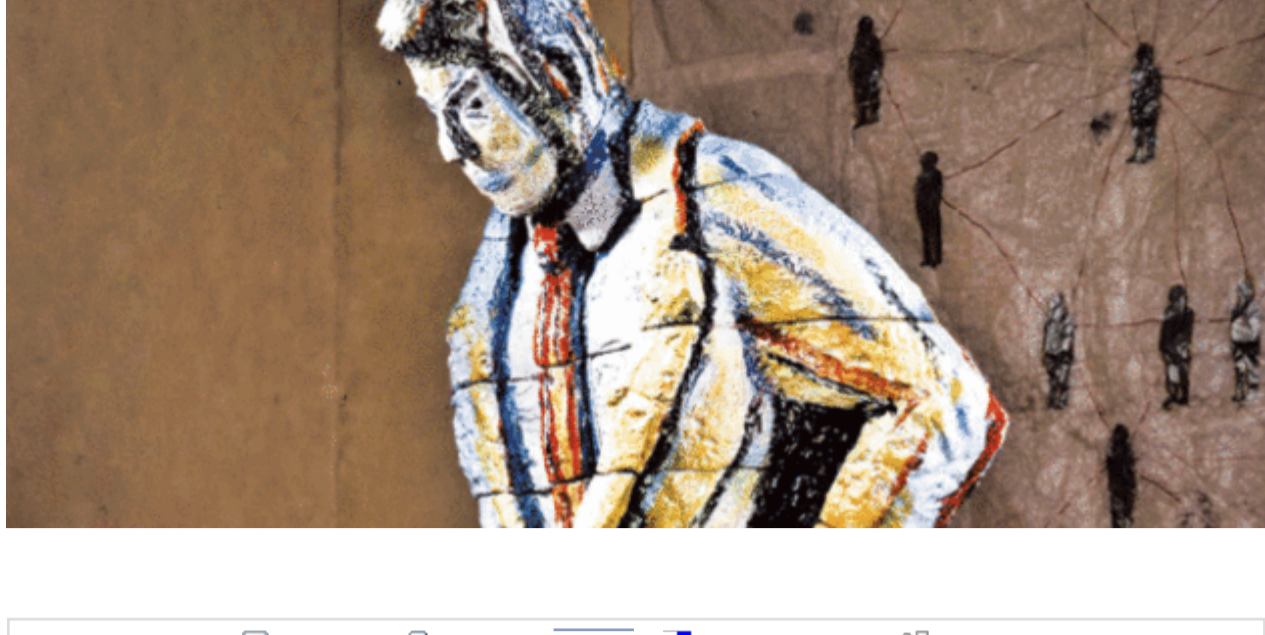


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Junk Portraiture Viola Frey's and Alexander Calder's quirky sculptures

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BY DAVID BALZER November 04, 2009 21:11

BIGGER, BETTER, MORE: THE ART OF VIOLA FREY ****
To Jan 10. Mon-Thu 10am-6pm;
Fri 10am-9pm; Sat-Sun 10am-5pm. \$6-\$12. Gardiner Museum, 111 Queen's Park. 416-586-8080. www.gardinermuseum.on.ca.

ALEXANDER CALDER: THE PARIS YEARS *****
To Jan 10. Tue, Thu-Sun 10am-5:30pm; Wed 10am-8:30pm. \$10-\$18. Art Gallery of Ontario, 317 Dundas W. 416-979-6648. www.ago.net.

The late, Oakland-based Viola Frey's sculpture, currently on view at the Gardiner, is stubbornly unclassifiable. It seems both dated and contemporary, both humbly, earnestly, embarrassingly figurative and conceptually gutsy. Perhaps this is because it's so ugly – ugly in that sometimes-transcendent, garish, id-influenced way that Philip Guston's later paintings are. Frey also works like a bricklayer at her monstrosities, so even if her declared points are basic – the war between men and women; the way humans abuse their environment; the scourge of capitalism – their monumental physicality makes them seem complex. These are literally towering achievements: Frey is best known for her larger-than-life ceramic people, which recall Egyptian and Babylonian statuary. Fire Suit and Man Observing Series II (pictured), for instance, from 1983 and 1984 respectively, have obvious comments to make about contemporary corporate culture, but you look at them and fear the artist, too – bolted to the ground, these figures tilt at viewers with their stiffness and chunkiness, seeming to defy gravity and thus to be perpetually on the verge of collapse. (It's as if you've been shrunk and placed on an activities table in a kindergarten classroom.) A late-life piece, Man Balancing

Urn – a depiction of a man with his foot on an urn, maybe about to tip it over – emphasizes this: art's fragility is as terrifying and violent as it is tragic and romantic.

Alexander Calder's wire portraiture, now at the AGO in an exhibit focusing on the legendary mobile-maker's years in post-WWI Paris, is a wonderful complement to Frey's primitivism. Paired with his circus (a favourite at New York's Whitney Museum and the focus of the AGO's marketing campaign), the portraits, along with some great glimpses of his commercial illustration, are the real revelation here. Calder was interested in the tangible, playful qualities of the line – he boiled it down to its scientific essence in his mobiles – and his wire portraits, many of them busts, are captivating three-dimensional drawings: the AGO dangles them from the ceiling and casts spotlights on them, so that we can see their perpetually changing, two-dimensional shadows. It's arguably the closest modernism ever came to replicating the awe of the magic trick.

Email us at: LETTERS@EYEWEEEKLY.COM or send your questions to EYEWEEEKLY.COM

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