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Art in Review

Ken Price

Sculpture and Drawings,
1962-2006

Matthew Marks Gallery
523 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through Nov. 4

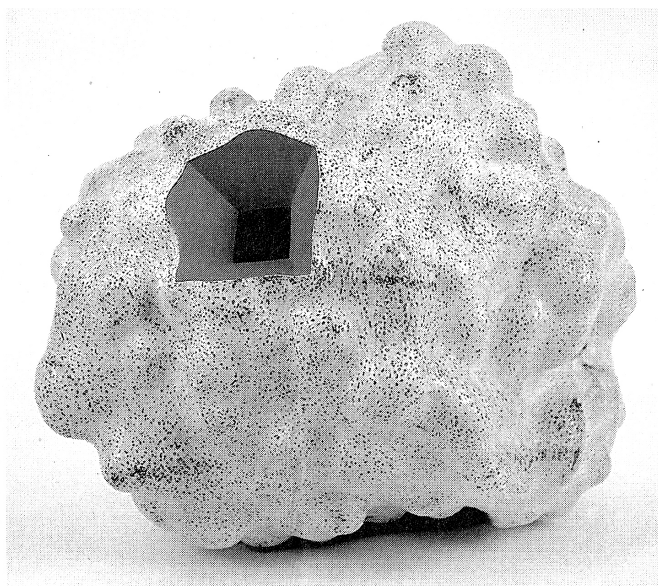
Divided into sections that might be labeled past, present and future, this is the largest New York exhibition yet devoted to Ken Price's work. Although somewhat unshapely in the curatorial sense, it states the obvious: some local museum should drop everything and give Mr. Price's scintillating, polymorphous ceramic sculptures the retrospective they deserve. In the exhibition's catalog (out soon), Matthew Higgs details the long-term discrepancy between Mr. Price's achievement and his visibility.

In the rear space of the gallery, five increasingly commanding and gorgeously colored pieces and 40 drawings allude to four decades of artistic growth. It all began with sex and coffee cups and their shared qualities, which include insides, outsides and things to hold. But these were quickly subsumed within a keen attention to natural forms and the grotesque sublime. In the middle and office sections, an array of 15 recent pieces on pedestals seem, at first, monotonous: a few too many in too much space looking too much alike. But close attention to these small, suggestively bumpy or lobed sculptures will dispel the sense of sameness. It also confirms that, of all the artists associated with the Fetish Finish tendency in Los Angeles in the 1960's, only Mr. Price managed to transubstantiate it from surface to form, transcending its origins in customized car culture by making it flesh — abstract flesh.

Like Jackson Pollock, Mr. Price converted technique into content. Despite his objects' smallness and ostensible exquisiteness, their jewel-like layers of sanded color are almost as dissectible as one of Pollock's drip paintings, and similarly factual, random and expansive. You count the colors, note the role of chance and get lost in the intergalactic vastness of their miniature textures.

The show's third, smallest space introduces something completely different: Mr. Price's first large sculpture, 7 feet tall and 7 feet wide and bumpy in a big way. The colors shift noticeably from bluish to pinkish across the bumps, giving them powdery shadows, a different optical glow. The possibility of an active, mysterious interior that figures in the early sculptures in the show returns. The form expands here, contracts there, as if scores of water balloons that are trying to break free. Only a full-dress museum retrospective will do justice to the restless ambition that has fueled Mr. Price's 40-year career. But this piece announces another departure for points less known.

ROBERTA SMITH



Photographs from Matthew Marks Gallery

"Pastel" (1995), top, and "Slope" (2006), above, from the exhibition "Ken Price: Sculpture and Drawings," at the Matthew Marks Gallery.