

ARTFORUM

Ken Price

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

In 1960, at the tender age of twenty-five, Ken Price had his first solo show at Los Angeles's storied Ferus Gallery. In both 1979 and 1981, he appeared in the Whitney Biennial, and he remains a staple of museum shows tracking LA's contribution to twentieth-century art, most recently last summer's "Los Angeles 1955–1985: The Birth of an Artistic Capital" at the Centre Georges Pompidou. Yet despite his otherwise impressive track record, Price has been the subject of exactly two museum surveys, in 1992 and 2004, and mention of his name tends to elicit vacant stares or tentative guesses at his significance. He is the consummate "artist's artist," widely respected but paradoxically little known.

Like, say, "Neo-Geo," "Finish Fetish" is a label of convenience; Larry Bell, John McCracken, and Billy Al Bengston may all exhibit some concern for surface polish, but arguably more historically important is the fact that they emerged in the same period and place. But for Price, the designation "finish fetishist" is undeniably apt. While his 2004 exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery focused on works on paper, in this recent show his trademark painted ceramic sculptures—illuminated by a selection of older constructions, drawings, and collages in the gallery's adjacent room—were the main event.

The typical Price sculpture is a small, biomorphic . . . thing, a non-representational handful of strangeness that vaguely resembles a smooth internal organ, sometimes boasting suggestive orifices. In a recent interview with Vija Celmins that is reproduced in the catalogue, Price recalls, "I remember reading someone quoted as saying, 'Art is when things are rounded.'" Price's new sculptures have all the fleshy roundness of a Rubens muse. Overpoweringly corporeal, they evoke a wealth of adjectives: lumpy, bumpy, blobby, amorphous, scatological. Amusingly, these diminutive, formless objects are held aloft by stern pedestals, and the baseness implicit in their shape is further redirected by radiantly smooth surfaces and paint jobs that make them shimmer like muscle cars in the California sun.

Price achieves the bizarrely beautiful mottled "skin" of his new works by layering a variety of acrylic colors on each piece after firing. Subsequent sanding reveals splotches of buried color that evoke cells under a microscope, inner matter bubbling to the surface. Certain forms are repeated throughout this new body of work: Tumorlike protuberances bulge from *Geodesic Pile*, 2006, and the monumental *Bulgogi*, 2006, which is painted in the burning orange and oceanic aqua of a California sunset. *Go-No-Go* and *Lazo* (both 2006) resemble leaning towers of kidneys topped by Oldenburgian soft phalluses.

The echoes of Philip Guston—in whose late paintings the body became an awkward, lumpy cipher—are patent.

In interviews and lectures, Price has framed his work as simply a manifestation of that which he finds pleasurable. The surface quality of his sculptures and paintings is undeniably captivating. But traces of a deeply sardonic worldview are detectable in, say, *Study for Geometric Cups*, 1974—a gouache rendering of ludicrously cumbersome, pastel-hued, fractured drinking mugs

that seem completely unfit for their purpose. In the Celmins interview, Price admits, "When I look at my body, I know I'm old." In light of this remark, his new sculptures seem shaded with pathos: Meditations on the body, their surfaces recall the splotchy skin of the elderly, and their buoyant bumps seem stuffed with silicone. Whatever blitheness is initially communicated by their eccentric shapes and gleaming color might also be considered a decoy: The saddest, most awkward body is perhaps the synthetic, unnatural one that fights a futile battle against the stampede of time.

—Nick Stillman

Ken Price, *Lazo*, 2006, fired and painted clay, 1' 6 1/2" x 1' 9" x 10' 2".

