are brought by weather and time of day and season.

VIOLA FREY: That's right, yeah. Yeah, and the painting was part of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think that this-I don't want to put words in your mouth-but do you think that this, then, is an aspect of what we described earlier as a universal quality of your work?

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, there's the specific, but what you're describing is then. . . .

VIOLA FREY: The visual. Yeah, the. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . more of a general encompassing. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Or as they describe it now, the visual dynamics.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that what it is? [chuckles] And so this then became a concern of yours when you moved outdoors. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . which I guess was in the mid seventies. Is that right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And presumably then that pointed you, if not in a new direction, at least it expanded the _____.

VIOLA FREY: Yes. And also it was my own direction, too. It didn't belong to anyone else. I always did not want to be overly influenced by other people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I used the word impressionism and you didn't object, but how do you feel about that? Do you _____?

VIOLA FREY: All those little dabs of color? Well, you could say that the work that was done in the early eighties was about a lot of dabs of color. That's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And also then this other issue of observing the same thing under different conditions.

VIOLA FREY: Over a period of years, yeah. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just like Monet with the cathedral and the _____?

VIOLA FREY: But in my case it was my own work that I was studying. And I had five luxurious years to do that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So some of the works. . . . Well, you couldn't change them, could you, once they were _____?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, oh no. You could change them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you change them?

VIOLA FREY: Well, because of the way I glazed. I glazed work that was. . . . What I wanted was to work on work that had color on it while I was working on it. So I would have the legs and the skirt sort of half-glazed with color and fired and I'd be working with wet clay on top of it. That was exciting for me. And I don't think anyone else ever did quite that, that way, to work as an artist and not as a product or as an object.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So these changes were over time and then in a fascinating way was a reflection of your own growth as an artist.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which, in sculpture seems most unusual. In painting. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, in sculpture it is extremely unusual, because people are so geared to making products, objects, and they're never encouraged to play.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so thanks to working out of doors you had this opportunity to really, I guess in a way, push sculpture into a different. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Another, on another level, I think so, yeah. But, you know, then again, who cares? [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we do. Because we're taping you.

VIOLA FREY: [still laughing] Yeah, okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it occurs to me that. . . . I saw recently this Neri show. . . . Actually Joan Brown and Neri down at [Vigand, Gigand], is that the name of the gallery there?

VIOLA FREY: Yes. Oh, I know which one that is, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, at Notre Dame College.

VIOLA FREY: Thiebaud and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, but this show is was. . . .

VIOLA FREY: . . . is at Notre Dame. Yes, I know. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Most recently it was at [Les show, Leshow, last show] and it's over now, of when Joan Brown and Manuel Neri were together. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and their collaborative efforts.

VIOLA FREY: And, you know, those things all broke up because of violence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean their relationship? Yeah. But Neri at that time, besides collaborating very closely with Joan, where sometimes they worked on the same work, which is an interesting, sort of positive side of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Collaboration, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Also, I saw [in] a couple of his sculptures, they were given dates like 1964 and 1980 or '79, so he must have. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Many years [they'd, he'd] hack away at them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. So sort of independently he was doing something similar to what you were doing?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, and I think it was because of the area that we were in. There were no traditions here, nothing to hold us back. We had nothing to lose. Certainly nothing to gain, either. [laughed]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I guess if nobody is lining up at that point to buy each piece, then what are you going to do?

VIOLA FREY: You know, in the seventies you could buy a Peter Voukos big pot, you know, a very nice one, for \$75.00. I mean, the prices were nothing. Bob Arneson, it was the same deal. The prices were so cheap. They didn't even begin to cover the cost of making the work. You had to make it because you loved to make it. And you could afford to make it. As an artist I've always . . . you know, you always have to watch your money and that's one of the things. . . . You can either afford to make something or not afford to make something. And if I couldn't afford it, I didn't make it. And that's the reason why Peter's were smaller in the beginning.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. Well, what about this? If then. . . . Or when your work was more sought, how did that affect this process of contemplation, if you will? And adjustment and so forth?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I always felt that everything had its time and place and that there always had to be change, that change was an effective model. That. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But nowadays your work is much in demand. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and you have commissions. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I always remember Manuel Neri's words, which were, "You go with the flow." [laughs] I'm not quite as easy as Neri is but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you wouldn't hold back a work-if it, say, has been commissioned and it's assigned to be in a certain space-you wouldn't hold it back because you felt it needed more gestation, if you will, in the process of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Oh, I've attempted to do that, sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You would?

VIOLA FREY: But it wasn't . . . never a commission. People don't commission my kind of things. They're not for commissions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They don't? What about your piece down in Old Town down in Pasadena, for instance?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, or the piece in Des Moines. Those are the exceptions. But those are under very sort of wonderful what you would call patrons. In other words, it was not a committee. There's no way that my work will ever go through a committee. Because committees can think of too many things. You know, "Where's the woman?" "Where's the ethnic representation? On and on. And so I don't get many of those commissions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because so much of your work is, almost by definition, public in nature.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it exists in a public space.

VIOLA FREY: I worked a lot with [_____-Ed.] Hall's book on the hidden dimension [_____-Ed.]. It's a wonderful book where he talks about spaces and sizes. Intimate size and then the personal size and then public size. And when I was in my backyard studio, I knew that I could not go to a public scale. I did not have the space for it. I looked at my space, and I knew that there was no way that I could do that scale, and when I first moved into that house that whole house was planned as an artist's working space for me. And it was about the. . . . It got so cold I have the heater on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were talking about public space, private space, working in private space and scale. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. And so when I moved into that house it was an awful house. I knew that I was committing artistic suicide by moving into a house in 1975. Because artists had artists' spaces, and since I did not drive I didn't have ways to get around to other people's studios very much. And so that was part of it. I looked at that, I looked at my back yard and my spaces, and I figured, if I did one piece like the kind I really felt I wanted to do, all of my space would be used up. A big horizontal space. And not only that, but in a house it would all be used up. And so all the paintings were vertical painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [That's nice. I see.] So they really do then conform and respond to an environment.

VIOLA FREY: To an actual space, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Our light is going here. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, the use of clay and sculpture-sculptural figures and the meaning that these figures may have had for cultures in the past. Was that something that you wanted to plug into? But in modern times, of course.

VIOLA FREY: I think the model was always there, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, you certainly weren't moving in the prevalent direction of abstraction.

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's very much the other way. It's the figurative tradition ____ ____.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, but when I did my outline in my backyard in the middle seventies, that was one of the options, was abstraction. And just the [forces], whatever you want to call it, took over and the figure dominated. Which was completely not expected on my part.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really? Not expected?

VIOLA FREY: No. Because I liked abstract things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why do you suppose that was that the figure sort of won out, if you will, in terms of your chosen....

VIOLA FREY: I think because of my background. It comes from, you know, grandmothers-very strong grandmothers-it comes from personal experience, which a lot of art comes from, anyway, starts from. You know, the National Geographic was a magazine that I looked at a lot, when I was. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I can remember you saying that.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, when I was a. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's turn this over now.

Session 2, Tape 1, Side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Viola Frey, session two, tape one, side B. Viola, you mentioned the National Geographic, that at an early stage you ____ ____.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, it's all in color, you know. They had a lot of color in National Geographic. But you got it at the library, and since we were in a rural location we were able to check things out including bound volumes of National Geographic. And I used to copy things from the National Geographic. And so I noticed this woman that appeared throughout the pages, and I called her Mrs. National Geographic [____ (Grosvenor?)-Ed.]. She was the one that funded the whole thing, and she was photographed riding things like an ostrich, which was an amazing sight in a magazine. Seated at the base of a pyramid. This is in issue after issue, she would appear. And then she would be on a path in Africa with tribal leaders around her.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

VIOLA FREY; Yeah, she was a wonderful figure. And she would be dressed like a proper lady would have dressed at that time. This would have been in the 1950s and sixties.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And she was somehow an important personage for you?

VIOLA FREY: Yes. Oh, yes, because she was out in the public; she wasn't private. And I saw her as a figure of substance. She had her own money, for one thing. And so she became the model for the first of the Grandmothers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. I somehow thought in my readings that these referred to your own grandmother, but at least women you knew in your community, in Lodi.

VIOLA FREY: That's right. But I did. They looked just like her. She was just typical, stereotypical. And the grandmothers-certainly in my community-certainly looked like that-you know, with the gloves. And I didn't ever use the gloves [in the sculpture-Ed.]. I couldn't bear to cover hands up, felt they were too important. But other than that the clothes all. . . . All the clothes that I've used on the women that I've done I had to go to flea markets or to second-hand stores and have that moment of recognition where you recognize something and then you have to look again. It's that André Breton moment where you can't discard; it jerks your head around.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that's how these costumes. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, they're all real dresses. I never could make anything up.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what did you do with these dresses? Put them on a mannequin, a ____ [vine]?

VIOLA FREY: On a clothes hanger, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just hang them up?

VIOLA FREY: That's enough, yeah. Because you could get the clothing details-and shoes, especially the shoes-without having a model.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you actually. . . . Did you dress up models, though, on occasion and maybe photograph them or draw from them before translating it to your sculpture?

VIOLA FREY: Ummm, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No. So you really worked from these finds.

VIOLA FREY: Yes. I had to have the finds in order to make them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the name of the. . . . Do you remember the name of the woman in National Geographic? What was she? The publisher?

VIOLA FREY: She was the publisher, the editor, or. . . . She was the big-wig, the person who controlled it all, you could tell. No one else got photographed at the foot of the pyramid, believe me, but she did. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: How interesting. So here was a successful, powerful woman, and that must have been part of the appeal for you.

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, in a sense-although I doubt that you would ever want to limit yourself in this way. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . there was an undercurrent from the beginning of making a statement, a kind of feminist statement.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Putting women at center stage.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. That's probably true. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you felt, presumably, that through your own work this is how you were achieving it for yourself.

VIOLA FREY: That's right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that makes sense. That makes sense. What about. . . . I don't want to get too much at this point-because I'm not sure if I'm up to it-into technical aspects of your work. I know that you. . . . Or at least, I. . . .

VIOLA FREY: My work was always larger than anyone else's for the time. You know, when you look back, of course, what looked large when you made it does not necessarily look large now anymore. But when it was being made they were always large.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I know that this is covered elsewhere, but I suppose we ought to touch on it a bit. And I don't to dwell, again, on the technique. But on the other hand, you set for yourself a challenge. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . a problem. And tell me how you met that challenge. I'm thinking especially of ____.

VIOLA FREY: Changing [the, to] clay bodies, which was really important. Changing it to a body that would go large. Which, in clay, you always have those technical problems. And the painting that went with it. I did do a lot of painting in the seventies and early eighties.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean not painting on the figures but. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Just straight painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . straight painting. Why did you do that? That seems almost divergent.

VIOLA FREY: Because I thought that was the only way to establish oneself as an artist was to show that as an artist that I was multifaceted, that I could work in other media. So no one could put me in a box and limit me. That was the basic. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It seemed to be pretty important for you. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . that goal of not getting boxed in.

VIOLA FREY: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why is that? Is there. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Probably because I had so many boxes around me, you know. When you count Arneson, Voulkos, they all had their own little containers, you know, that they were part of. I think that was probably an influence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about when you were growing up? I don't want to go back to biography too much, but it seems not unreasonable that your desire for some latitude, some scope. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . might reflect certain limitations that you had in your experience as a child or as a young woman.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, probably.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is there anything specifically that you can think of?

VIOLA FREY: Just being stuck in the middle of a vineyard wasn't enough for me. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Some people would think that's great. You could drink wine all the time.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. No, I had to go on the back of the truck to the winery. No, it was not idyllic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's right. I think you've told us already that you were determined early on to get away from that.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, that's it. That's true, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: To set it behind you. Why don't you tell me, step by step, but in simple terms how you came to create, from a technical standpoint, the methods that created these large figures. How do you do it?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I guess it comes early because it has to do with hand construction and understanding that clay doesn't have to be thrown on the wheel, it doesn't have to be modeled carefully, that you could use it with a certain sense of freedom. That was all part of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why don't you take me step by step through the process-can you do that?-of making one of these big figures?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Well, I start from the ground on up, which is very logical when you think about it. The other people went through a lot of different ways. My work is very direct. Arneson would have worked with molds. His heads were made from molds. Now it wasn't until very late in his career that he worked directly. So my work is very direct, I guess, as I would describe it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you make drawings, initially, to get the concept?

VIOLA FREY: No drawings. I draw because I feel that as an artist you have an obligation to do that. So the connection between the drawings and the sculpture is much more indirect.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So they're not studies for your big pieces? These drawings are. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Just indirectly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Indirectly.

VIOLA FREY: What they are are the world. In other words, as an artist you only do what you can do, you know. You can't do any more or any less than that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you said you start from the ground up and. . . . Think of me as somebody very unsophisticated about the medium.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Well, I mean, but you know about being in a garden. You plant a seed and it grows. And that's basically the same way that these things are thought of.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's the seed, then?

VIOLA FREY: Oneself, I guess. So it's probably very primitive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, take an example. Let's be specific about this. You know, you can choose a work that would be, say, a particularly prominent, interesting one. Well, choose one of your best known and meaningful works.

VIOLA FREY: Okay, like perhaps the two figures in the Metropolitan Museum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

VIOLA FREY: The Two Grandmothers. And they are very similar but they're not identical. So I always like the idea of having the eye be active, not passive. Not allowing the viewer to be passive when looking at the work. And so doubled, you would do that, because they'd look from one to the other, and they'd never be able to rest. So there are a lot of formal issues in the work, so to speak. More so than with. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like what? Speak of the formal issues.

VIOLA FREY: Well, not being passive. The activity that the eye. . . . The fact that the hand always had to get involved in the work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Meaning your hand? The artist's?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, the artist's. The hand of the artist was important. And that's why the surfaces are the way they are. They're not smooth. They're not carved and cut down because I don't think that the work has any resting place, you know? It's always coming and going.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The Grandmother series was done in the late seventies, is that right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because, I mean, here's one example in this catalog, I guess from one of Rena Bransten's shows?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is, probably '88, was this show. Well, I mean, for instance, here's the double grandmothers right here, not the one. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, those are the ones that are in the Metropolitan.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, these are the ones? Yeah, so the Met acquired these then. These are from 1982.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is called Double Grandmothers in Black and White [Dresses].

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. A lot of thinking about what is a double? And what's a twin? You know, I didn't want to make twins. I hate the idea of twins, anyway.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why, because of those guys in art school?

VIOLA FREY: Well, because those little old ladies to that go around identically dressed as twins.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like those ones in San Francisco that everybody knows?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. But. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how did you construct these?

VIOLA FREY: From the ground up, from the feet first.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And are these in blocks? Are these in separate blocks, which is the way you do some of your.
. . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, all of the big. . . . I mean, that's how you solve the. . . .

VIOLA FREY: You have to separate them. Because my other problem was, if I wanted to participate in the world and not be an [art burt artist, good artists, output artist] I had to have work that could move. And I would have had almost insurmountable problems if I had had work that was monolithic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you come to this revelation that this is the way to do it? Because I don't know of other examples of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe I'm just ignorant, but it seems to me this was, for you at least, a kind of discovery of your own....

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . the way to achieve this.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you create these elements-again, technically-speaking. . . . It's like a puzzle almost, isn't it?

VIOLA FREY: Well, it becomes a puzzle. . . . Well, for me, they become almost part of the piece. And you can see how much more cleaner the divisions are now than they were in the beginning. But in the sixties I cut figures apart after I made them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

VIOLA FREY: And that was so stupid. We all do stupid things and that was. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so that's how you made them that they could move around, you mean?

VIOLA FREY: No, that's how they could be moved. But not easily.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

VIOLA FREY: You know, they still had to have an armature. I was not someone. . . . From the high school time I know that I was never anyone who could deal with wood or saws because I was not allowed to take wood shop. [chuckles] You know, that's just the way it was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Gee, your career could be entirely different if you ____ . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, it could. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so you then, actually, in the more primitive, early stage, to solve that problem of large scale that then still could be moved around, you would cut them up and then so they could be disassembled and reassembled?

VIOLA FREY: Right. But not easily. Not easily enough.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so then you finally figured out at some point, "Well, wait a minute. Why not just create. . ."

VIOLA FREY: Well, I looked at buildings, architecture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

VIOLA FREY: If you look at architecture, it's the mind that says, "I'm going to look at every damn brick," or "I'm going to look at the piece as a whole." So it's a mental problem. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So then you really began to create modular works. Not interchangeable modular.

VIOLA FREY: No, but modular, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Then do you fire them all. . . .

VIOLA FREY: In pieces, and that's the other thing that makes it possible, that low tech equipment that's used. And I really like the electric kiln, which also made this stuff possible-the increase in scale from electric kiln versus working with a gas kiln.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's intriguing. What about the painting? What about the colors that. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, the painting came from the outdoor workspace where I look at them in a natural light. And so one day would be a rainy day and everything would be cool and gray, and then the next day it would be warm and so forth. So all of that was part of the. . . .
[Interruption in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: We were talking about outdoors and the importance of that for your color, right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what did you just say?

VIOLA FREY: Local color is what I used when I lived in San Francisco and had just an indoor space. And so in Oakland, I had to work outside, and the reason that. . . . I thought all of these things out methodically. Nothing was left to chance. I mean, I felt that I needed space to look at the work outside, not just an indoor light. Well, you can imagine if you want to look at something for a long time-in my case, it turned in some instances into a year or longer of looking at the work-that you had to keep it interesting and a fixed- light position never becomes interesting. If you talk to artists or people that look at work, after a while they no longer even see the piece under fixed light. And I wanted that mental activity of someone actually looking at the work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you know what this sounds like to me? Very much like what the impressionists discovered. And I never would have thought of that in connection with your work, but what you describe-at least as you've described it now-has very much to do with the changes that are brought by weather and time of day and season.

VIOLA FREY: That's right, yeah. Yeah, and the painting was part of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think that this-I don't want to put words in your mouth-but do you think that this, then, is an aspect of what we described earlier as a universal quality of your work?

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, there's the specific, but what you're describing is then. . . .

VIOLA FREY: The visual. Yeah, the. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . more of a general encompassing. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Or as they describe it now, the visual dynamics.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that what it is? [chuckles] And so this then became a concern of yours when you moved outdoors. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . which I guess was in the mid seventies. Is that right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And presumably then that pointed you, if not in a new direction, at least it expanded the ____.

VIOLA FREY: Yes. And also it was my own direction, too. It didn't belong to anyone else. I always did not want to be overly influenced by other people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I used the word impressionism and you didn't object, but how do you feel about that? Do you ____ ____?

VIOLA FREY: All those little dabs of color? Well, you could say that the work that was done in the early eighties was about a lot of dabs of color. That's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And also then this other issue of observing the same thing under different conditions.

VIOLA FREY: Over a period of years, yeah. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just like Monet with the cathedral and the ____?

VIOLA FREY: But in my case it was my own work that I was studying. And I had five luxurious years to do that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So some of the works. . . . Well, you couldn't change them, could you, once they were ____?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, oh no. You could change them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you change them?

VIOLA FREY: Well, because of the way I glazed. I glazed work that was. . . . What I wanted was to work on work that had color on it while I was working on it. So I would have the legs and the skirt sort of half-glazed with color and fired and I'd be working with wet clay on top of it. That was exciting for me. And I don't think anyone else ever did quite that, that way, to work as an artist and not as a product or as an object.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So these changes were over time and then in a fascinating way was a reflection of your own growth as an artist.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which, in sculpture seems most unusual. In painting. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, in sculpture it is extremely unusual, because people are so geared to making products, objects, and they're never encouraged to play.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so thanks to working out of doors you had this opportunity to really, I guess in a way, push sculpture into a different. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Another, on another level, I think so, yeah. But, you know, then again, who cares? [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we do. Because we're taping you.

VIOLA FREY: [still laughing] Yeah, okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it occurs to me that. . . . I saw recently this Neri show. . . . Actually Joan Brown and Neri down at [Vigand, Gigand], is that the name of the gallery there?

VIOLA FREY: Yes. Oh, I know which one that is, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, at Notre Dame College.

VIOLA FREY: Thiebaud and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, but this show is was. . . .

VIOLA FREY: . . . is at Notre Dame. Yes, I know. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Most recently it was at [Les show, Leshow, last show] and it's over now, of when Joan Brown and Manuel Neri were together. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and their collaborative efforts.

VIOLA FREY: And, you know, those things all broke up because of violence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean their relationship? Yeah. But Neri at that time, besides collaborating very closely with Joan, where sometimes they worked on the same work, which is an interesting, sort of positive side of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Collaboration, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Also, I saw [in] a couple of his sculptures, they were given dates like 1964 and 1980 or '79, so he must have. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Many years [they'd, he'd] hack away at them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. So sort of independently he was doing something similar to what you were doing?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, and I think it was because of the area that we were in. There were no traditions here, nothing to hold us back. We had nothing to lose. Certainly nothing to gain, either. [laughed]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I guess if nobody is lining up at that point to buy each piece, then what are you going to do?

VIOLA FREY: You know, in the seventies you could buy a Peter Voukos big pot, you know, a very nice one, for \$75.00. I mean, the prices were nothing. Bob Arneson, it was the same deal. The prices were so cheap. They didn't even begin to cover the cost of making the work. You had to make it because you loved to make it. And you could afford to make it. As an artist I've always . . . you know, you always have to watch your money and that's one of the things. . . . You can either afford to make something or not afford to make something. And if I couldn't afford it, I didn't make it. And that's the reason why Peter's were smaller in the beginning.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. Well, what about this? If then. . . . Or when your work was more sought, how did that affect this process of contemplation, if you will? And adjustment and so forth?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I always felt that everything had its time and place and that there always had to be change, that change was an effective model. That. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But nowadays your work is much in demand. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and you have commissions. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I always remember Manuel Neri's words, which were, "You go with the flow." [laughs] I'm not quite as easy as Neri is but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you wouldn't hold back a work-if it, say, has been commissioned and it's assigned to be in a certain space-you wouldn't hold it back because you felt it needed more gestation, if you will, in the process of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Oh, I've attempted to do that, sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You would?

VIOLA FREY: But it wasn't . . . never a commission. People don't commission my kind of things. They're not for commissions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They don't? What about your piece down in Old Town down in Pasadena, for instance?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, or the piece in Des Moines. Those are the exceptions. But those are under very sort of wonderful what you would call patrons. In other words, it was not a committee. There's no way that my work will ever go through a committee. Because committees can think of too many things. You know, "Where's the woman?" "Where's the ethnic representation? On and on. And so I don't get many of those commissions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because so much of your work is, almost by definition, public in nature.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it exists in a public space.

VIOLA FREY: I worked a lot with [_____-Ed.] Hall's book on the hidden dimension [_____-Ed.]. It's a wonderful book where he talks about spaces and sizes. Intimate size and then the personal size and then public size. And when I was in my backyard studio, I knew that I could not go to a public scale. I did not have the space for it. I looked at my space, and I knew that there was no way that I could do that scale, and when I first moved into that house that whole house was planned as an artist's working space for me. And it was about the. . . . It got so cold I have the heater on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were talking about public space, private space, working in private space and scale. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. And so when I moved into that house it was an awful house. I knew that I was committing artistic suicide by moving into a house in 1975. Because artists had artists' spaces, and since I did not drive I didn't have ways to get around to other people's studios very much. And so that was part of it. I looked at that, I looked at my back yard and my spaces, and I figured, if I did one piece like the kind I really felt I wanted to do, all of my space would be used up. A big horizontal space. And not only that, but in a house it would all be used up. And so all the paintings were vertical painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [That's nice. I see.] So they really do then conform and respond to an environment.

VIOLA FREY: To an actual space, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Our light is going here. . . .

JUNE 19, 1995

Session 3, Tape 1, Side A

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a third interview session with Viola Frey in her Oakland studio. The date is June 19, 1995, the interviewer for the Archives, again, Paul Karlstrom. Well, today we should try to wrap this up.

VIOLA FREY: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We've had two sessions, and I think that we can surely do that. Last time, as we were discussing earlier, we talked about. . . . Well, we ended up talking about some technical matters, and you were describing just how you create your pieces.

VIOLA FREY: From the ground up, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. From the ground up, and I have a few more sort of loose ends regarding that and some other matters that I'd like to bring up. But first-I can't resist this-earlier when I first arrived you were sitting here where we've been conducting this interview watching the television with the sound off and listening to the radio with. . . . I don't know what program it was, but like a talk show, wasn't it?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. KGO, I think. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so I sat down and started watching it and thought that the sound was for the television naturally, and, interestingly enough, it seemed to match.

VIOLA FREY: They do match. It's strange but true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you said something about why you do that, why it interests you. It has to do with the audio and the visual, but they're not the same program.

VIOLA FREY: I've always liked radio, for one thing, because it allows the imagination to travel, and so I support the radio. Television I think is just . . . is wrong, you know, because it's both sound and visual.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It should be one or the other?

VIOLA FREY: I think so. Just my opinion. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so what do you get from . . . and what is your experience of this? Obviously you enjoy doing it because you weren't doing it for me. You were. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Right, yeah. I was automatic. My reason for it . . . probably because I grew up with radio, and I'd miss it if I didn't have it on. And television I don't miss, but I can't not have it on so. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you like the visual. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But doesn't it seem like two different things going on?

VIOLA FREY: I think it's the same culture, the same context. I think it's all part of the same.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You see it, really, less in terms of specifics, of specific information. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . than a reflection of the times and the culture.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How interesting. I don't know of anybody that watches television or listens to the radio quite that way.

VIOLA FREY: Well, background noise I think is what it's usually called.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so does it serve that function for you as well?

VIOLA FREY: It probably does, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you do that at home?

VIOLA FREY: Frequently, yeah. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm sure it has no connection to your work. Or does it?

VIOLA FREY: It might. It might. You know, just a lot of. . . . I want to say it's noise, but just a lot of background stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's funny. So it doesn't matter too much what channel it's on at any given time?

VIOLA FREY: No, it doesn't matter what channel or what. . . . What station is on matters a lot. Because bad noise is very, very irritating.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But bad visuals don't matter?

VIOLA FREY: Well, because they're never that ugly on television. They're always rather pretty.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because they have high production values? [laughs]

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, I mean the colors are always good no matter what program they are, so I always enjoy the color and the people. But just as a general flow.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you don't particularly want to hear what they have to say?

VIOLA FREY: No, what they have to say is usually meaningless.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I love it. I think you're right. Some of the worst things on television now but are most popular are the daytime-sometimes the prime time-but usually the daytime talk shows, and I think most cultural critics would say that we've come pretty close. . . . I don't know if it's an all-time low, but certainly. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, to doing away with culture. I think it's gone.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, it's phenomenal. But it's interesting how you've managed then to incorporate it into

your experience but also keep it at a distance.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You can choose what part you want. . . .

VIOLA FREY: That's right. And I do choose. If the visuals get really interesting then I pay attention to it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you a question. I don't want to reach too far on this, but carrying that idea, or that notion, into your own work-into your figures-let's think of them or these tableaux as something you might see on television. They have great colors. They're visually stimulating and pleasing I think to most people.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But they're silent.

VIOLA FREY: Isn't that nice? I love silence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, then, yeah. But what would they say if. . . . What would be appropriate for them?

VIOLA FREY: What would it be appropriate for them to say? Probably "Hello," "Goodbye." "How are you?" "How do you feel?" and, "I feel fine," so forth. Just the usual very ordinary conversations, as far as I'm concerned.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so you're not asking them to represent any profound thinking?

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or they themselves are perhaps not even aware of whole. . . .

VIOLA FREY; And hopefully nothing political.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that will eventually come up again as we talk about the meaning of the. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Even though they are political. But hopefully they're not too overt.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, food for thought, that's for sure. Let's, if we may, take a quick look at some of these loose ends.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, nothing of perhaps major importance but they're just things that I've noticed from my own notes. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . that I don't think we got to. Again, from some of the reading that I did about you preliminary to the interview, it mentioned-again, which article I'm not sure-in the 1950s your ceramics, according to this article, reflect an interest in contemporary Japanese pottery. I think we touched on that.

VIOLA FREY: But from the standpoint of rejection. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yeah. I didn't fall for it completely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you acknowledged it as an important part of the history of ceramics.

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yeah, I think every. . . . You know, you can't help but acknowledging some of that. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was it you were rejecting?

VIOLA FREY: The overwhelming pressure to be Japanese. It's hard to imagine in the arts the amount of pressure there was, the influence of Japan.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it was as much. . . . Was it that the Japanese craft, ceramics established standards that were to be emulated, to be achieved. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, one authority, a Rosanjin, who was called "the Picasso of the Japanese ceramic world," said that it would take 500 years . . . or 250 years for there to be a ceramic tradition in this country. We may not

have the tradition but we do have ceramics.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so, in many ways then, it was a dialogue or a debate between the whole notion of tradition. The requirement that you have. . . .

VIOLA FREY: The Rosanjin was someone from Japan who did not fall on the side of tradition. He fell on the side of being an artist first.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he was sympathetic to the situation in. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes. Yeah, [but they all, putdown].

PAUL KARLSTROM: You feel then that most serious ceramic artists or sculptors in this country would probably agree with that notion. They saw themselves as . . . their job as breaking ceramics. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, they probably see it all as crafts. I don't. I see it all as art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I mean the artist ceramists.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would you think it . . . would it be a fair statement from your viewpoint. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, I used to make jest of ceramic artists that were involved in painting bamboo leaves and things like that, and I always felt that those people were burying themselves. And I didn't want to be buried that way. So that was my take on it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Presumably the pioneers like, well, Pete Voukos and Arneson and others like that. . . .

VIOLA FREY: We all were seduced by Japanese ceramics at certain points.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They were, too, do you think?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it was like the renaissance tradition that the modernists had to break away from. In ceramics, to a certain degree, it was the oriental or the Japanese. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Well, in the 1960s-again according to my source-you turned to overglazed painting. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and then the observation was. . . .

VIOLA FREY: You don't know how difficult all of those things were when you didn't have the proper equipment, and even at a school like Arts and Crafts there was no place for electric kilns. Everything had to be gas-fired. It was awful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So how did you then solve these challenges?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I gradually got my own equipment. As a matter of fact, I feel that electric kilns saved ceramics from an early death.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes. Because gas kilns just were more costly to install, and electricity does a similar job without all of the excessive waste of fuel and all of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so this enabled you to apply color to your work in a different way, which is characteristic of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: As a painter would. Always as a painter would. Never as decoration. And that had its own interesting story, when you talk about surface not as decoration but as painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what is that story, for you, in your work?

VIOLA FREY: Well, it's the same actions and feelings that you get from painting. And you make a lot more mistakes, I guess is what you. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But the overglaze painting allows more flexibility presumably. Is that. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, with color, yes. You use the brush with more sensitivity. And the smell of china paint is very nice.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The smell?

VIOLA FREY: The French fat oil and the French lavender oil, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you were attracted to that?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes! [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: A remark was made . . . somebody said about china painting that it allows a complex of interrelated forms on the base structure. Does that mean anything to you?

VIOLA FREY: Well, yes, because always everything you painted had to be placed [as a handsome abstraction, it had some abstraction]. You couldn't just dab it on. So it kept you alert. I know, when I went to [a manufacturer A-7, Manufacturé Severn] in Paris, where . . . two, three, four times I think I went, the China painters there. . . . This one woman who had been a china painter for twenty-five years, she said, "Well, I mean I have no blanks," so I said, "Well, why don't you paint? You could paint a plate a year. At the end of twenty-five years you have twenty-five plates." Oh, no, she couldn't do that because she had no blanks. And then she said, "How will I fire them?" I said, "You can get an electric kiln. They're inexpensive." I mean, such little knowledge. So bound in, an example of just being tied like with a rope in a corner about the options.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. And unable to. . . .

VIOLA FREY: See out of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and see ____

VIOLA FREY: Everything she had a reason for.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why she couldn't.

VIOLA FREY: Why she couldn't, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so you see yourself and your whole career as finding the ways, you know, why you could, why this could be done.

VIOLA FREY: Right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then finding the way to do it. Well, I guess that then would represent very much a breaking with tradition, as you were saying earlier.

VIOLA FREY: But to be confronted with it so directly, embodied in a woman from China. But not only that it's so historical. She was a woman. She had never been head of the china painting department because they were all men. And believe me these men didn't do any painting themselves. As a matter of fact, in this case this particular person refinished furniture in his studio-whatever they call those there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So the china painting was just one aspect of his enterprise.

VIOLA FREY: Well, I mean, he did very little of it, and he was head.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, they're managers, .

VIOLA FREY: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, not those who are actually producing, creating, doing the work.

VIOLA FREY: Well, the amount of china painting that can be done is so little, because everything has to be

duplicated as it was in the past. And that is always the difficulty. How do you duplicate the past? Takes a lot of time and energy. So if you want to do the dinner set for the Legion of [the] Honor, which was one that had soldiers, and roosters, and chickens on the pathway and all of that, in order to copy it, they had to go to extraordinary efforts to copy it. You couldn't do any painterly shortcuts. And it was one of the reasons I wanted to go to Paris in the first place was that I always thought that the French, or France, well, they had tradition down. They knew what it was and they employed it very effectively, I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But not so much in this case. I mean, you saw this as a negative. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, in this case, no, both negative and good. It was negative because the china painter was obviously destroyed by that. But then she also had painted beautiful plates. Very traditional. She could paint, you know, eighteenth-century plates. She could do all kinds of different things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She was a reproducer.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: An imitator and a reproducer. Which almost nobody would, then, use in a definition of art.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Craft?

VIOLA FREY: Maybe, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Elsewhere in my reading about you, in talking about your paintings and drawings, this writer said they deal more directly with your own experience. What does that mean to you? Do you agree with that?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes. I don't see how you can do art if it doesn't . . . if it isn't part of your experience.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. But the implication here was that, within your work-and you're perhaps best known, I think, for ceramic sculpture-that within your own work the drawings and the paintings are the most directly connected or grow out of your life experience.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what does that mean? I mean. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, I mean, look at drawings. All of the. . . . Well, specifically they deal with the house that I had still have-in Oakland, and it's a. . . . Well, it deals with the house, in other words. I made nothing up. I think I talked about it a little bit before.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You did. Yeah, that's right.

VIOLA FREY: And that carried throughout. The carpet. . . . If [you, I] wanted a carpet, it was the carpet that was on the floor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it's really your environment. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . as much as the experience. I mean, obviously the sculpture-as far as I can tell; we'll talk more about it-comes very much out of your. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, I think a lot of that was done here. You know, away from my home studio. And just being able to see work indoors and out of doors was really essential as a general experience.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, do you see your work-this is related to that notion of work growing out of one's experience, one's life-do you see your work in terms of personal self-revelation? Is it revealing of you? If people looked at the work in the right way, thoughtfully, are they going to get real profound insight into Viola Frey, the woman?

VIOLA FREY: I think so, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because not all art. . . .

VIOLA FREY: . . . does that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . does that. Certainly to any great degree.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. But I think it does.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Again, about the drawings and paintings. . . . You know, here in your studio-in fact, on the first day I visited-I noticed that you have a lot of figure drawings and. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes. That was always my ideal when I was a student. And I guess I never changed from that. I always felt the figure was supreme. And it wasn't just the figure; it was also the things around the figure, obviously.

PAUL KARLSTROM: For instance, is that a pastel, hanging up on the wall up high?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that what that is?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. An old one, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Old one. There's a nude figure. I guess it's in the studio. There seems to be an. . . . Well, I can't tell. It looks like she's _____.

VIOLA FREY: Well, that was a thing that happened because of this studio that I had, that couldn't happen in my home studio because it was a different environment. And when I decided to bring a model into here to be able to draw the model directly. . . . Which I felt was one of the jobs that an artist had, which was to know how to draw the figure. I did painting, and then I did. . . . My home studio, much more painting because it was that kind of environment.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How often do you draw from life, as they say, here?

VIOLA FREY: Usually once a week.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Once a week?

VIOLA FREY: That's a lot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's a lot. Yeah. So that's a real commitment to that figurative tradition.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you see it simply as an exercise? Sort of hand/eye?

VIOLA FREY: Well, at the first stage it always is, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you use these figures then as a basis for your sculpture?

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not at all?

VIOLA FREY: Not unless it's coincidence. No, I don't make that connection.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you don't say, "Well it's time to do some new monumental figures. . . ."

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: ". . . I'm going to do some nude women-or men-I'm going to get a model and. . . ."

VIOLA FREY: I don't use them for that purpose, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So they're not idea works for your sculpture at all.

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What is the connection? Or is there one?

VIOLA FREY: The connection is the stuff that's in the drawing. The figure I don't want to say is immaterial, but it's not the most important thing. It's what's in the drawing. And that just has to do you know with things that in the past I've photographed them and I drew them, I used silhouettes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, when you say "what's in the drawings," do you mean the objects. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, the artifacts, the cultural accumulation.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so but you basically create that, then, here. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and these models come in and occupy that space which is precreated.

VIOLA FREY; Yeah. Right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you must-well, perhaps-you have this in mind when you pose the model, and do you choose some objects then to. . . .

VIOLA FREY: No, I don't put any object with the model. I do the model just for the model itself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, perhaps, it's not what you say-what's in the drawing or what's in the painting-but I gather it's not then even a single drawing or a painting but it's an accumulation. . . .

VIOLA FREY: The debris, probably, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . the debris, perhaps then in a number of different drawings that. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, that's why the titles are always very sort of open titles. You know, there would be like Western Civilization, The World, can't get any broader than that. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This sounds-this is just too neat, of course, I suppose-but it seems then to take us back to your childhood. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . with, I guess, it was your Dad that would accumulate and gather things. I mean, weren't there things all over the place?

VIOLA FREY: As a gatherer, yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, it sounds to me, in my simplistic mind, as very much the same way of looking at the world.

VIOLA FREY: The ____ might be, yeah. Probably is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: If you'll bear with me, one or two more loose ends. Again, in one of the articles written about you-this goes back to your New York period, or I gather it does-this author said that paintings of Manhattan and. . . . I think it was a she. . . . Mentioned several figures, particular artists, I would turn that question around in a minute and ask you if you could think of any artists that you were aware of at that time. But at any rate that paintings of Manhattan and especially urban mural art-and it didn't necessarily have to be only Manhattan-had a great influence on your later work. ____ ____ do you see it that way?

VIOLA FREY: Well, when I was in New York, which was in the early sixties, late fifties, some of the artists that I knew-Michael Lakokis, Catherine Choy, Jeff Schlanger-some of them just in clay, some of them not. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: They represented in their work New York as a subject? Is this the meaning of that [time]?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I don't. . . . They all represented themselves. Michael Lakokis did organic abstract expression. So it was maybe more of the surrealism, which was a line of work that [sort of, this early] Jackson Pollock was into and all of us were interested in it. It was sort of an underlying theme in a lot of the work and certainly of my early work there. And I would say organic surrealism is certainly related to surrealism.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think this is important, so unless I miscopied this. . . . Because let's face it, what people then . . . how they see you and your work is. . . . You collect, you accumulate debris and so forth. Well, the writing about you or any other artist becomes the debris of our history.

VIOLA FREY: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so here I am striving for the truth, whatever that may be. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and my reading of this woman's observations in some magazine was that, specifically, urban mural art, the murals themselves. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, I think that may have come up because I had a three-panel painting, which was of a man in a suit in a huge clutter of figurines [_____ -Ed.]. It was at the Whitney show, and he was exiting one of the doorways. [It, He] had columns that had hundreds of figurines in it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was that?

VIOLA FREY: That show was 1983, I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: 1983. And. . . .

VIOLA FREY: And that came from the figurines, when I used them and put them together, you know, into different compositions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I see. And so it's a matter of scale applied to sculpture. Obviously, you have huge figures. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Which you can't you can't play around with, so things have to happen around the figures. But. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so do you see that then as connected in some way to the large-scale murals, urban murals that you might have seen in New York?

VIOLA FREY: I never saw many murals in New York. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really, okay.

VIOLA FREY: But I did work at MOMA, so I can't say I was completely blind.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. So you see this whole issue of scale and complexity and adding elements as really unrelated to. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I see that as being part of California, the whole. . . . We used to call it funk, but I don't think it really was funk. You know, where the dichotomy between an inanimate object and something that was. . . . Well, I used to like a word called apalog, and it had to do with mechanical things and things from nature but not humans necess[arily]. . . .

Session 3, Tape 1, Side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, we're now continuing session three with Viola Frey. This is tape one, side B. Viola, you mentioned "funk," which in just a moment I'd like to pick up on because I think that is important, to maybe make some distinctions and draw some parallels. I have several catalogues here of yours-about you and your work-that I brought along. I want to mention one of them, because I gather it's important as, at least, maybe an early statement and this is the. . . . Well, it's not all that early but it's 1981. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and that was the catalog. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Garth [Clark's] catalog.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. [_____ -Ed.] Crocker. . . .

VIOLA FREY: . . . and with Charles Fiske. He was involved in the writing of some of this essay, and that's where Bricoleuse [a sculpture-Ed.] came in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it was also at Oakland?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But the main essayist and, I guess, the curator probably was Garth? Is that right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Garth Clark. So I think that's worth mentioning.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it's probably, would you say, the first really serious, important statement about your career?

VIOLA FREY: I think so, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. So for the record. . . .

VIOLA FREY: And I remember when I made my first statement in the middle seventies it was a real chore to write, but basically I had . . . you always have to guide something at the beginning. You can't just throw it out there and hope that people will pick up on it. You have to. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you feel that that catalog-that show and the catalog-did that well, in providing. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, mainly because of Charles's input, which Garth did use-which I don't know if that's relevant or not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. So you're basically pleased with it? You think it's a fairly accurate. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . portrayal of your career and your work and your interests? There have been some more recent exhibitions with catalogues. In fact Rena Branston has done a good job. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, she does do a good job, I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . on a regular basis regular basis, bringing these out. And they're very helpful. She even did an interview with you for one of these. . . .

VIOLA FREY: That was funny, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . which I read, and I thought it was interesting. I hope that this [interview-Ed.] is a little more substantial.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what I want to turn to now is the. . . . It's a very handsome catalogue for the show, which is now traveling, on the plates-the plates, 1968 right up to 1994.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'd like to talk a little bit about the plates and what they. . . . Well, just talk about them: What they mean, how they fit within your work. There's an essay in here by very distinguished Donald Kuspit. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and I thought that we could start out this part of the discussion by my reading a paragraph from his essay. One of the main reasons I want to read this. . . . He's writing about the plates, but he does try to position you in [____] relationship to funk, and so I'd like you to think, "Does this say it?" Do you agree with this or not? At least you can get it started. Now according, Donald Kuspit, writing in, well, probably '93 or '94; it's published in '94. It says:

Thus, Frey's cast of mind is not entirely funk in her plate art. Certainly, it does not have the populist character of most funk work. (Three early funky plates showing a starry-eyed girl, stars surround her, driving a car toward the spectator, seem the exception. And two other early plates show the funk tendency to break the surface plane as well as frame of the work. They depict vigorously projecting over three-dimensional heads that seem to be struggling to escape from the plates, more particularly to break out of the constraining trap imposed by their rim.) The figures and scenes on Frey's plates and the plates themselves as objects are not unequivocally funny, corny, ephemeral, although they seem to have an autobiographical dimension.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [continues reading]:

The funk point is to use raw physicality to show the human turned inside out to show the endemic emotional crudity between the polite, slick social surface. But Frey's plates are aesthetic. Her scenes and figures are peculiarly refined and the emotions evident in them are subtle.

PAUL KARLSTROM: End of quote. That's fairly long. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, I would agree with that statement on funk. I never really considered myself to be a completely funk artist. I thought my father was a funk artist but I wasn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And do you agree with the way that he chooses to separate you from funk?

VIOLA FREY: Yes. I agree with whatever a writer says. I mean, it's their words, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you feel comfortable with that?

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, you feel that this is accurate?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you would not describe yourself, as you said, as a funk artist?

VIOLA FREY: No, I wouldn't. No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And yet, of course, your work evolves here, as Harold Paris said, "the sweet land of funk."

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. I'm not even sure that Harold Paris was funk, but who knows?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, sometimes it's useful to be attached to a movement.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about the. . . . He uses the term "aesthetic." He says that unlike funk, which tends to be more raw-intentionally raw and crude, even shocking, anti-aesthetic, almost Dada, in a way. . . . He uses the term "aesthetic," that your work is subtle in its meaning and aesthetic. I'm not sure that everybody would describe it that way, but how do you feel about that? Do you yourself feel that those words. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I think I probably do. In just the manipulation of the visual elements [and belief] that the visual abstraction can dominate.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So the idea of aesthetics, perhaps of beauty, are not. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. I like the word beauty.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . are not inappropriate to your work?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. So that's what would separate me from my father. My father would just do five hundred clocks or five hundred radios, or whatever it was, whereas I would have attempted to make five hundred beautiful radios.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so for him it's the essence of radio. The "radioness" of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Oh, yes, they all had to work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. And for you, even with your humans, well, dare I say that it is striving to reveal, to find, identify, and bring forth. . . .

VIOLA FREY: California, I think, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . California-but beyond that some quality of beauty in the subjects themselves.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, because I certainly had in my mind the problem of the California dream-you know, which for everyone was the redwood tree in the front yard, an orange tree, and an automobile to drive. I mean, double pairs of everything. Two palm trees, two big rose trees, two. . . . You know, everything paired.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was that a conscious thing then?

VIOLA FREY: I think it had to be conscious. I think a very human thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I mean, this would explain, I guess, the. . . . Although this isn't exclusively the case with your work, but very often there are couples in this kind of pairing. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . which we'll discuss in a bit may have other ramifications as well, but at least for starters this would fit then with. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Well, the fact that I always believed that a person is an individual first and that couples have a tendency to destroy each other. That's just my own. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I know, but they're pairs, pairs of people.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So is there any connection between. . . . Is your view of the California dream, what shall we say, not. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Destructive?

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . not entirely positive?

VIOLA FREY: I don't think it was positive at all. No. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. What about. . . . Again, although maybe you've answered this, Kuspit and others who write about you bring in, I guess, the autobiographical quality of your work.

VIOLA FREY: Everything is auto[biographical]; it's all autobiographical. Even on the plates where there's a string, you know, as I. . . . The meaning-rather, the title of the plate-is Don't Forget. Now, don't forget "what" I don't know. I don't remember.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it was a message to yourself.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, are you willing to go along with the notion that many of your works stand as messages? And messages to yourself?

VIOLA FREY: I think so, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That it's like putting something out there perhaps to remind you of who you are, where you come from?

VIOLA FREY: I think so, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh. Well, then that would be truly autobiographical and then some, because the dialogue could well. . . . I don't want to. . . .

VIOLA FREY: But it's not in the sense of a Bob Arneson, where it's all very specifically detailed as to what the biographical information is. Mine is much more . . . not as specific.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe that's what Kuspit means by more subtle.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, and more aesthetic. Yeah, I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, well that would be a very good, then, comparison. The personalism in your work, as opposed to the often polemical personalism of Arneson's.

VIOLA FREY: And he certainly is autobiographical, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, right. Sometimes too much, some people might say. [chuckles]

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it's amusing. Speaking of funk, from which you now very clearly have distanced or separated yourself a bit, concurring with Kuspit, do you know Peter Selz?

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who, of course, put that funk show together.

VIOLA FREY: And stuck with it ever since. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was just wondering almost as an aside if Peter had ever been over to visit you in your studio.

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he never. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I was not. . . . That was in a boys' club, believe me. No way. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it seems to me Joan Brown got in it.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, but that was through Manuel Neri, and she was on a different circuit.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

VIOLA FREY: Clay was not . . . I don't know whether it wasn't included or what.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah sure. I think [_____-Ed.] Wiley was in there with some clay work, if I'm not mistaken.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In fact, what strikes me as interesting is, if I remember correctly, that clay played a fairly prominent role.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, because you could manipulate it with your hands.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it could look, quote, "ugly." It could look trashy, vulgar, not just the subject but the physicality.

VIOLA FREY: The way it's made, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It seems odd. . . . Well, maybe Peter Selz was being particularly insightful then and he saw that you didn't belong. But your work certainly was known at that time.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, but it was on a different level. You know, you all. . . . And it has to do a lot with money and opportunity and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's move on to another question, although I realize it takes us back to something that we've already discussed. We may well have exhausted that already. But again, I keep coming across these references to the drawings. Now you've had drawing shows, haven't you-separate shows-or not?

VIOLA FREY: I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do they stand to you-this is getting at the same question from a slightly different angle-but as independent, self-contained, finished works of art?

VIOLA FREY: I think so, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Again, several writers say that these are the most personal of your works. And I, frankly, don't get it.

VIOLA FREY: The drawings?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I mean I don't get why they're the most personal. Other than what you said about certain drawings or paintings done at the home studio in Oakland.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Well, that was a time when. . . . I mean, there were buses that would come up, buses full of people. And I know that was a time that Rene de Rosa wanted to just, you know, make the whole thing into a museum. I said, "No thanks."

PAUL KARLSTROM: What, your house?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. I thought, no. I had every corner stuffed with. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's not like that anymore?

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's partly because you have this studio here, right?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So if I came to visit you now it wouldn't be the same marvelous oddity, curiosity, I suppose.

VIOLA FREY: No. No, the backyard was filled to the point of gridlock. If you didn't know the last piece put in, you could never figure out what came out next in order to unscramble the heap. And at that point I made a decision, which was that I was not an art brute artist. Which meant that I, that to just. . . . An art brut artist would have just. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Excuse me, an art world artist?

VIOLA FREY: An art-brute artist-would have been someone who would have just advertised.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Art brute.

VIOLA FREY: Would have, you know, "For a dollar and a half, view all the art you can."

PAUL KARLSTROM: So Rene de Rosa encouraged you to set yourself up as a kind of celebrity? Well. . . .

VIOLA FREY: No, I don't think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, but I mean your home would be a great stop on the art tour ____.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. [chuckles] And it did begin to affect the artwork. It could even be seen in the artwork, the fact that all of the visitors became part of the work, ultimately.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's not bad.

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now what years were those? When was that?

VIOLA FREY: It must have been in the late seventies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you stop that?

VIOLA FREY: I moved.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ah, you mean you moved to a different house?

VIOLA FREY: I moved to a different studio.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Here?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right. Okay. But you're still in the same house.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. But it's now just full of books.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles] Now it's a normal house.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, sort of.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of. What's abnormal about it? Or unnormal?

VIOLA FREY: Well, just the fact that it has thousands of art books, which. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You really have a big art library.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Any book about art? No particular focus or ____?

VIOLA FREY: I like, particularly, books about individual artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Monographs?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. It used to be that, but, well, whatever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When did you move here to this studio?

VIOLA FREY: '83. '82, perhaps.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You sort of discarded an idea that you were having about. . . . You said it used to be a different way. You were talking about monographs, your interest in particular artists and that it used to be something else. Does that mean in terms of what you bought, what you collected in the books?

VIOLA FREY: No, I did collect books. [It's just, Because] the books became more and more expensive books.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh. You said earlier that. . . . We were talking about Rupert Garcia, I guess, and I mentioned I had just visited him and that Rupert has this-he loves his library-he has a pretty big library. And very learned books, as a matter of fact-intellectual things like on critical theory, this sort of thing.

VIOLA FREY: Oh, God, those books are so worthless.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chortles]

VIOLA FREY: It doesn't matter. I buy them, too, but they're worthless.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You then said, well, you have a lot of books as well, but that doesn't. . . .

VIOLA FREY: And also Charles Fiske is very intellectual, so the ones that I didn't read he would read.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is the man you live with.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How long?

VIOLA FREY: Since 1950s.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

VIOLA FREY: Long time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I talked to him on the phone one day.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He's a writer, isn't he?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so your library is a joint library. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . reflecting both your views.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, turning this around, reaching a bit, this library seems to be important to you-books seem to be important to you-and yet you say that. . . . You said earlier, when we were talking about Rupert, that you too have a big library but that doesn't mean that you've read all. . . .

VIOLA FREY: All of them, yeah. But I've looked at all of them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, and I thought that was interesting. So do these books then provide you some sort of visual stimulation that. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in one way or another, may influence you, be incorporated into your work? What do you think? It's hard to say, of course, but. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, it is hard to say.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is there anything you can think of that you saw and said, "Wow, isn't that terrific! Look at the way those colors come together."

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Never?

VIOLA FREY: Never. I don't think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And when you look at books about sculpture, same thing? That there's. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I like books about sculpture, because it's the one instance where you can't really get a feeling of what the original would have looked like.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You can't get a. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Photographs cannot convey a piece of sculpture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No. Well, you can't move around it for one thing.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So let's talk just a moment about monographs. I'm interested that you're interested in monographic works, books about artists. Very often they tend to be biographical. They tend to be about the lives. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . as well as the work or the connection.

VIOLA FREY: And then you read the reviews and you find out which ones are the most interesting ones. Every year there's a new batch that comes out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But does this provide an exception to the usual practice of yours of looking at the pictures but not reading? In other words, are you interested in reading about the lives and experiences of these artists?

VIOLA FREY: I get the gist of it, usually, just by looking at a couple of pages, I have to admit. Whereas Charles is someone who will read it all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you talk about these with him, about these. . . .

VIOLA FREY: To an extent, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: If there's one that's maybe particularly interesting.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or scandalous maybe?

VIOLA FREY: I always mean to read it if I had the time. It's a matter of not having the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Neither have I.] Well, I appreciate that, because I think we all face that.

VIOLA FREY: It's wrong to say that you don't have the time to read the books.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I know, but for one reason or another many of us seem to be in the same boat.

VIOLA FREY: Well, I remember once in the sixties I was in an exhibition somewhere-it was a one-person show-and I wanted a book of a hundred drawings. And in my mind they had to be drawings on both sides of the paper, which was a real crucial point. Otherwise they would not really be a book. They were big drawings, like this [_____-Ed.]. And I put drawings on both sides, which, of course, forever created a problem because which was the best side, was the question always. So. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that became. . . .

VIOLA FREY: . . . an albatross [sort of thing, I think]. It was awful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But this has to do, then, with judgments. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . making decisions, and what's most important, what. . . . That's an interesting exercise. It's a critical exercise.

VIOLA FREY: It was an exercise, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me-just one more time and I promise I won't bring this up again-but I want to find some way of dispatching-or dealing with-this penchant people have of describing your drawings as the most personal, the most autobiographical, and despite your effort to explain to me that. . . . It doesn't seem like the same thing. To talk about your drawings and paintings as incorporating all the details of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, [they're surroundings] to explain the big sculpture. They're the explanation, if you want one. And the explanation occurs in the drawings. Because there's no way you could put it around a piece of sculpture. Not unless you were some sort of idiot wanting to do too much labor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So explain how the. . . . Is this true, then, consistently through your work that your drawings explain the sculpture, even though they're not, you have said, models for the. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Right, they're not models, but they do explain.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not studies.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, they do explain.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And consider me dense, but tell me-or tell this interview-exactly what that means. You know, explaining, that the work, sculpture, is explained in the drawings.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, there's always an explanation for a free-standing piece of sculpture, so that my drawings I did what I wanted to do, which was not drawings that were so directly related to sculpture-or to the piece of sculpture that I did. I could do so much more; if I wanted to break up a big figure I could do that on paper. If I wanted to have a clutter of figurines, a pile of them, I could do a pile. And it is an explanation of who and what the big figures are. PAUL KARLSTROM: Without being directly related.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So is it problem-solving then, a means of problem-solving for you-exploring ideas in general without needing to be specific?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. I mean, if I had to do them in sculpture, there'd be no way that one could have done. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, I understand that. That's clear now to me. I still don't see, though, why that necessarily makes them the most personal.

VIOLA FREY: I think. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What does that mean? The most personal?

VIOLA FREY: Because they are direct reflections of thoughts that I have. And I suppose they're much quicker, faster than a sculpture would ever be.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is personal though in an aesthetic, a formal sense, not a biographical. Not in the same way as, like events. People read "personal," and they often tend to think in terms of life experience.

VIOLA FREY: Events, no. Well. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That they reflect more directly, say, events and so forth.

VIOLA FREY: In a general sense, sure. You are what you are. So you can take that either way. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right, that's fair enough. Let's flip this tape over. This is a pausing point. I mean, change it.

Session 3, Tape 2, Side A

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is continuing an interview with Viola Frey. This is the third session. This is tape two, side A. While the recorder was off, Viola, you were talking your interest in art-brut, the _____. . . .

VIOLA FREY: That's where I came to the decision that I was not an art-brut artist. That was a problem that I had set up for myself, and I arrived at that conclusion. That was not my way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But earlier and I gather from your experience in New York and I guess at the Museum of Modern Art....

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . you'd seen a show of Dubuffet and you. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Well, the little . . . the things that are made out of chunks of coal, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you were interested in Noguchi.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Noguchi mainly for a specific reason-the fact that he was Asian and American. And from profile he would look like one culture, and from front face he looked like another. I always thought that was interesting that a face could reflect that much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm. As much as his work itself, then, as the idea of what it came from.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, physically he resembled his work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because he certainly. . . . One would have to say he's largely about aesthetics.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which is the direction then that you came to acknowledge in your own. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would you cite him as a major influence on you?

VIOLA FREY: Well, maybe, because from the time I was a student I was very interested in his work. As I say, primarily because he was one of the few artists that had catalogues in the library, and since I worked in the library that was an important source.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So books then always have been an important part of your. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . .exposure to art and your studies in art.

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yes. Yeah. That was always the. . . . Especially the adult section of the library that had the art books.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It interests me that from an early day that Noguchi's biculturalism. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . his Americanism and, well, his Japanese ancestry was interesting to you like. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, like people that I knew from the town, from Lodi, the town that I came from, which was. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what were the implications, though, beyond. . . . Was it simply a visual thing? Do you think it's interesting, you know, physically this mixture of two ethnicities, two races?

VIOLA FREY: So what was interesting about that? Why did I remark on it, you know?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, did you see it as a conflict? He did. You know, for him it was problematic.

VIOLA FREY: No, I did not see it as a conflict. Just as it's either, you know, fifty percent good and fifty percent bad, was the way I always looked at things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Couples. Duality.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. All of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think so? Do you think that's a part of it? That this was. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . that these backgrounds participate in this notion of differences. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Of differences. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . of two different things trying to be resolved?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, and if you look at differences, you also have to look at similarities. The two go together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Again, is it stretching it to see this kind of thinking in your ideas about couples? You mentioned earlier, couples that. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, it was just always my view that couples were. . . . You know, if you don't want to be like your parents, you know, that's one of the first ways you do it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you had a relationship for a good number of years. You're, in a sense, a couple.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. But. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's the difference?

VIOLA FREY: None. Only that art is. . . . Only that Charles is so-how would you describe him?-so active in his responses to things. Mentally [it's, he's] so brilliant in a way he just can chop it all up real quickly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so you feel that that helps prevent sliding into a situation, where couples often do, where they begin to submerge their self-identity?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, two strong-in your philosophy-two strong individuals, independent.

VIOLA FREY: Are going to be much more interesting than two people who just happen to be together, I guess. I don't know the answers. Just the questions. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: But so maintaining independence becomes then an important goal.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, for you.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And for like-minded people whoever they may be. And I suppose particularly artists have to be careful [of doing that], in your view?

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it sounds to me like you've been successful in that regard. You keep your private life pretty private, don't you?

VIOLA FREY: I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. I mean, do you think more so than some others? Well, maybe not.

VIOLA FREY: Well. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Socially and so forth?

VIOLA FREY: Socially because of my self-imposed isolation, probably, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But do you guys ever go out to dinner and so forth?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Only, you know, I mean, like. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, at other people's places.

VIOLA FREY: Oh, yeah. But not excessively.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just the right amount?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Enough.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about with colleagues at school? How would you describe your interaction with them? You know, beyond the school itself. Socially.

VIOLA FREY: Well, beyond the school?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

VIOLA FREY: I always have my views which are, of course, very direct and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, is that bad? I mean, do I understand that to mean then that. . . . You said that you had these direct views. Does that sometimes make for some friction?

VIOLA FREY: Well, yes. Because you always have the latest, you know, politically correct phraseology and everything, you know. And when you have to say, look, as an artist, as a student, you have to watch out for yourself. Because if people are going to tell you to put your work out there, and you know yourself that if you put your work out there you may not have it left for yourself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you don't socialize a lot with the faculty colleagues, for instance, like. . . .

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, do you ever get together with Linda [_____-Ed.] and Michael [_____-Ed.]? Or is it pretty professional? Linda being on staff, of course, that's why I mention it.

VIOLA FREY: Professional, I think more.

PAUL KARLSTROM: For the record, that person is Linda Fleming, the sculptor.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She's head of the sculpture department, isn't she?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Are there exceptions to that? I'm trying to get to know you a little better at this point.

VIOLA FREY: Ah. Well, sure, I mean. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Perhaps a different circle or certain people?

VIOLA FREY: Sure, I mean, matter of fact, but they're usually ex-students. You know, like Squeak Carnwath. Bob Brady was an ex-student.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And they remain friends?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, if I see them it's like, you know, you always know them-or knew them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you don't. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I don't go out of my way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You don't dine back and forth ____ [those]?

VIOLA FREY: No. Those days I think are long over with. Those are the old days. And that was strictly a men's club to a great extent.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's probably changed, though, quite a bit.

VIOLA FREY: Well, yes, but nevertheless that's what it was in the sixties.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, so you feel in general that there's not as much of that kind of socializing in the art community.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it's not just you.

VIOLA FREY: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That may well be. Do you think people imagine they're busier now?

VIOLA FREY: Probably, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Too busy to read.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's see, where are we? [shuffles papers] Well, I have a . . . The next topic here is a big one, and we've already touched on it all along the way. And without being coy I'll state what that is and then we'll see just how we can productively get into it.

VIOLA FREY: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it's always a difficult area, after a point, and that has to do with the content in the terms of the meaning of the body of work, of the work itself.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that has sort of subtexts or subcomponents. I suppose what I'm talking about is the iconography of the work. What struck me earlier-and this by way of introduction-is that these kinds of questions and this sort of approach to doing an interview with you is also what separates your activity as a ceramist from craft. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . because these questions are the questions that you ask artists.

VIOLA FREY: Right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is how you understand art. And my interest is very much less in technique-and I don't pretend to be terrifically knowledgeable about that; I have a basic understanding-but I'm an art historian who's interested in, I guess, the realm of ideas. And this interview is as much about that.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Trying to . . . it's a quest for meaning.

VIOLA FREY: That's always been. . . . The whole basis of my work has been in the realm, I think, of ideas. And a lot of that took place when I moved to Oakland and I had this backyard and I created this outline, which was from abstraction to realism, never realizing that the realism would take over. I never dreamt that realism was going to win the battle. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that in itself, of course, is such a big subject. Before we launch into this a little bit further, let me read another quote. And I don't usually do this but it seems helpful right here.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is from another good catalogue of yours.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, Susan Larsen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, this is the show at Rena's ____ ____

VIOLA FREY: At Art [Works]. No, Asher's. Asher-Faure, I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, it says. . . . Yeah, and Renad.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, okay, Asher-Faure and Rena Asher-Faure and L. A. Rena in San Francisco. Monumental Figures, '78 to '87, with an essay by. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Susan Larsen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . excellent art historian, a friend of mine, Susan Larsen. And, if I may, I'd like to read this concluding paragraph and maybe it'll then stimulate some thoughts of your own.

VIOLA FREY: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She writes-and this in 1988-a quote:

If we may apply the imagery of her paintings to our experience and her sculpture, Frey's bold program may be seen quite clearly. Her sculpture is indeed intended to recapture the heroic stance she admires in historical sculpture. To command it's own ground and to offer an experience which throws real space and human scale into sharp relief. Disabused of our heroes, gods, and giants, we no longer believe in the efficacy of powerful graven images to inspire us to great deeds. Frey's massive emotionally flawed personages. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'll repeat that, "emotionally flawed personages. . . ."

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [continues reading]:

. . . have the power to remind us of our true state of mind and the commonplace nature of our aspirations and the tense, conflicted ground of our emotions. To the extent that she succeeds in this mission, Frey has indeed recaptured the historical position of sculpture as a significant medium and has turned aside its other more common and minor roles as decoration, entertainment, and mere physical presence. Her silent witnesses to the impoverished emotional landscape of contemporary life are disturbing and heroic in their candor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: End of quote and end of her essay. Well, that says a lot.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and how do you feel about it?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I recall at one, oh, it was a symposium-sculpture symposium, I think-and on the panel there was Manuel Neri. And Manuel Neri said he wanted all of time and I said fifty years would be enough for me. He wanted every. . . . He wanted timelessness, and I wanted the fifty years time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about. . . . And this actually brings to mind that the place, which we I realize we didn't . . . I digressed a bit in my questioning and we might return momentarily to that, but there seems to be, then, a thread, a theme that Kuspit and Larsen. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, like I say, it was a major surprise when it turned out that after I had established this outline, and this outline was done using the out-of-doors, using direct sunlight, which is really important. Even though they were painted inside, but they were viewed outside. What was that I was saying?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we were talking about. . . . Or I suggested that there was a theme, again, quoting from Kuspit and from Susan Larsen in their views of your work. . . . And I guess what we're talking about is trying to get at the kernel of it, the heart of it.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, in large scale. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But more than that it's a concern with contemporary life and, I suppose, an emotional truth about these figures on the plates themselves.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. A lot that had to do with. . . . Do you know a book by Hall called The Hidden Dimension?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I've never read it, I've heard of it.

VIOLA FREY: It was a great source because it. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would you tell me about that?

VIOLA FREY: Well, in that book he says there are three dimensions. One deals with intimate distance and then personal distance and then public distance. And I had established that I had room in my backyard studio to encompass just private and personal space, not public space. And so I made a definite decision. So the sizes were always geared to a fact, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Again, what about Susan's statement that. . . . From the whole. . . . I think it's really an interesting paragraph.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Yes, and then it's all accurate. I think it's very true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's very important, to know that this is something that you do approve of or you share.

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She says it again, "Frey's massive emotionally flawed personages. . . ."

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, the "flaw" is important.

PAUL KARLSTROM: ". . . have the power"-power-"to remind us of our true state of mind, of the commonplace nature of our aspirations and the tense conflicted ground of our emotions." Now, for me, in reading this I would cut away almost everything else that Susan has said. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and I would point to that as the key sentence. Do you agree?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, what's most important about Viola's work? What is she. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, because by the time they're painted they do have emotion, you know. When they're all white they don't have the same. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about this idea, though, of conflict. Can we pick that up somehow?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I think the conflict comes in in just. . . . I mean, in other words, do they have the power to be good? If they have the power to be good, they also have the power to be bad.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you mean? You mean the people or. . . .

VIOLA FREY: The people, the sculptures.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, the sculptures are people for you?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So they have, in a sense, a life and presumably a history of their own.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even though they're fictions, I suppose. They're not portraits-we determined that.

VIOLA FREY: No, they're not portraits. Because what is he asking for, you know? A handful of coins.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, this is the newest guy, isn't it?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He must be twelve feet tall.

VIOLA FREY: Something like that, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And he's a man in a suit, which has always, as I understand it, been a power image for you.

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The suits, _____.

VIOLA FREY: That's true, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So here he is. You're still doing men in suits after all these years.

VIOLA FREY: And the suit went out and then it came back in again, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you took the clothes off them for a while.

VIOLA FREY: Yes, well, nakedness has its own power. And certainly I would have dealt with men and suits and no suits. They came first, because they were the most difficult to do. A male nude was much more difficult. A female nude was easier to do and, therefore, she came last. In other words if I could think of something to do that was more difficult, I would do that first.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why is that? Does this have to do with art history and the tradition that the female nude is easier?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, because the female nude is so treacherous and, yeah, and tricky and everything else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But the male nude is tricky.

VIOLA FREY: The male nude is. . . . As a matter of fact, I think it's Garth Clark that said that it's one of the few times in art history that the male nude is portrayed as a vulnerable figure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In your work?

VIOLA FREY: In my work, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's true. Often reclining.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. In other words, not necessarily heroic male poses.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. Well, that no doubt is intentional on your part.

VIOLA FREY: Absolutely. If I did it, it's intentional. Sometimes even quizzically scratching their head but nevertheless. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But why is it more difficult to do-again, going back to what you yourself said-more of a challenge, more difficult to do the undraped male than the undraped female?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I mean, don't you think that the male figure is more a part of our current psychology than the female figure?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Undraped? I mean, nude?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't know. What do you think? What do you mean?

VIOLA FREY: Well, in the sixties there would have been a male nude with penises all over, and it would have been done in a funk way. And now the male nude is. . . . It's just much more, I think, truer, more accurate. Not so cute and. . . . In it's way, funk was very refined.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, it's an interesting subject because especially women doing nude males.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I remember when Beth van Hosen years ago. . . . Do you know Beth at all?

VIOLA FREY: No, but I know her work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. And she did this series of etchings of male nudes back in the sixties.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it was considered quite radical.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And, you know, she posed friends and so forth, and at the time this seemed almost like a political statement.

VIOLA FREY: Just a little early.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. And now I think that that certainly isn't the case so much. But it does seem that still in our imagery the female nude dominates.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Despite the feminist efforts. And this is. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, how would you portray a male nude that wasn't a vulnerable figure? As a matter of fact, that was done because my assistant, Kevin Anderson, he died of AIDS, and so that brought that home.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that then is. . . .

VIOLA FREY: The first male nude, yeah, was Kevin.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . something of a subtext.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. It wouldn't have happened if I didn't have Kevin as an assistant. Everything here has to have. . . . There's always a trigger for all of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's where you get into this personalism, then.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He wasn't the model. He was just working here as an assistant?

VIOLA FREY: Right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that was, at least in part, a response to AIDS.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's the first one?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, first male nude. And then it continued on through the series.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is it in this book?

VIOLA FREY: Actually, it might be. Green and yellow were unlikely colors to do of him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah. 1984. Two. Same figure, both reclining. Is that right?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sleeping man, '84. Reclining figure, '84-85. Quizzical, scratching his head.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what does that mean? This is a work. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, it's an anti . . . it's not a classical pose. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not at all. It's sort of like an odalisque. Which is owned. . . . Well, I mean this is a pose that's owned by a female, _____ for the most part in art history.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He looks puzzled. Scratching his head. I suppose if one were going to do a critical analysis this one would say, ["What am I doing here, like this?"]

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Or the other one, which is a sleeping nude.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It looks like he's almost sucking his thumb, and he looks like a very fetal. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is this figure, though, also asking the question, "Why has this happened to me" The HIV case. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I don't even know if they ask that question, but they must.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, but were you?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you see this as part of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, I think I saw them as figures of vulnerability. How vulnerable people really are. Especially the men, who were on such a crest in the sixties, you know. Come crashing down to all of this. It doesn't seem quite right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in the sixties you think of them as sort of raw. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Proud and . . . yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . power. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. And then it all. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in charge.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, they were in charge all right but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it sounds to me as if you find more vulnerable men-and perhaps if you can generalize-men of our time more satisfactory than men of sixties. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, probably.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . or at least some of them, given their male arrogance, I suppose.

VIOLA FREY: I think they were an arrogant bunch. But then. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And not just artists. I gather you felt. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, everyone.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . across society.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think that's changed?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I don't think that the reverse is any better. That the politically correct is not necessarily the best solution or the answer.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me flip this. . . .

Session 3, Tape 2, Side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing session three with Viola Frey, this is tape two, side B, the conclusion of the interview-when we finish. Picking up where we left off, what was, for me, an interesting discussion of gender issues in recent history and perhaps how they're reflected in art-or at least in your art. I mean, we can't talk too broadly about it.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let's see. I mean, I have a number of questions. And we started out on this, just as a reminder, when we were looking at this recent big figure. Big, tall guy-who's going to be painted isn't he?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He's huge. And he has a suit back on, and we commented on that, and you described what's in this process-of in a suit, then you took his suit off, and then now you've put the suit back on again. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and so that deals with power, but in a way some people wouldn't necessarily think about. It's like the power is assumed. It's put on, you wear it.

VIOLA FREY: That's right. It is worn.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The suit becomes that, but it's not. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Absolutely. The suit is the power. Not the person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not the person. Not the flesh. Not the. . . .

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And part of the meaning of the nude male's vulnerability. Let me ask you another question, pushing it a little bit. . . . Well, no, it's not in a different direction. It's a different kind of power-or lack of it. There are those who think that, in an interesting way, the female nude, especially now, has its . . . her own power.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it's in that nudity. But this then becomes very much a sexual thing. And I'd like to know your thinking in general, but certainly in terms of your own work, on the sexuality or the eroticism of the nude figure.

VIOLA FREY: I guess I don't see it as an erotic subject matter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: These are de-eroticized nudes, do you think?

VIOLA FREY: I think so, because of the increase in scale, and they are about power, and so it's. . . . In contrast, the male is the vulnerable nude, but the woman is not a vulnerable nude.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why is that, though? Why does the woman. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Because I make them. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: It [doesn't] have anything to do with. . . . Women have exerted whatever power they may have very often through their sexuality.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And the nudity is certainly, with women, remains. . . . Probably more so than men, although the feminists would argue this, that it has yet to be demonstrated. . . .

VIOLA FREY: It's argued back and forth, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . but it seems that certainly women can exercise through their bodies and through their accessories a kind of power that men don't exercise in the same way, normally.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. I just wonder if that applies to a female nude. Certainly the ones that I've done have all been women of power.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So eroticism simply isn't a component, as a part of the iconography of these. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I don't think so, because it would be like. . . . Well, think of some of the Greek figures, you know. The Athenas, the. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, some of them are, of course, right back to primitive times, are clearly like fertility and. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . usually the women carry that role.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, but even that if you. . . . I don't know. . . . I've read, you know, Gimbutas's book on the European earth goddess, and everything is treated equally. I mean, everything is in there. The penis. . . . All of them are equal with the powers that the woman has so. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, there is a cultural thing as well. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, which [words, we're]. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in the modern times and with Western. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, that I. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I see the important thing in here, of course, is that in your work the erotic is not a

component and not a source of power necessarily. This is not a part of what you're talking about in terms of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what is the power in the female? In the female nude? Remember, you said that she has power; the man has it in the suit. How would you interpret that.

VIOLA FREY: He wears his, I guess. But I think the same way when I paint them. I think the women also are wearing clothes, and that's what makes them-I don't want to say acceptable-but a lot more relevant. Kids don't look at them and think of naked ladies. They think just brightly colored people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's true.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. And I have a feeling that probably that sculpture, you know, in Greek times also did this. That they were coarse and a little ugly and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and painted. . . .

VIOLA FREY: . . . and painted. Completely painted. They had a mimetic aura that came from the way they were painted and the colors that were used.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, we're used to this idea of classical sculpture. . . .

VIOLA FREY: All white. Boy, the French really did a deal on us. [both chuckle]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Returning to our friend here, what are you going to call him? Just Standing. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I never give them names. It's a real problem. Unless it shows on the figure. This one here, you know, they always call him. . . . Well, I don't know whether a man in a suit would ever be begging but he might be.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Man in a Suit Begging. That's because his right hand is out with the palm up and open.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, yeah. Which is an unusual gesture, I think, for a man in a suit.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's for sure! It looks like it could be a commentary on our times.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Homelessness and losing jobs. People falling from. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, I know. And the computer's taken over. I mean, so. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that something that you see as part of _____?

VIOLA FREY: Well, yeah, I mean, I think of it. . . . Yeah, the decline and fall, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, he's been trying to get a job now for months.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He had a big. . . .

VIOLA FREY: They're just not hiring executives anymore.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. He was a big executive and who thought he would ever lose his position?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. [laughing]

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you know. . . . Do you know now what colors, how you will paint him?

VIOLA FREY: Uh-h-h, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so. . . .

VIOLA FREY: This one is really unusual. In painting them it's intuitive and it happens with the piece.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Each one different. It's like two separate processes in a sense. There's the creation of the. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Three-dimensional piece.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . the armature for the painting, the sculpture, the three. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Basically, yeah, you could say it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then it's almost like the abstract expressionists approaching a canvas and. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in that sense you're still connected to, well, an abstract expressionist aesthetic.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interesting. You see, wouldn't have naturally. . . . I don't know if I would have figured that out necessarily, but it seems to make sense. I don't know that there's much more I can ask you about the iconography of the work, about any kind of symbolism, so forth. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I think it follows through even with the grandmothers, you know. Like why grandmothers? And why a lot of artists, as the artist as a worker? There's a reason for each. . . . Each category of figure has a reason.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you write any of this down? I mean, do you ever write anything?

VIOLA FREY: [shakes head no]

PAUL KARLSTROM: No? You don't have a little journal where you. . . .

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No? I didn't think so. Well, let's move towards wrapping this up. I do, if you'll bear with me, I have just a few more questions. Ah! But, before we forget, I wanted to return just very briefly to the plates.

VIOLA FREY: The plates.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You have this current show and you did say something a few moments earlier about something going on, and I can't remember how you put it.

VIOLA FREY: Because the plates would be a direct reflection of the thinking process of doing the pieces of sculpture. And there's nothing. . . . In other words, that there are no limits in a plate, like in a piece of sculpture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does this mean, then, that they stand much more related to the drawings and paintings in that respect?

VIOLA FREY: But even more so. Because they're more intuitive and more direct.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm. Now you've done a lot of those plates. This is a major part of your work, it seems.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, but they only . . . don't take up that much time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They don't?

VIOLA FREY: I think labor and time always go together for me. No, they don't take up a lot of time. We don't want to say that, of course, but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, we won't say that. You didn't say that. Well, it is a kind of drawing.

VIOLA FREY: It is. Drawing or painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They exist in these whirls, this tondo shape. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, because of the round shape, and the reason for that shape is because there are no corners or gutters in a plate, and if you think of renaissance paintings and what derived out of that, I mean, it's just too much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, it would be fascinating to delve into the iconography of. . . .

VIOLA FREY: [Of, A] Howard Kottler on those.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which we, of course, can't do. And what is this? The H.K. stands for?

VIOLA FREY: That's for Howard Kottler, who also died of AIDS. I don't know why I pick people that die of AIDS.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't know Howard. Tell me about him.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, well, he was from Seattle. He was a very. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is a friend?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. Very entertaining. Who died, obviously.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Another AIDS victim?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, and also the head of our department, a very, very good friend, Art Nelson died of AIDS. I don't know if that's relevant to anything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I mean, is this. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, you do get the feeling that everyone was dying of AIDS, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Does that explain, then, these wonderful skeletal figures, the presence of the skeletons? I mean, an obvious reference to death, but it doesn't have to be just that.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, it wasn't just that. Yeah. Because the skeletons were later-were earlier, rather.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, here are these mounted skeletons, and here's one Skeleton and Horse and Questioning Woman. I mean, from a narrative standpoint this is sort of scary.

VIOLA FREY: [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: What does it mean to you?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I think the woman is frequently questioning. She may not be doing that now, but she used to.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then her juxtaposition with the horse? I mean, a skeleton on a horse is like the riders of the Apocalypse.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. But in order to get the skeleton, those are all traced on paper from their shadows, which was projected on a piece of paper via the shadow. Which then, of course, you could tilt the figure in any direction. It was a wonderful way to draw.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you also have in this series self-portraits.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A number of. . . . Well, they're quite wonderful. How many have you done?

VIOLA FREY: I would say hundreds.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it's sort of hard to make a selection for an exhibition, I suppose.

VIOLA FREY: Well, yeah, it was. Yeah, these are all ones that were in my warehouse.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's take a moment, if we may, to reflect upon your work and the directions it seems to be taking. Earlier we went into the other room here and you have all these small groups. Like the [Rogers] groups, we called them.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And they're quite, marvelous. You said a couple things about them. One, that most of them won't be painted. Isn't that right?

VIOLA FREY: Probably not. I like them all white. Because that . . . it just . . . it's more . . . maybe I feel in a classical mood, who knows?

PAUL KARLSTROM: _____, could be. But you did say that you thought it would be just too much. That the complex. . . . I presume that they're complex enough on a small scale. And then I asked you and you seemed to think that it was a possibility that at this point your interest-the direction of your work-is towards more complex groupings. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . tight, complex groupings. Is that just. . .

VIOLA FREY: Yes, because the potential is there to, I think, do some of these. . . . To take a complex grouping and enlarge it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh? So you see that as a possibility?

VIOLA FREY: Yes. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: An outcome. I've asked you this before but are you getting commissions enough to make that kind of viable?

VIOLA FREY: Oh, people won't. . . . I never count on commissions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But something like that would be really quite ambitious and expensive and time-consuming to make a big version.

VIOLA FREY: Yes. I do those for myself. I store them in my warehouse.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

VIOLA FREY: I have.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You do them for yourself.

VIOLA FREY: Well, it's the only way I can work. Yeah. I don't think you expect the public to fund the things we play at.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs] That's an interesting. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Who knows?

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's an interesting thought. Are you not entirely in agreement with those many artists, then, who say it's the obligation of the. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Of the public to pay for it?

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . government to pay for whatever they want to do?

VIOLA FREY: I don't think that's possible. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we're going to _____. . . .

VIOLA FREY: I just finished a big commission for Iowa.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I know. You went back for that, didn't you?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I mean, public art's public art. In that case, it makes sense.

VIOLA FREY: [It's public, yeah.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about. . . . Obviously you don't know exactly where your work is going to go down the line, but there seems to be a direction indicated with these. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. It all ends up in a museum somewhere, usually.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's good.

VIOLA FREY: Or recirculated, in the big picture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you're pretty prolific. It seems to me that you manage to make quite a bit. And I suppose there's a limit to just how much any. . . .

VIOLA FREY: You could make, it's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, also, how much can be accommodated or absorbed into the consuming part of the art world. Many museums. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah, but I chose the outdoors, which has a lot more room than a house.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's true. But even that has its limits.

VIOLA FREY: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There are only so many sculpture parks. How many of your figure groups are-or figures, large-scale works-do you think are in private . . . well, in people's backyards, if you will?

VIOLA FREY: Yeah. I would say at least half of them. Must be at least a hundred.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's pretty good.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you, I suppose, would say that for somebody who is doing what she wants to do-as you say, to have fun. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . you have realized, achieved a pretty significant level of support?

VIOLA FREY: Yes, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, it would sound like. And so you feel. . . . This would not be one of your complaints then?

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about the crafts. . . .

VIOLA FREY: . . . aspect. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in general? Or ceramics in general? I was. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Well, we never believed in crafts when I was a student.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, well, ceramics. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Not going to start to believe in it now. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what about that whole area that-at least in the past-has been described, because of material more than anything else, as related to the craft-ceramics thing?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I think craft is always there. I mean, you have to know your craft. You have to know it in painting. You have to know it in any area you're in. And I think that certainly applies in a medium like clay. So it's always there. Lurking. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I guess my question is this. It is seen as a movement or an activity-I mean, serious art/crafts, if you will.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or art ceramics, ceramic sculpture, in which you participate. And even from interviewing you I have this notion reinforced that it's been that, an ongoing struggle. It certainly was. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Not with me it hasn't. But it has been. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But to establish. . . .

VIOLA FREY: Oh, the arguments that would go on about whether it was craft or whether it was ceramics-whether it was a fine art or a craft.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So how do you feel now in general, though, about ceramics? How is it positioned? Do you feel it's a full-fledged member of the fine arts?

VIOLA FREY: Well, I think it's fed the world, you know. Whether it's going to keep its position I don't know, but I know that in Australia, Canada, Europe, Japan, Asia, all influenced by ceramics that were done here in the sixties and the seventies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you feel that battle, to the extent that it ever existed, has been won. That there is real partnership, a full-fledged position, within the fine arts.

VIOLA FREY: I guess won. . . . I don't know. I think it's not a field that's going to go away.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles] No, I don't think so.

VIOLA FREY: Because it involves the hand, and I think in this era, when you think of computers, I think the hand is really vital.

PAUL KARLSTROM: More so than ever.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, do you have additional thoughts on these themes? This official interview?

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think we've covered most of it?

VIOLA FREY: I think we've covered a lot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course we'll never cover everything.

VIOLA FREY: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that's life. Okay, well, thank you. It's taken us. . . . Let's see, we started in February, I think, and here we are in June.

VIOLA FREY: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it's been delightful. Thank you very much.

[End of interview]

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