

The work of Mary Frank makes us realize how rare it is today to encounter fully three-dimensional sculpture. It may be that modern man has lost his sense of the solidity of things. Our concepts of space and volume have been virtually destroyed by temporal distortion. We tend to view life as an endless series of two-dimensional images—fleeting glimpses of building facades from the window of a car, shapes pressed to the surface of a newspaper, or our television and movie screens.

Traditionally, sculpture has been closed and monolithic, concerned with solid masses and with volume, from the Venus of Willendorf to Tony Smith, though this runs counter to contemporary visual conditioning. Assemblage, open-work linear sculpture, theater and environmental pieces, anti-form scattering are a few of the strategies sculptors have adopted in this century as alternatives to the basic monolith. Mary Frank's unique contribution has been to maintain a sense of the monolithic in her sculpture while incorporating a vast array of modern pictorial devices.

Collage is a precise metaphor for the multi-leveled complexity of 20th-century experience. Mary Frank isn't a collagist, but her work shows clear evidence of collage thinking. The collage attitude implies the use of abrupt juxtapositions of elements which do not obviously or ordinarily relate to one another. These occur within a fairly unclear or arbitrary framework which does not impose logical order on its constituent parts. Scale disruptions, fragmentation, planar ambiguity, multi-faceted meaning, contradictions of every sort are the norm within a work constructed under the influence of collage thinking. The unexpected is expected. All these occur within a Mary Frank sculpture, but her pervasive sensibility manages to make them all seem so normal one hardly notices what is happening.

She catches our attention with a beautiful face which metamorphoses into the head of a ram as we move around it, only to disappear into the side of a mountain which is, in fact, part of a landscape with tiny horses dashing across its surface. The landscape then becomes the woman's body, or, once again, the side of her face. Every animate thing emerges from and returns to inanimate matter in a constant state of flux. There is a quality of filmic instantaneousness to her work which surprisingly co-exists with a sense of timelessness.

Her work seems monumental even though it is actually small in size. Few pieces are larger than a couple of feet in any direction. This, plus the figural nature of her style and the sense of space contained (like a core) inside each piece, is part of what makes her work traditional. But planes predominate, not masses; and many of these



Mary Frank in her studio. Photo by Joel Meyrowitz.

Mary Frank: 'a sense of timelessness'

BY APRIL KINGSLEY

planes project freely into space or become open-backed shells, instead of the solids their convexities imply at first glance. A sense of fragmentation, which is modern, contradicts a sense of traditional wholeness and completion—for which she also strives. The emotional tension of her imagery, which is expressionistic, is conveyed with an economy of gesture that is almost Matissean. Her work also parallels that of Reuben Nakian in spirit: American energy and plentitude used to convey mythic content.

Sundial and Dance illustrates her strategy perfectly. Not much over two feet tall, it suggests a monument of some sort, but also a tree, a many-storied dwelling, a temple as well as a figure. The vertical alignment of small horizontal indentations in the clay might be vertebrae; thick unfurling leaves atop the curving trunk could as easily be petals on a sturdily stemmed flower; animals and figures stamped into its side look like fossils or minute figures in a vast, steep

landscape; while hard right angles at the base of the piece imply architecture. (The window in one side encourages this reading.) The piece is directionally ambiguous; a large female head on top of the stem faces directly upward; a woman's torso, entangled with something unidentifiable but organic, protrudes from the window; a group of tiny intertwined figures treats the slope of the bowl-shaped leaf like a cozy depression in a sand dune, ideal for lovemaking. Nearby, a woman's head, completely out of scale with the lovers, seems to be emerging from the substance on which they lie. This face is similar to the one on top of the stem, but it is not the same size and is set at a different angle. The bowl which encircles the lovers is the cup of the "sundial"; the "dance" goes on in there, and also inside the little window. It is the ancient "dance of life." The piece looks like two different sculptures from its two most informative angles.

Disruption of scale is one of Mary Frank's

most expressive tools. A work like *Of This Time and That Place* depends upon it. The scarred, fallen head with its vacuous eye sockets ringed by a star of slashes contrasts totally with the brave little standing figure of a tree-woman (a sort of Daphne) on a barren hillside. The split heads of *Nightself*—one backed by the stretching body of a woman searching the heavens, and the other, her forehead stamped with a frieze of figures, like an Egyptian headdress—also garner their expressive force from this device. (Her single standing figures of consistent scale seem to suffer some loss of effectiveness.)

Paralleling Mary Frank's diversified scale and imagery is her commitment to a wide range of sculptural techniques within a given work. For instance, *Night Head* is modeled in the round on one side, but is backed by a flat wall which adjoins another flat surface to serve as a stage or background for a full-length figure painted on it in brown-black glaze. Nearby, a leg-like shape has been cut out of the clay leaving a hole which functions as a negative drawing. She also draws in the clay by stamping images into it with seals, by gouging it, etching it, or cutting shapes incompletely out of it and then extruding them. There is little methodological consistency to her work; only the constant of variety.

Though her use of clay is distinctly modern, its history goes back tens of thousands of years. Much of her imagery seems to go back almost as far in time, recalling Babylonian seals, primitive cave paintings, Pre-Columbian art, Egyptian wall reliefs and Chinese tomb figures. She makes few specific references to the Western tradition. Her vocabulary borrows mainly from the ancient arts of the Near and Far East. The closest she comes to the Western tradition is in some figures which look vaguely like Hellenistic temple carvings or white-figure Greek vase paintings.

Certain processes she uses stress this subliminal archaic quality in her work. She eliminates all specific factual depiction. She keeps color to a minimum; her pieces look as though they might have been recently excavated. They also look fragmentary, thus suggesting shards of ancient pottery or parts of a tomb or primitive religious monuments. The artist seems to transmit messages from the distant past in the language of 20th-century art.

A large sampling of Mary Frank's recent work—earthenware and stoneware sculpture and a group of monotypes—was on view at the Zabriskie Gallery this spring. If anything, the show was too crowded with work and there seemed to be a need for at least one large piece to provide a central focus. Frank probably felt this too because she

began work on parts of a larger-than-life reclining female figure as soon as the show was installed.

"I don't know why I kept on making them taller, when they could just as well have been enlarged horizontally. I've always wanted to make larger clay pieces, but not so large that I would lose the freedom of the process of the smaller ones, and lose the intimacy. I don't want them to look the same when you get really close as when you're 60 feet away," she said recently.

She is a prolific artist, especially as far as drawing is concerned. She draws incessantly, filling countless books, pads, scrolls and oddly shaped pieces of paper with leaping animals, landscapes, plants and figures. In this she probably comes closest to her hero, Degas, who instructed his friend Forain that if any funeral oration was to be said for him, it should be "He greatly loved drawing; so do I"—and nothing more. Following this quotation, which she recorded in one of her sketchbooks, Mary Frank wrote, "I understand so well those Degas drawings of the dancers while they moved—what is it that is so exquisite about the attempt, even though I know it is impossible? Maybe it's like being a hunter, seizing on the immediacy." She keeps her models moving around in her studio, doing what seems natural to them, and she often sketches them reflected in a full-length mirror so that she has two images of them. Beaches, natural history museums, zoos, botanical gardens and parks provide most of the rest of her source material. She tends to favor fast-moving birds and animals, especially horses, goats, antelopes, gulls and cranes. "It's very hard to catch them in motion like that, you have to work so fast. It's a never-ending struggle, but when you come near it, your work is injected with the life they have."

Mary Frank described her early years: "I've been drawing ever since I can remember. My mother is a painter, Eleanor Lockspeiser. She just had a show at the Phoenix Gallery. When I was little she would give me books on Picasso and old copies of *Verve* magazine to read when I went to bed. The *Verves* were full of Indian and Persian miniatures, Chinese and Japanese art. I didn't read them; I only looked at the pictures. I loved those books."

Actually, she studied dancing more than she studied art during her formative years, and spent over four years with the Martha Graham company. She stopped dancing by the time she was 17, but its influence remains a strong current in her work, especially in her obsession with capturing the figure in motion. At 17, she was already married and pregnant with her son Pablo, and studying with Max Beckmann. A little later she studied drawing with Hans Hof-

mann, but she has learned the most from other artists by studying their work on her own. Picasso, of course, was always crucially important to her. Henry Moore and Giacometti, Rodin, Reuben Nakian and Degas, Francis Bacon and Raoul Hague all provided strong stimulation in turn during the various phases of her development. Sharing points of view with Margaret Israel, Jeff Schlanger and the late Jan Müller also had a vital effect on her sense of what possibilities were open to her as an artist. She has recently been involved with the Open Theater performers, as friends and as drawing subjects during their rehearsals; this too has had a liberating effect on her work.

When asked what influence she felt her long marriage to photographer and filmmaker Robert Frank had on her imagery, she said there was "little influence on the imagery in particular, except that he was interested in people. One is influenced just by the presence of an artist all the time. Especially since my separation from Robert, I've been working closely with other artists and friends in recent years, sharing the experience of working together, and that has made a lot of difference to me, freeing me, opening things."

Undoubtedly there have been subtle influences from Robert Frank: for instance, the quality of instantaneousness which her drawing shares with photography. She can, with a single undulating line, convey the sensation of watching a woman bend and turn; it is as though she has taken snapshots or action photos of her subjects. There is also the sense of silhouetting, of light-dark contrast, of theatrical stage settings, and of seeing shapes and masses in outlines and flat planes which might be called photographic.

Mary Frank is a marvelous draftsman. The idiosyncrasies of each drawing medium she uses—pencil, charcoal, wash, crayon, ball-point pen, brushed ink or pastel—are exploited for their full potential. "I like to switch mediums," she says, "each one has a wholly different feel. But it takes me such a long time to master a new technique." Learning to use oriental brushes that can make pencil-thin lines or lay down wide washes of pigment was perhaps the most difficult, but she feels it may have been the most rewarding.

She has been experimenting with monotypes since 1969. A number of these were exhibited in the Zabriskie show for the first time. She recently discovered a way of reworking the plates and re-printing over and over the original image, adding more color to make a richer image, that is more like painting than making prints.

"The process itself is extremely exciting to me. I love working in reverse like that and not being sure of the results. Also, you



Mary Frank: *Sundial and Dance* (two views), 1972, stoneware, 31 inches high. Zabriskie Gallery.

Night Head, 1970-71, glazed and unglazed ceramic, 28 inches high. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Vanderwoude.



can have the past and the present at the same time. In clay the changes wipe out what was there before."

That, of course, is one of the things she likes best about using clay: the possibility of making lightning-quick alterations in the forms, of erasing and adding. She is able to manipulate clay with something like the facility of a pencil. She says, "I never felt as free working any other way, though I enjoyed carving and molding the wax with my hands."

From the late '50s, when she had her first show at the Poindexter Gallery, until the late '60s, she carved in wood or made wax figures to be cast (whenever possible) in bronze. It wasn't until 1967, when she began working directly in plaster, that she found a medium that was as responsive to her spatial conceptions as it was to her hands. Her plaster pieces were often landscapes (or, more accurately, dunescapes) containing tiny, erect female figures that evolved from an earlier image she describes as "Daphne coming out of the earth and being transformed back into the substance of it again." Though these works are small in size, their internal scale is vast. "It didn't dawn on me," she said once, "that there was no natural way to cut off a landscape in sculpture. In painting you have the frame, like a window. I let the shaping I did of the boxes into which I poured the plaster determine their boundaries. A figure is a little more finite, at least, though I often treat the figures as landscape too."

Since 1970, Mary Frank has been working almost exclusively in ceramics, and thinking more in terms of the figure than landscape. But even in these pieces, figures often merge imperceptibly with their landscape or architectural contexts. Either that, or she opens the figures up, allowing space to flow into and around their forms. Her approach to the craft of ceramics is totally open, too. She is always experimenting with different clay mixtures, ways of attaching parts and unusual, sometimes even accidental effects.

"Orthodox ceramists are shocked by the way I work," she says. "I have lost a lot of pieces, and there have been accidents in the firing. Sometimes the accidents turn out to be the most beautiful things. I have to wait six or eight months between making the piece and firing it because there's no kiln here. It's so frustrating, and so is not having enough room to make a really big piece. I have to work where I live, to be in contact with the pieces daily. Sometimes I sense that it would be some kind of salvation if I could work much more. Often I'm on the outside, distracted, distracting myself. I know I could go much farther. Some of my friends fear that if I did, I would close myself off to everything else."