

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Ken Price

Press Packet

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Pagel, David. "At 'Ken Price: Drawings', Life's Little Details in Broad Strokes." *Los Angeles Times*, July 22, 2016.

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**The New York Times**

# What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries Right Now

Dec. 8, 2021

DOWNTOWN

## Ken Price

Through Dec. 23. Matthew Marks, 526 West 22nd Street, Manhattan; 212-243-0047, matthewmarks.com.

The great ceramic sculptor Ken Price (1935-2012) knew that, in art, social concern and visual beauty were not mutually exclusive; in fact, he inextricably embedded one in the other to brilliant effect. Seduce and enlighten. Their interdependence was perhaps nowhere clearer than in his two-pronged Pluto Ware series, made between 1993 and 2000 and exhibited in this revelatory show for the first time.



Ken Price's "Pluto Bowl (Red Sky)," 1993, glazed ceramic. Estate of Ken Price and Matthew Marks Gallery

More numerous here are the small, richly colored Pluto cups, bowls and vases in glazed ceramic that depict isolated factories belching smoke and polluting rivers amid barren

landscapes. These black silhouettes have a sign-language legibility. The surrounding emptiness is defined in off-key blues, greens, coppers, reds and lavenders, at once luxuriant and toxic. It's as if Precisionism were filtered through the palette of Art Nouveau. You realize that only the factories remain; after the apocalypse, they will be the only buildings still standing.

The second Pluto group, while smaller, features more imposing, nearly spherical vessels called bomb vases. Those here are in pure white bisqueware — fired with no or very little glaze. The factories and landscapes are sparsely rendered (usually outlined) in black glaze and ink. The stark contrast feels dire, as if the entire planet has been burned away. Given Price's affinity for the American Southwest, you may be reminded of the black-and-white Anasazi burial bowls, as well as the papier-mâché skulls and skeletons of the Mexican Day of the Dead observances. *ROBERTA SMITH*

## Los Angeles Times

### Review At 'Ken Price: Drawings,' life's little details in broad strokes

By David Pagel

JULY 22, 2016, 5:20 PM

**“K**en Price: Drawings” is an intimate affair, despite the number of works in the exhibition (35), the number of rooms it fills (five) and the years it covers (1969 to 2011). Everything at Matthew Marks Gallery in Beverly Hills gives infectious form to Price’s fascination with details and the wide-eyed delight he found in his surroundings.

Price (1935-2012) spent a good chunk of his life in the studio. So it shouldn’t come as a surprise that the works he made there formed a big part of his surroundings. His ceramic sculptures (five of which are in the exhibition) are depicted in 20 of the drawings on display.

What’s remarkable about Price’s pictures of his own works is that they have the presence of portraits. Not still lifes. Nor studies that explore future possibilities. But full-blown portraits: visual transcriptions of what passes between a sitter and an artist when both sit down so that the latter might convey the 3-D reality of the former in a 2-D image.

The best portraits capture an essential facet of their subjects while suggesting that many other facets lie just beneath the surface — that life, in all its impossible-to-depict richness, is present.

That is the sense you get from Price’s drawings. You also see that he treated his sculptures as autonomous beings — as complex creatures that have lives of their own.

At different times and in different moods, they elicit different interpretations, evoke different emotions and trigger different responses. Some seem to be chatting with one another as they stroll in the sunshine. Others hang out on tabletops. One appears to be playing shadow-puppets, simply for amusement. Many sit stoically, the seriousness of their stances bumping up against the cartoon goofiness of their forms, the comic strip feel of Price’s palette and the casual gracefulness of his draftsmanship.

His eight little landscapes and two interiors similarly show his fondness for contrast and complexity. Colors puddle and blend. They also get circumscribed by decisive lines and black shadows. Some form plump landscapes, a la Grant Wood. Others recall the golden age of Sunday comics and the pleasures of getting lost in little pictures.

“Ken Price: Drawings” paints a picture of an artist who had no interest in the god-like control some artists pretend to. Instead, he found transcendence in the most incidental of details. That is what he gives visitors, repaying, in spades, our attentiveness to life’s mundane wonders.



Ken Price's "Barren Rock," 2006, acrylic and ink on paper, 9 by 6 inches.  
(Matthew Marks Gallery)

## The New York Times

### Art in Review

#### Ken Price

##### 'Drawings'

Matthew Marks  
523 West 24th Street, Chelsea  
Through June 25

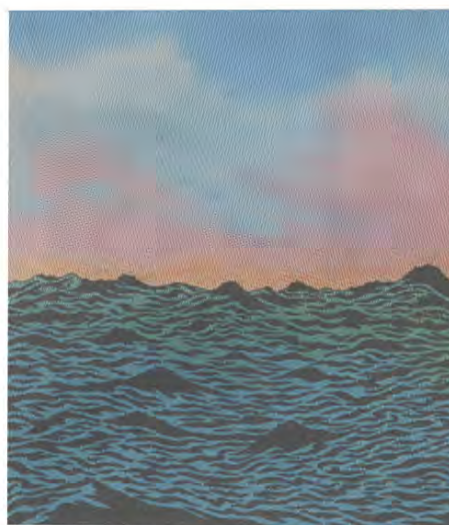
During his celebrated career as a ceramic sculptor, Ken Price (1935–2012) maintained a sideline of making wonderfully imaginative and funny drawings and small paintings. Many of his works in “Drawings,” at Matthew Marks, depict sculptures he made or might have made, from fanciful cups in the 1960s to blobby works from the 2000s. Most compelling, however, are two sets of pictures from different periods that evoke offbeat senses of place.

The earlier ones pertain to Los Angeles, where Mr. Price was born and spent most of his life. Images of stark modern living rooms with city views through nearly ceiling-to-floor windows have the coolly suspenseful feel of neo-noir film sets. “Car Plunge” (1994), in which a small red car is hurtling off a cliff over the Pacific Coast Highway, looks like a case of foul play.

Later works reflect Mr. Price’s move in 2002 to Taos, N.M., where the rugged environs inspired small, vividly colorful cartoon landscapes that are more hallucinogenic than naturalistic.

Several envision blob sculptures in primordial settings. In “Where Women Rule” (2000), seven naked women dance wildly around a monumental pink blob sculpture, from which rises a towering, tongue-like form. A volcano erupts under a lightning-laced sky in “Eruption and Lava Flow” (2003). “Ocean” (2004) depicts a rippling blue-and-black sea beneath an opalescent sky. With such sincerely goofy images, Mr. Price exposed the Dionysian depths of his own creative mind.

KEN JOHNSON



ESTATE OF KEN PRICE,  
MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

“Ocean” (2004), by Ken Price, part of the body of work this sculptor made on the side.

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## The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

### Ken Price: 'Specimen Rocks'



"New Mexican" (1984), by Ken Price, fired and painted clay, at Matthew Marks Gallery.  
Matthew Marks Gallery

**By Roberta Smith**

June 12, 2014

*Matthew Marks Gallery*

*502 and 522 West 22nd Street, Chelsea*

*Matthew Marks Gallery*

*526 West 22nd Street, Chelsea*

*Through June 28*

Ken Price, who died in 2012 at the age of 77, did not go quietly. Exhibitions of his large painted bronze sculptures in two Matthew Marks Gallery spaces on West 22nd Street show him pushing his work into new territory to the end.

A third show of seven pieces from his small, rough-surfaced "Specimen Rocks" series of 1983-84 verifies that forward motion was his normal mode, fueled by a profound understanding of clay and its history, formal possibilities and inherent sexiness.

The large bronze sculptures, which were initially modeled in clay, might be taken as Price's response to the Light and Space movement of Los Angeles, where he began his career. Visually and suggestively, they are

wild aggregates of two or more sausage or bean shapes coiled together. They bring to mind things like food, bodily organs, oddly-fingered hands, excrement and even blissfully spooning couples.

These forms have glowing, seemingly monochrome surfaces that are actually alive with fugitive, chameleon hues. The colors slip and slide — a little like the forms themselves — as you move about them: purples and reds float up from blues or greens, and reds from bronze. The dips between the rounded forms do their own thing with light and shadow, adding to the sense of color as a living thing.

Isolated in Price's signature wood and glass boxes, the "Specimen Rocks" mimic geological samples, presenting irregular amalgams of smooth and rough, bright and earthen, iridescent and matte. They acknowledge clay's origin in the earth, but also sometimes harbor odd geometric forms that add to the tension between natural and artificial. It is almost as if the larger pieces next door were germinating inside these, struggling to get out.

The "Specimen Rocks" have not been seen in this number in New York in decades. Price may be gone, but there remains much to discover about his amazing, ever-changing continuity.

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THE  
NEW YORKER

ART

**Ken Price**

The late genius of ceramic art springs posthumous surprises. In two gallery spaces, massive, luminously painted bronzes, conceived in Price's last years, amplify his wonted poetry of globular forms. Walk around them. They configure differently from each viewing angle, to dramatic, funny, and beautiful effect. A third space presents a series of little, and little-known, experimental works, called "Specimen Rocks," which Price made during a spell in Massachusetts, in the early eighties. The grenade-size ceramics combine planar and rough elements, and matte and metallic colors, in ways that transfix and delight. Through June 28. (Marks, 502, 522, and 526 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200.)

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# ARTFORUM



View of "Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective," 2013, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Foreground, from left: *Little D*, 2011; *Ordell*, 2011–12; *Venus*, 2000.

## Ken Price

THE DRAWING CENTER / METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

**AN ICONIC KEN PRICE SCULPTURE** finds its way into a pool in his 1968 collage *Floating Turtle Cup*; sketched onto a found photograph of a naked woman wearing a tiara, it seems to be swimming by her, trailing in its wake a scribbled note: SEE IF TURTLE CUPS WILL FLOAT? SHOTS IN POOL—. A kindred ceramic vessel makes an appearance in the drawing *Sea Turtle Cup* from the following year, where Price's experiment in animating his sculptures deepens: See if cups will become turtles? Oblivious to us, and to the enormous cup with handle protruding out of its shell, a turtle glides orthogonally by in a graphite ocean, white circles bubbling up from the mug as if the creature is breathing through it. The question of what is natural pervades Price's work—from his first animal earthenware, to the ambiguously biomorphic sculptures that defined the bulk of his career, to the eerie landscapes that dominate his later drawings. In its unsettling beauty, Price's oeuvre recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous declaration that art itself is a kind of sublimation of the natural world. "Thus is Art a nature passed through the alembic of man," Emerson wrote in his 1836 meditation "Nature"; and thus is art passed through the vessel of reptile, sometimes holding tequila.

Price, who died in February after five prolific decades sculpting clay, was an artist's artist, always a little under the radar and a little off the grid, whether working in Los Angeles or New Mexico. From the start of his career, prominent critics followed his ceramics with enthusiasm—*Red*, 1961, even graced the cover of *Artforum* in 1963—and as recently as 2006, he enjoyed a major drawing show at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York. Still, Price was hardly a household name.

But he was suddenly everywhere this past summer in New York. A blazing heat wave was the perfect backdrop for the oozing, igneous shimmer of Price's compact sculpture retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the artist's friend architect Frank Gehry designed the beautiful show, curated by Stephanie Barron, which traveled from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas); the puckish menagerie of ectotherms, both sculpted and drawn, in "Ken Price: Zoo" at the Franklin Parrasch Gallery (which exhibited Price regularly through the 1990s); and the desert vistas and scenes of spewing lava downtown at "Ken Price: Slow and Steady Wins the Race, Works on Paper 1962–2010," the first survey of Price's drawings, organized by the Drawing Center (curated by Douglas Dreishpoon of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo). Exhibiting Price's personal taxonomies of the physical world across varied stages of his career and different modes of production, all three shows produced that most Emersonian of reactions: delight.

The messy, annotated energy of Price's initial sketches—most depicting extant or forthcoming ceramics—suggests a fervent, even scientific curiosity about every warty bulge and sensual orifice of his sculptures. Drawings activated these specimens into breathing, mating beings: deputies (here is Emerson again) of the world. Beginning in the '80s, Price's sculptures seem crafted in reverse, as if approaching a state of natural formation: Imagine minerals burnished for millennia discovered one day while walking the dog (*Big Load*, 1988), or geological samples extracted from planets where exotic atmospheres catalyze delirious textures and colors, such as *Bub*, 2010.

If these later sculptures introduce us to appealing alien surfaces, Price's drawings from this same period engage in an uncanny intimacy with the landscape around us. The breakdown in metaphor instigated by the ceramics—where a piece is described as like five things, precisely because it is like nothing—becomes, in the drawings, a radical versatility. The efficient graphic crispness of his late acrylic and inks, given their own gallery in the Drawing Center's thoughtful hanging, renders a mountain the same as a wave; the whirling vortices in the center of *The Hermit's Cave* and *The Bottomless Pit* from 2008 are simultaneously opening and closing. Both are evocative of the disembodied void of Emerson's "transparent eyeball," and here we are not really so far from the scenery of British Enlightenment painter Joseph Wright of Derby, by way of *The Simpsons*.

Shades of environmental noir were everywhere at the Drawing Center. And when Price introduces not only a touch of pop Americana but a sense of unease, of landscape as compromised or even hostile, he creates a true kind of American sublime. In *Taos Talking Picture*, 2000, identical cars park at a drive-in theater under a roiling sunset blotted by dark clouds. On the screen, a reclining Gauguinesque woman looks warily over a bare shoulder while tufted plants stretch toward the horizon as a hundred small fires. (Think Georgia

O'Keeffe on acid, or Cormac McCarthy with a sense of humor.) LA is a decorative screen in the windows of Price's blank interiors from the early '90s, and as a backdrop for the Hockneyesque bathroom scene in illustrations commissioned by environmentalist poet Harvey Mudd. In *Dangerously Clean Water*, 1993, it's the factory that's threatened by its setting. And in the *Talisman to Avert Falling/Crashing* drawings from 1997, buses plunge off hairpin cliffs and giant skeletons loom over cars already smashed at the bottom of mountain passes. Price updates transcendentalism for a postnature ecology: With the worst right in front of us, we can carry on with the unknown.

A wonderful detail from the earliest work at the Drawing Center, the ten-foot scroll *K. P.'s Journey to the East*, 1962, has Ken Price-san (the suffix a Japanese honorific allowing for a mischievous play on the art/artisan division between sculpture and pottery) hoping to uncover the poet Basho's wisdom inscribed on a garden stone, but "unfortunately a turtle was sitting on the poem during Price-san's visit." One definition of the sublime posits that what we seek is already in our presence.

*"Ken Price: Slow and Steady Wins the Race, Works on Paper 1962–2010" is currently on view (through Jan. 19, 2014) at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo; travels to Harwood Museum of Art, Taos, NM, Feb. 22–May 4, 2014.*

*Prudence Peiffer is a senior editor of Artforum.*

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# FINANCIAL TIMES

## Ken Price: Sculptures, Metropolitan Museum, New York; Works on Paper, Drawing Center, New York – review

by Ariella Budick | August 15, 2013



Ken Price's 'Zizi' (2011)

Contemporary art rarely broadcasts its virtuosity as proudly, or as subtly, as Ken Price's ceramics do in the Metropolitan Museum's loving retrospective. His odd, biomorphic shapes are thrillingly executed and bewitchingly mysterious. They could be solid blobs or hollow vessels, squishy life forms or carapaces for mutant creatures hidden inside. They ooze organic vitality.

The glowing, sensual surfaces of Price's sculptures wrap around an assortment of tumescent nodules and crack open in suggestive fissures. An agglomeration of swelling sausage shapes could be a pile of stray penises or a tower of turds. A purplish blob parts its prickly surface to reveal an aperture of shiny geometric planes. It's almost impossible to resist touching these ceramic monsters, to see whether a black hole is just a shallow depression or a dark passage to the form's interior.

Many of Price's bulbous forms hint at some sort of order within; others seem to have insides that are unruly if not downright dangerous. A monumental, nose-like lump gapes open and its single nostril flares into an orifice with a slopping red tongue. Ungainly tentacles poke through the fractured shells of egg-shaped orbs. Price acknowledged how disturbing these tiny sculptures can be. "People would come and tell me that they were both repulsed and fascinated, like looking at a bad automobile accident or something."

This dynamic of attraction and disgust may be one reason Price's work has lingered so long in the shadows. When he died last year at 77, his name was all but unknown except to a small circle of friends. One of them, the architect Frank Gehry, collaborated with him in designing this exhibition, which started its

odyssey at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art before alighting at the Met. “I can’t imagine living in a place without a Ken Price,” Gehry writes touchingly in the catalogue. For now, New Yorkers are getting a double dose: in addition to the Met’s show, the Drawing Center has mounted a concurrent study of his works on paper, *Ken Price: Slow and Steady Wins the Race*.

A Californian ceramicist, Price had to overcome two kinds of prejudice to break into an art world centred on more macho genres and headquartered in New York. He never did get comfortable, caught as he was in a category clash between art, craft and architecture. It’s a set of contradictions he himself nurtured, especially during the period he focused on making countless versions of the potter’s humble vessel: the cup. In the end – which is where the Met show begins, since it narrates Price’s story in reverse chronological order – he gravitated to the aesthetic object, useless, beautiful and pure.

Born in Los Angeles and raised in the semi-wilds of the Pacific Palisades, Price pledged himself to jazz, surfing and creativity. He toyed with cartooning and animation, and his work, even much later, gave off whiffs of R. Crumb and Philip Guston. In graduate school in 1957, he came under the sway of Peter Voulkos, who was then a high priest in the cult of clay as art. Voulkos worked in a direct, spontaneous, expressionist style and Price became a disciple.

But by the early 1960s, needing to unshackle himself from Voulkos’ influence, Price shrank his scale from intimidating to intimate. He began a series of small, delicate cups that still discharge sparks of enchantment. Some he assembled out of tiny clay bricks, as in a child’s bright building toy. Others evoke his boyhood in the California hills, with frogs, turtles or snails clinging to their walls and branches curling into handles. The so-called “slate cups”, precarious stacks of rough-edged clay slabs, threaten at every moment to slide apart. Their horizontality and earthiness evoke the broad valleys and flat mesas of Taos, New Mexico, where Price moved with his family in the 1970s.

The cup was a way for Price to negotiate the straits between art and craft. “The cup essentially presents a set of formal restrictions – sort of a preordained structure,” he said. “It doesn’t have to be about anything other than itself, but it can be used as a vehicle for ideas.” Price’s enthusiasm for the form was also driven by its usefulness as a conveyer of tequila. When he dried out in the 1980s, he abandoned the cup, but he didn’t leave behind its essential nature as a form that could double as a container. This preoccupation with lucid emptiness would reign over his remaining decades. His later sculptures grew in scale and wallowed in comic grotesquery, but he always remained fixed on the eloquent void.

Price’s obsession with enclosing space in idiosyncratic ways helps explain Gehry’s enduring fandom. The architect was so intrigued with the hidden recesses of “100% Pure”, a blobular sculpture in his own collection, that he subjected it to computer imaging. What the virtual X-ray revealed was a baroque structure of overlapping curves, caves and passages that harmonise intriguingly with Gehry’s flamboyant interiors.

Like an architect, Price made elaborate drawings to help himself think. He also sketched regularly, for pleasure and sanity. The Met has gathered a small sampling of these less formal works, but the Drawing Center exhibition shows off the full scope of his draughtsmanship, and the joy he found in putting brush to paper.

“For real pleasure, I’d like to draw all day and listen to jazz,” he said. “My happiest day is when I have no business, visitors or phone and can draw.” And yet the drawings, like the sculptures, use seductive, friendly colours and cartoony shapes to convey a world beset by volcanoes, storms and environmental catastrophe. Price had a taste for wrapping dark obsessions in affable packages, which is what makes his work so unsettlingly pleasant to behold.

THE  
NEW YORKER

**"KEN PRICE: SLOW AND STEADY WINS  
THE RACE, WORKS ON PAPER, 1962-2010"**

Saturated colors and surreal vistas characterize sixty-five intimate drawings by the brilliant ceramicist who died last year and whose sculpture is the current subject of a show at the Met. Early gouaches of claustrophobic interiors with film-noir flourishes (a dead boy in a bathtub, an unmade bed in a detective's room) give way to lush landscapes in juicy acrylic, turbulent scenes of volcanoes and oceans that can suggest updates of Hokusai, every inch vibrating with color. Working in Taos, New Mexico, Price often portrayed his signature tuberous forms amid desert settings: "Large Sculpture with Rocks," which he completed in 2009, features an aqua version squeezed between two jagged red peaks. Through Aug. 18. (The Drawing Center, 35 Wooster St. 212-219-2166.)

THE  
NEW YORKER

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK  
EARTH ANGEL

The compact Ken Price retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum is a chamber of wonderments. The ceramics artist, who died last year at his home in New Mexico, spent half a century flirting with greatness in a disrespected



medium. His confidence owed to timing—a brief renaissance of ceramic art in Southern California in the late fifties, led by Price's teacher Peter Voulkos—and his quality to wit and (no other word will quite do) genius. Price's manipulations of cup forms, variously geometric and biomorphic, amounted to a surprise attack on the history and the aesthetics of modern art, spankingly refreshed and made the artist's own. His later mode of globular masses with sanded, speckled patinas of paint is sui generis. It exalts color to practically metaphysical intensities. The artist Robert Irwin remarked, "You had the feeling that if you cut that thing in half it would be that color all the way through." The architect Frank Gehry, who designed the Met show, said, "I can't imagine living in a place without a Ken Price." Go see. Join the club.

—Peter Schjeldahl

## The East Coast of California



**O**VER six months in 2011 and 2012, dozens of art institutions in Southern California joined forces in a festival of exhibitions, “Pacific Standard Time,” celebrating the history of contemporary art in Los Angeles. The project was a big success and continues to generate energy. A jolt of it hits New York City this week in an unheard-of convergence here of major California shows.

Most are historical, documenting West Coast art movements and careers stretching over the last 60 years. “State of Mind: New California Art Circa 1970,” opening at the Bronx Museum of the Arts on Sunday, tells the story of California Conceptualism, which emerged in parallel with its East Coast counterpart but developed its own distinctive trajectory.

Traveling retrospectives flesh out important West Coast figures still under the mainstream radar here. The much-loved ceramic sculptor Ken Price, who died last year, is the subject of a doubleheader survey at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Drawing Center in SoHo, while the Los Angeles artist Lynn Foulkes, an artist’s artist with an avid hometown following, is at the New Museum.

A keenly awaited new site-specific project by the Los Angeles-born James Turrell, a leader of the West Coast Light and Space movement, is flooding the Guggenheim Museum’s rotunda with unearthly illumination. (A recreated 1977 light piece by his California colleague Robert Irwin opens at the Whitney Museum of American Art on Thursday.) And in the cavernous Park Avenue Armory, the veteran bad-boy Paul McCarthy brings Disneyland innocence crashing to earth.

How “California” is all of this? Totally. What can New York learn from it? We’re just finding out. HOLLAND COTTER

FRIDAY, JUNE 21, 2013 C25

# A Career Of Bumps And Twists

Tableware? Toys? Genetic accidents? Objets d'art? The ceramic sculptures of Ken Price suggest all these possibilities and many more. To the market's old divide-and-label

**HOLLAND  
COTTER**

**ART  
REVIEW**

query, "Is this art or craft?" Price offered one finessing answer: "Yes." And right he was. You see the rightness instantly in "Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is one of those rare ideal shows: right size, great design (by Frank Gehry), pretty near faultless art. Ideal, too, in a plainer way, is a concurrent survey of the artist's works on paper, "Ken Price: Slow and Steady Wins the Race," at the Drawing Center in SoHo.

Price, who died last year at 77, was in certain ways a classic Southern Californian. Born in Los Angeles and raised there in the 1930s and

'40s, as a kid he lived for surfing and jazz, and he had art on the brain from the start: drawing, painting, sculpturing, he liked it all.

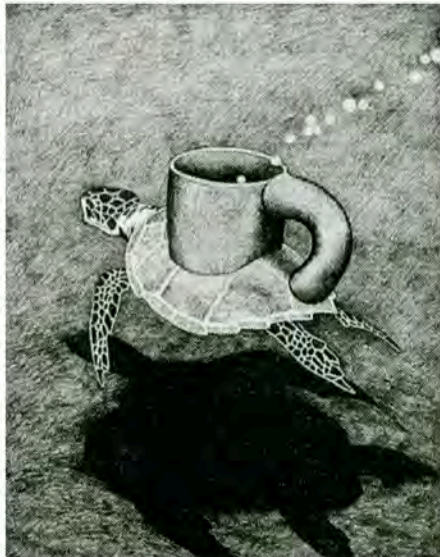
Where he departed from the stereotype was in the matter of focus: creatively, there was nothing laid-back about him. He was alert, hungry for input. One day on the beach he met a surfer named Billy Al Bengston, a serious painter who, like Price, had an interest in ceramics. They buddied up and eventually shared a studio, but while Mr. Bengston stuck with painting, for Price clay became the way.

It was not, however, the way in most art schools, where the art-craft divide was firm. At the University of Southern California, Price ended up studying, among other things, cartooning and animation.

He made a major shift in 1957, when he was a graduate student at what is now Otis College of Art and Design. There he worked with Peter Voulkos, who is often credited with shifting ceramics, in the art world's eyes, from craft to fine-art status.

Voulkos, a big-gestured sculptor in the Abstract Expressionist mode, was a don't-talk-but-do-as-I-do sort of teacher. And what he did was work with clay every day in the Otis studios.

Seeing Voulkos in action and working beside him had a deep effect on Price, who always seems to have learned more from experience than from instruction. On early surfing trips to Mexico, he paid close attention to folk pottery sold in Tijuana shops, noting that even objects produced in bulk were individually enlivened by flourishes and flaws that came with handmaking. In the early 1960s he traveled to Japan — in a charming pen-and-ink scroll at the Drawing Center he depicts himself as a visiting pooh-bah — less to gather technical tips than to feel the vibes of a place where great pots were made.



For Price, nature was a real presence. In the 1930s, Los Angeles was still rural around the edges. He grew up at the foot of the Santa Monica Mountains, near the sea. Mountainous landscapes recur in his drawings. Some of his sculptures look like things that were fished from tidal pools: extravagant crustaceans, tangles of kelp and a variety of oozy, amphibious eel-ish critters.

And he was soaked — what young person isn't? — in visual pop culture, which in the 1940s and '50s meant, among other things, comic books, monster movies and advertising. He embraced it all, though selectively, in the same way he did modern art, paying attention to Abstract Expressionism's appetite for color; to Joan Miró's soft-porn blobs and curves; to Joseph Cornell's blend of adorableness and abjection.

The Met show — organized by Stephanie Barron, senior curator and department head of modern art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and overseen in New York by Marla Prather — is arranged in reverse chronological sequence, with late Price coming first.

Strategically, this makes sense. His last sculptures are his largest, weirdest and, with their wondrous surface patterning, prettiest. You see them and you want to see more of him. Yet an early-to-late narrative is well worth tracing.

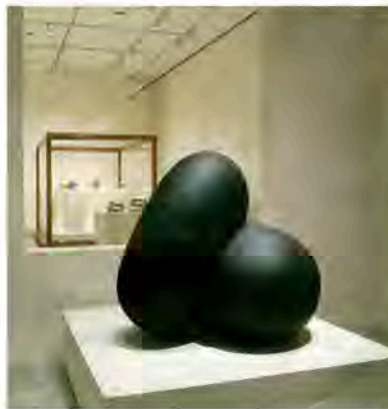
In the 1950s and early '60s, as if in recoil from Voulkos's dour, crushing work, Price went light, bright and anti-titanic. Instead of clay colossi, he made ceramic cups. Some were ornamented with frogs, turtles or snails, like children's breakfast mugs. Others had handles in the shape of branches or stems, like jade brush holders found on a Chinese scholar's table.

Mr. Bengston was also making cups at the time, as was the slightly younger artist Ron Nagle, a Voulkos acolyte (and a star of this year's Venice Biennale). All three were learning about the power of smallness. As Price correctly perceived, diminutive doesn't have to mean dinky. Imaginatively shaped, a very small object can seem more monumental than something many times its size.

For Price, such insights were arrived at through experimentation. At first, for example, he enclosed some of his cups in display cases, as if uncertain that they would otherwise be perceived as art. Such framing became unnecessary as the cup forms, broken down into modular cubes or stacks of craggy planes, lost all pretense to utility, making them sculptures for sure.

Even after he retired the cup as an image, he kept exploring what was most salient about it sculpturally: namely, that it wasn't a solid mass, but a container, with an inside and an outside of equal importance. Containment itself, put under psychological pressure, became a recurrent subject of Price's. His first noncup series, in the 1960s, featured egg-shaped sculptures. With their smooth exteriors and vivid, sharp colors — the paint is automobile lacquer — these roughly ovoid objects look solid from a distance. But when you get closer, you see that the surfaces are pierced by orifices from which abstract forms, phallic or fecal, protrude like tongues or groping fingers. The recurrent image is of a high-polish shell hiding appalling activity, sexual or excremental, or both.

Price stayed fixed on this drama of dark recesses even as his sculptural forms changed. Gradually growing larger, they moved from quasi-architectural to freakishly organic. By the early 1990s, he was turning out warty, bulbous, fruitlike lumps that combined realism and fantasy, comedy and pathology in ways reminiscent of Basil Wolverton's 1950s *Mad* magazine portrait heads and of gloriously schlumpy Oribe-wear tea bowls.

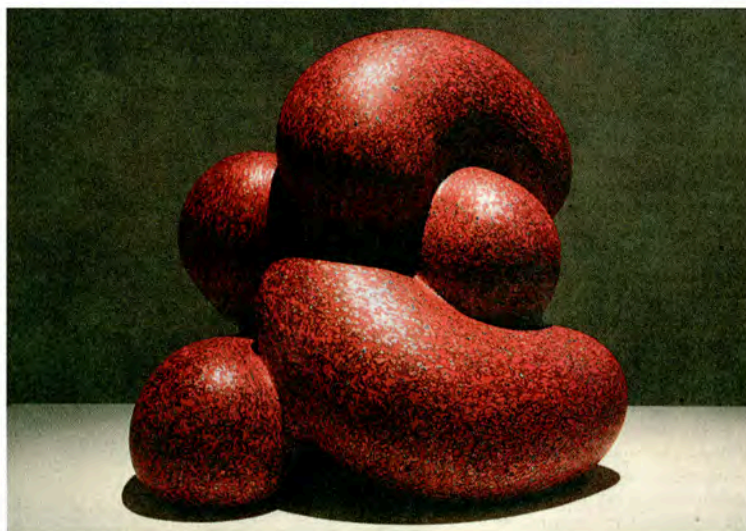


What saves even outrageous forms from grossness, though, is color, the element that Price ultimately cared about most, worked hardest at, and mastered most completely. By the late 1990s, his forms had simplified — no more orifices, no more interiors — and his colors had grown staggeringly complex, as he covered pieces with up to 70 coats of different-colored acrylic paint, sanding surfaces between applications or swiping them with pigment-dissolving fluid to create mottled and speckled patterns of breathtaking depth and subtlety.

Such fine-grained effects would have been lost on a four-inch-tall cup. But they can be fully savored on sculptures that, by the end of Price's career, had attained an average height of two feet, twice that in the case of the all-black "Ordell," completed the year he died. This work comes at the front of the show, exquisitely framed by Mr. Gehry's multivista design.

The Met retrospective also has several of the artist's paintings on paper, all landscapes, and dozens more are at the Drawing Center. Price drew almost daily for 50 years, in a crisp, sophisticated pop style. The Drawing Center survey, organized by Douglas Dreishpoon, chief curator at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, gives some sense of his range, with sculptural studies, book illustrations, cartoons and erotica.

But, as at the Met, landscapes dominate, and they're odd, disturbed, eschatological images of erupting volcanoes, rising seas and a bleak world viewed from the mouth of a cave. Price has often been celebrated by his fans as an upholder of the pleasure principle, that California specialty, in an era when art was idea-intensive and political. I wonder about that evaluation, though. His surfaces are as gorgeous as Pacific sunsets. But they cover some tough subterranean stuff.



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## THE NEW YORKER



When the American sculptor Ken Price died last year, at the age of seventy-seven, Peter Schjeldahl observed, “If America were like Japan—whose Momoyama-period ware influenced him early in his career—Price would have been designated a national treasure.” Price’s audaciously beautiful, seductively weird abstract objects, fashioned from clay and ingeniously glazed, earned him the fierce admiration of other artists, but rarely a place in the spotlight. If there is a cavil with his career retrospective, which arrives at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on June 18, from the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art, it is simply that it comes too late. Price had a big fan—and a close friend—in Frank Gehry, who designed the exhibition of sixty-two sculptures, made between 1959 and 2012, in close collaboration with the artist, whom he’d known since the nineteen-sixties. “I can’t imagine living in a place without a Ken Price,” Gehry writes in the catalogue, and, for a few months, New York won’t have to, either. There are only eleven drawings in the Met’s show, but they have ample company in the sixty-five works on paper at the Drawing Center, in the related survey, “Ken Price: Slow and Steady Wins the Race,” which opens on June 19.

# ARTFORUM

2

**"KEN PRICE SCULPTURE: A RETROSPECTIVE"** (METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK; CURATED BY STEPHANIE BARRON) AND **"KEN PRICE: SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE, WORKS ON PAPER 1962-2010"** (THE DRAWING CENTER, NEW YORK; CURATED BY DOUGLAS DREISHPOON) It is increasingly easy to forget that art often used to be original, sometimes stubbornly so. A case in point is Price's profoundly strange work, the subject of these two parallel—and sadly posthumous—retrospectives. For more than fifty years, Price made art that not only looked like no one else's but also felt like nothing you had encountered before—or since. A true maverick, in many ways the definitive "artist's artist," he will be greatly missed.

2. Below: Ken Price, *Untitled Cup (Geometric Cube Cup and Object)*, 1974, painted and glazed ceramic, cup: 4 x 6½ x 4½"; object: 2 x 3¼ x 1½".



*"Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective" was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "Ken Price: Slow and Steady Wins the Race, Works on Paper 1962-2010" was co-organized with the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo.*

# Art in America

## Artist of the Year Nominees

### KEN PRICE

Looking, with their almost phosphorescent surfaces, like they had arisen from the primordial ooze, Price's ceramic sculptures were enshrined in a Frank Gehry-designed retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Dallas Museum of Art and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, asserting the legitimacy of ceramics as a fine art—a stance long held by Price, who died in 2012 at the age of 77.



Ken Price: *L. Blue*, 1961, ceramic painted with lacquer and acrylic, 6 by 9 by 5 inches. Collection Ken Price Estate.

## Museum Solo Show of the Year Nominees

### "KEN PRICE SCULPTURE: A RETROSPECTIVE"

Los Angeles County Museum of Art /  
Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas /  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

After its showings in Los Angeles and Dallas, Price's long overdue retrospective (with an exhibition design by Frank Gehry) made its way to New York, where works by the late California ceramic sculptor looked right at home amid the Met's old-master holdings.



## Art in America

# THE LAST TESTAMENT OF KEN PRICE

**A posthumous traveling retrospective confirms the sculptor's role in boosting the status of ceramics over the past five decades.**

**by Brian Boucher**

THE SUPERB SHOW “Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective” bears the unique distinction of being the final show the artist helped to plan. During his last two and a half years, before his death in February 2012 at age 77, Price contributed extensively to preparations for the show, which was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and designed by Frank Gehry, the artist’s friend since the 1960s.

Price, who lived sometimes in Los Angeles and sometimes outside Taos, N.M., worked almost exclusively in ceramics. He was being treated for cancer in L.A. when he learned that the show’s curator, LACMA’s Stephanie Barron, had secured the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as its final venue, after Dallas’s Nasher Sculpture Center. Feeling that he had never quite gotten his due from the New York art world and taking this news as vindication, he opted to discontinue what had become largely unsuccessful treatment and devote his remaining time to creating work and preparing the exhibition, according to Barron. “One of the bravest acts I’ve ever seen,” said Price’s son-in-law, Carl Colonius, at a memorial service in L.A. last fall, “was his decision to die.”

Price created objects that reside “on the line between bewitching and ludicrous,” as critic Dave Hickey quotes him in the catalogue. They are mostly small—topping out at 30 inches

high—and take a wide range of shapes. They evoke manifold associations—architecture, body parts, alien creatures—and are often loosely grouped by critics and curators into classifications such as lumps, blobs, eggs, mounds, moon rocks and geometrics.

Though he made cups and plates along with nonfunctional sculptures early on, Price’s signal achievement was to create compelling abstract sculptures in clay that have a beauty and mystery all their own, despite the material often being given short shrift in the fine-art world, particularly on the East Coast. In 1964, when Price was just 29, *Artforum* editor Philip Leider significantly identified two artists—Price and Robert Irwin—as being at the center of the L.A. avant-garde, and in a 1966 LACMA catalogue essay, critic Lucy Lippard wrote that “no one else, on the east or west coast, is working like Kenneth Price.”

The current exhibition, which debuted in September 2012 at LACMA, presents 100 objects (there will be slightly fewer at subsequent venues), spanning from 1959 to 2011. At LACMA they were displayed in reverse chronological order. (This arrangement will largely be honored in New York, as it is in Dallas.) Among the first things visitors encountered in L.A. were seductive, sensuous, eerie and funny objects from Price’s last dozen or so years, which he described as “rounded forms with active surfaces.”

Ken Price: *Balls Congo*, 2003, acrylic on fired ceramic, 22 by 18 by 18 inches. Collection Linda Schlenger. All images, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art. All LACMA photos Fredrik Nilsen.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW “Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective,” Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas, through May 12; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, June 18–Sept. 22.



Boucher, Brian. "The Last Testament of Ken Price." *Art in America* 101, no. 3, March 2013, pp. 92–99.

*Pastel*, 1995, fired and painted clay, 14½ by 15 by 14 inches. James Corcoran Gallery, Los Angeles.





*Hunchback of Venice*, 2000, fired and painted clay, 14½ by 29 by 13 inches. Collection Dallas Price and Bob Van Breda.

These include *Hunchback of Venice* (2000), which recalls a giant, misshapen inchworm making its awkward way along a branch: an elevated, central blob rests on two ungainly supports, one crescent-shaped and ending in a small, round, open mouth. To describe as “active” its spectacularly colorful surface, where tiny amoeba shapes in bright green, red, blue and white proliferate in a radioactive buzz of color, would be a wild understatement.

And there’s *Venus* (2000), in which fewer hues (metallic blues and reds) adorn a shape that suggests a rearing cobra—a neck, curving at its top, rises from a blob—or an unusually flexible phallus stemming from an outsize testicle. Equally up-front about its sexuality, at least in its title, is *Balls Congo* (2003), whose surface, too, is dominated by tiny, swarming shapes of blue and red. Multiple spheres at the sculpture’s bottom seem testicular, the ceramic by which they dangle tentacular. They could be the appendages of a squid. The sculpture seems virtually to spring up, startled, off its pedestal.

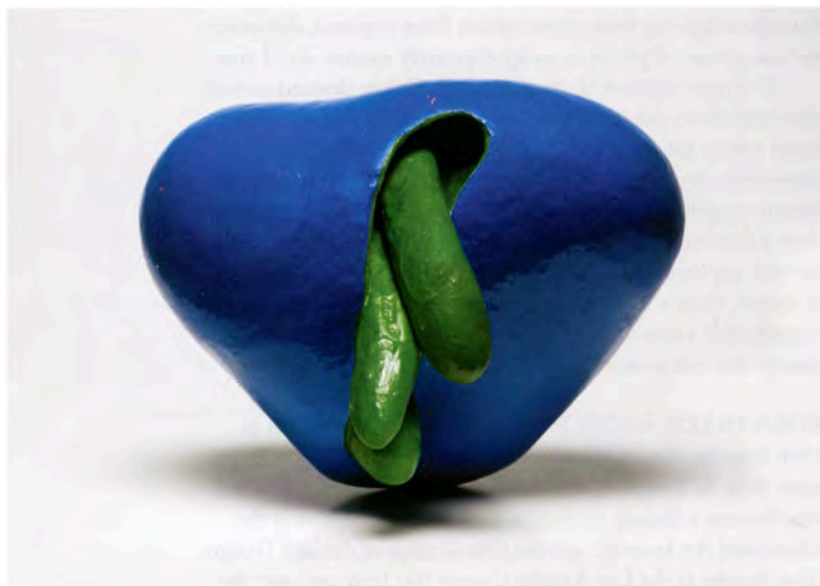
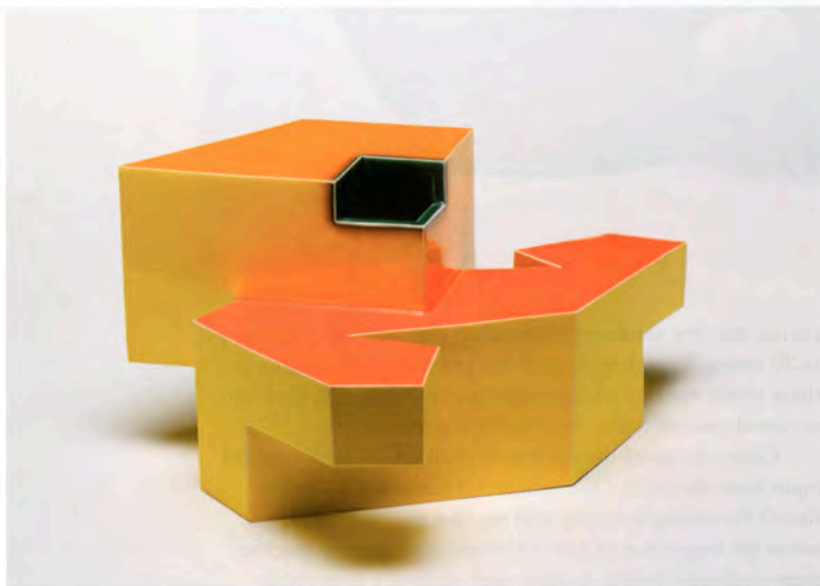
Price said that he hoped his sculptures would appear to be made from color. In his later works, he applied as many as 75 layers of acrylic paint in several hues. (He stopped using glazes in 1983.) Selective sanding then partially revealed underlying strata, producing surfaces often referred to as speckled, stippled or mottled, words that fall short in conveying the works’ mesmerizing chromatic effects. Photographs of Price’s studio in the exhibition catalogue reveal sequential color charts, with overlapping swatches, that served as plans for paint applications. He employed a wide range of techniques to achieve his finishes—wiping with Q-tips or with a cloth soaked in denatured alcohol, varying the constitu-

tion of his clay, sanding wet, sanding dry, and firing as many as 20 times. Though they were the product of much labor, these richly varied surfaces often appear as though they had occurred naturally, like the weathering of a stone.

Gehry designed the exhibition at all venues with detailed input from the artist. (The architect is also a lender to the show.) For example, Gehry told me that not only did Price refuse his suggestion of non-white pedestals, but he specified every pedestal’s height, to allow each sculpture to properly occupy the surrounding space. In many instances, overhangs that allow lighting from above, which Price required, also subtly enclose groups of pieces in an appropriately modest-sized area.

To house some of these groupings, Gehry devised one of the exhibition’s inspired features by enlarging to the scale of small rooms the elegant wood-edged vitrines in which Price sometimes displayed his works. In one of these large cases, various egglike sculptures from the early 1960s, most less than a foot high, seem to defy gravity as each piece stands on end, apparently unaided. Among these is *L. Blue* (1961), in which, from a central, vertical crevice in an object shaped vaguely like a cartoon heart, protrude three fingerlike green shapes that are, comically, at once phallic and labial.

BORN IN LOS ANGELES in 1935, Price earned a BFA in 1956 from the University of Southern California, along with artist Billy Al Bengston, whom he had met on a surfing trip and who became a lifelong friend. He took ceramics courses at the Chouinard Art Institute and the Otis College of Art and Design (then known as the Los Angeles County Art Institute) over the



following year. Otis's ceramics department had been founded by Peter Voukos, whom Price called "the hero of American ceramics" and whose approach to the medium as abstract sculpture inspired his student, as did the ceramics of Picasso, Miró and Asian craftsmen. In 1959 Price earned an MFA from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. His gallery debut, in a group show at L.A.'s Ferus Gallery, came just a year later, when he was 25. Having returned to L.A., he had quickly established himself in that city's then nascent art scene, of which, due to Voukos's prominence, ceramics were a vital part. Price would show numerous times at Ferus, along with such artists as Irwin, Jay DeFeo and Ed Kienholz.

Price's first works include both completely abstract examples, such as *Avocado Mountain* (1959), the show's earliest piece, a heavy-set, shiny dark-green mound, and many fanciful cups, sometimes featuring noses or wartlike growths. He enclosed some of these cups or abstract blobs in Cornell-like boxes. Some cups assume the shapes of fauna, like the *Blind Sea Turtle Cup* (1968), in which the cup fuses with the shell of a turtle that crawls on a bed of sand in a foot-wide wooden tray. Geometric, brightly hued drinking vessels appear in the '70s, along with a number of "slate cups," made up of, and surrounded and sometimes interrupted by, jagged-edged sheets that seem torn from the earth.

In the early '70s, having vacationed in New Mexico and wanting to raise his children away from L.A., Price moved to the Taos area. Much of that decade saw him working on *Happy's Curios* (1972-77), a group of works devoted to Happy Price, his wife from 1968 until his death, and inspired by Mexican pottery. These include plates, vases, bowls, mugs and cups, painted with motifs of Southwestern life, complete with colorful houses and men in sombreros, installed in custom-designed shelving units. Price originally hoped to open a store in which he would display them, though that plan never came to fruition.

While today's all-embracing (some might say all-consuming) art scene exhibits a postmodern openness to widely diverse mediums, in Price's early days, the divide between art and craft was far less permeable. Barron notes in the catalogue that in the postwar years, museums often classified works in clay as decorative arts rather than sculpture. She suggests that *Happy's Curios*, which struck many critics as too folksy, led to a degree of ghettoization for Price; she supplies a litany of group shows in which he was subsequently included, all devoted to ceramics. His reintegration into the art world, she says, came several years later, when he stopped glazing his works and began to paint them in acrylics.

Interpenetration of inside and outside is key to Price's works, perhaps as a holdover from his early cups and bowls, objects for which voids are functionally essential. He explored this relationship from the beginning, for example in *L. Blue*, with its creepy appendages emerging from its interior. Straight through to *Hunchback of Venice*, almost every work in the show features some hole, crevice or cavity. The early '80s, when he was still glazing his output, saw a series of brightly hued, geometric pieces that sometimes recall spaceships, with holes that suggest the necks of bottles, followed by rocklike works in the late '80s that might come in two parts.



Unit 1 from  
*Happy's Curios*,  
1972-77, ceramics  
in wood cabinet,  
70 by 35¼ by 20  
inches. Frederick  
R. Weisman Art  
Foundation,  
Los Angeles.

Opposite top,  
*Slate Cup*, ca.  
1972, fired and  
painted clay, 4½ by  
7½ by 6½ inches.  
Collection Joan  
and Jack Quinn.

Middle,  
*Hawaiian*, 1980,  
glazed ceramic,  
5¾ by 11½ by 9½  
inches. Collection  
Betty Lee and  
Aaron Stern.

Bottom,  
*L. Blue*, 1961,  
ceramic painted  
with lacquer  
and acrylic, 6 by  
9 by 5 inches.  
Collection Ken  
Price.



*Big Load* (1988) and *Pastel* (1995) use such holes to create a teasing optical play: in each work, the hole appears at the corner of a rectilinear section seemingly sliced out of a rocklike form. It's hard to tell if the small black void there is painted (for a trompe-l'oeil effect) or actual. These are also among the earliest works to exhibit his distinctive mottled/speckled, multicolored surfaces. In *Big Load* and *Pastel*, where a piece has apparently been cut away, a bright monochrome interior is revealed.

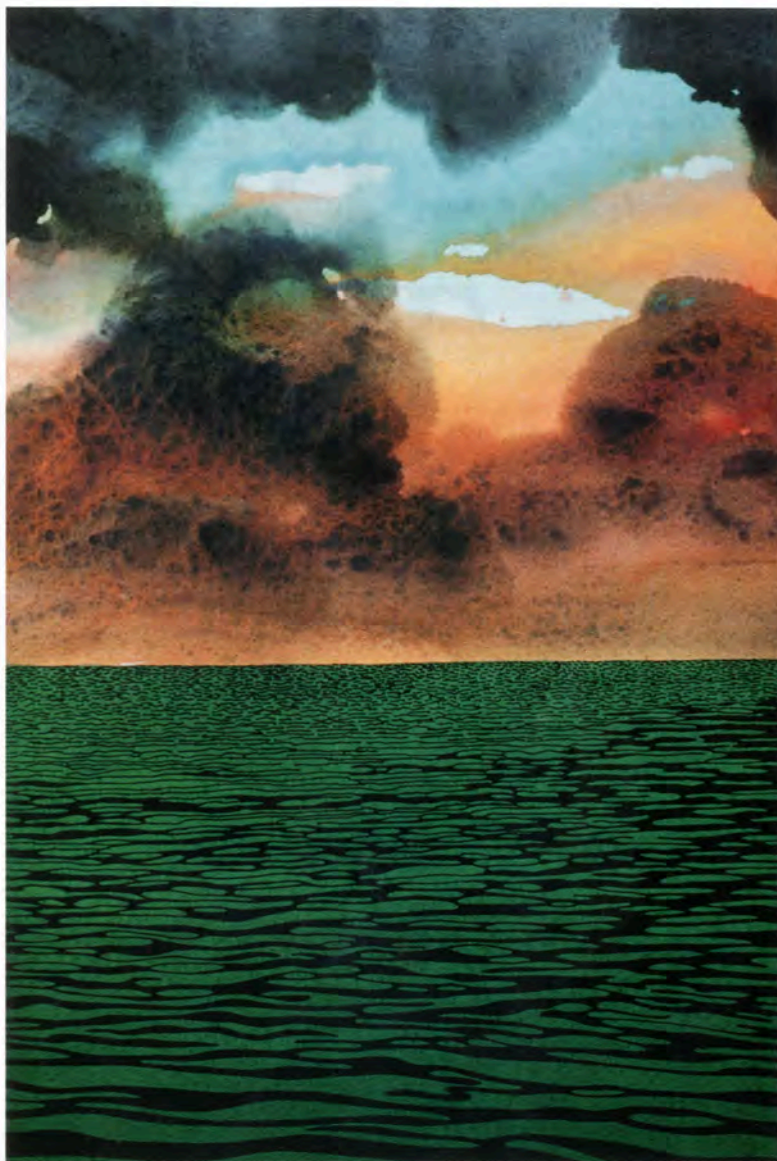
IT WAS IN THE MID-'90s that Price's works took on the slinky, biomorphic shapes that would characterize his oeuvre thereafter. The only remnant of the geometry of the '80s works is to be found in the shapes of the cavities or cutaways, such as the triangular void in *Sweet Paste* (1994), which appears in an otherwise rounded, bumpy blob, or the square and circular holes, respectively, on lumpy moon rocklike shapes in *Pastel* and *Phobia* from the following year.

The artist was limited to what he called "household sculptures scale" until he built a larger studio in 2010. But the results of his excursion into increased scale were mixed. No larger clay works are included in the show. However, two works as large as 6 feet to a side do appear, fabricated in bronze from smaller, handmade clay models. Much as one hates to say it, *Ordell* and *Yogi* (both 2011-12) are not among the show's standouts, as they lack the subtle shapes and chromatic play of Price's best works. *Bulgogi*, a 7-foot-high mound of egg shapes in iridescent purple, gold and brown, which was concurrently on view at Matthew Marks Gallery in Los Angeles, is more successful. Like *Heap* (2004) and *100% Pure* (2005), both included in the LACMA show, *Bulgogi*, which is named after a Korean barbecue dish, is inescapably fecal in appearance. Its shimmering finish suggests the droppings of some magical beast, perhaps unicorn poop.

The retrospective also includes a small selection of works on paper in acrylic and ink from 2000 to 2011, mostly inspired by the New Mexico landscape. Even the artist's wonder at these beautiful surroundings was balanced with humor, manifest in cartoonishly amped-up or misfit colors, like the vivid green waters in *Glass Off* (2000). At the September memorial service, artist Vija Celmins recalled watching desert sunsets with Price and critiquing them as if they were artworks. A 2005 acrylic and ink depiction of trailers under a pink sky sardonically imagines a sordid use for the isolated locale. Its title: *High Country Meth Labs*.

Besides contributing to the show's organization, Price was also involved, along with the L.A. design firm Green Dragon Office, in the exhibition catalogue, which, if there's any justice in this world, will win awards for its arresting style. It features essays by Barron, Gehry, Hickey and Phyllis Tuchman, and reprints numerous interviews with and writings on Price, compiled by Santa Fe-based art writer and curator MaLin Wilson-Powell. There's also a detailed, illustrated timeline of the artist's life.

In addition to the current retrospective, Price's work has experienced heightened exposure, appearing, for example,



in four of the "Pacific Standard Time" exhibitions in 2011 and '12, organized by the Getty Institute, which focused on Southern California artists; a survey of his drawings will be mounted at New York's Drawing Center this summer. But as crowds gathered at LACMA for the opening of his show, Colonius suggested that had Price been alive, he might well have preferred to remain working in the studio that night, with a Dodgers game playing in the background. Many of Price's artist friends, including Celmins and Ed Ruscha, remembered Price at the memorial service that evening. Speaking of Price's spiritual approach to his work, Tony Berlant quoted him as demurring, "I only provide the labor." Ron Nagle, stressing the artist's humility, recalled his saying, "We're so lucky to get to make stuff." ○

"Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective" debuted at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Sept. 16, 2012-Jan. 6, 2013. "Ken Price: Slow and Steady Wins the Race," a survey of the artist's drawings, will be at the Drawing Center, New York, June 19-Aug. 18.

*Glass Off*, 2000, acrylic and ink on paper, 16¼ by 10¼ inches. Berlant Family Collection.

Opposite, *Bulgogi*, 2006-11, painted bronze composite, 84 by 80 by 72 inches. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

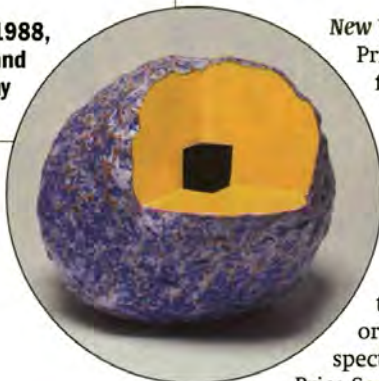


## THE ART NEWSPAPER

### EXHIBITIONS *US & Americas*

#### Ken Price sculptures from last to first

**Ken Price's *Big Load*, 1988,  
made from fired and  
painted clay**



New York. Though Ken Price is best known for his ceramics, curator Stephanie Barron draws attention to another aspect: "He is a major figure in post-war American sculpture." Barron, who organised the retrospective exhibition "Ken Price Sculpture" for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Lacma), which travels to the Metropolitan Museum of Art this month, presents her argument by arranging the show in reverse chronological order. The show begins with recent, larger scale, abstract work and ends with smaller, seemingly more utilitarian, pieces from the 1960s. "When you start a show with small, hand-held, whimsical cups, there is a kind of intimacy, wit and sense of humour – but it's not terribly ambitious," she says. "Even though Price was pushing the envelope of what sculpture could be, it's hard for most people to dissociate these works from functional use." After they see this exhibition, it shouldn't be. P.P.

• *Ken Price Sculpture: a Retrospective*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 18 June-22 September

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## Los Angeles Times



### **Ken Price's voluptuous works seduce in LACMA retrospective** by Christopher Knight

Ken Price is one of the great American sculptors of the last half-century. Emblematic of his achievement is a brilliantly nuanced, multi-layered sculpture near the start of the exquisite retrospective of his career, now in members' previews and opening Sunday at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Made last year, the voluptuous linear form reclines horizontally like a Moorish odalisque by Matisse or a sybaritic bather in one of Ingres' Turkish harem paintings. The iridescent, silvery green surface is as richly patterned as a Persian rug or a Moroccan screen, flecked with prismatic specks of color ranging from hot pink to icy blue.

Unlike those vaunted predecessors, though, Price's lounging sculpture is wholly abstract. Rather than a figure, it's a collection of extruded and intertwined sausage-shapes.

Almost comic in form and feeling — the ensemble looks something like the Oscar Mayer Wienermobile crossed with a banana split from the local Dairy Queen — it seems to lovingly wrap its nominal limbs around itself. The torso is propped up in a languorous stretch, twisting high into space as if to sniff the surrounding air.

Just as the sexy sculpture is turning into a charmingly romantic farce, a chill wind blows through. The recumbent form suddenly recalls a Mesoamerican chacmool, a reclining stone figure whose

carved head is turned abruptly to the side, elbows resting on the ground and powerful feet drawn up to the buttocks. A chacmool's belly is thought to have been a repository for ritual offerings — including bloody human hearts — in ancient Toltec, Mayan and Aztec societies.

Luxury, sex, comedy, death, the roller-coaster ride through such a cosmic range in a single painted sculpture is a boggling feat of artistic legerdemain. “Zizi,” as the insouciant 2011 work is titled, isn't the only such seductive piece in the large exhibition, which includes 117 sculptures and 11 small paintings on paper. They turn up just about everywhere you look.

“Zizi” is among the artist's final works — Price died in February at 77 — but the sculpture is placed in the first room. Curator Stephanie Barron has installed the show in reverse chronology. It starts in the present and works backward — from the voluptuous works begun in the 1990s through the architectural objects of the '80s and '70s, the elaborate cabinet installations of the early 1970s, the brightly colored “eggs” of the '60s, which balance precariously on the narrow end of the ovoid form, and more.

The reverse format is unusual for a retrospective but serves an effective purpose here. Price's materials, glazed or painted clay, virtually demand it.

Observers who would never think to limit Richard Serra by describing him as a steel sculptor, or Martin Puryear as a wood sculptor or George Segal as a plaster sculptor, will still casually identify Price as a ceramic sculptor.

If the show opened with the big covered jars and diminutive cups from the start of his career, however eccentric, the lingering cultural prejudice against clay as a hobby-craft material unsuitable for major art would be nearly impossible to subvert.

Price did distinguish between craft and art, but it's important to note that he respected them both. “A craftsman knows what he's going to make and an artist doesn't know what he's going to make,” he once said, “or what the finished product is going to look like.”

“Happy's Curios” (1972-1977), a large series of brightly decorated cups, plates, bowls, pitchers and jars displayed in elaborate cupboards, is a witty homage to the Mexican souvenir pottery industry, lavished with loving care. Price was an artist, and craft was a primary subject of his technically skillful art.

Though it's virtually never acknowledged, Price's art is partly important because it is painted clay, not in spite of it. So it was for sculptor Peter Voulkos, his mentor at the old Los Angeles County Art Institute (later Otis). Beginning in 1955, Price studied with Voulkos for three years.

Immediate artistic inspiration came in part from Modern ceramics made by such European masters as Picasso and Miró. But the decade following the apocalyptic global ruin of World War II was also characterized by a widespread return to artistic visions connected to prehistory. Coming to grips with the wartime horror of industrial mass-society's collapse into unspeakable barbarism seemed possible only by starting over from scratch.

That cardinal view was manifest in the elemental markings of Abstract Expressionist art. Yet, what could be more artistically primordial than dirt and water mixed into mud and tempered by fire?

Ceramic vessels, which turn up at the start of nearly every ancient civilization, were a fitting vehicle for Voulkos and, soon after, Price. Los Angeles, home since the 1930s to scores of pottery businesses large and small, was an ideal place for it.

A new city pushed into high gear by the war and its aftermath, L.A. was also blissfully without history's ponderous, imaginatively constricting weight. At the movie-mad edge of the American continent, far from the neo-Bostonian cultural pretensions of San Francisco, starting from scratch was practically a given. Price, born in West Hollywood in 1935, grew up in Santa Monica and Pacific Palisades. He ran with it.

Price's work is emphatically hybrid. It took up arms against the conformist 1960s demand for art's formal purity, epitomized by critic Clement Greenberg posthumously stripping the paint off metal sculptures by the late, great David Smith. With Price's colored pots, sculpture fuses with painting, never to be torn asunder.

His painted sculptures also play against period-type. Price was busy cooking pottery in an old-fashioned kiln while heavy industrial materials (iron, steel, glass, plastics) were everywhere in '60s art. In a sly maneuver, he sometimes switched from traditional glaze to bright automotive paint — Earl Scheib unleashed in the artist's studio.

Painting and sculpture had gotten very large, but his work stayed small, sometimes as small as a hippie tea cup, carried across a box of sand on a clay turtle's back. Pots operate at the scale of the hand, and Price magnified the sensual power of that built-in intimacy. Ear, nose and throat shapes abound, along with the occasional bellybutton and anus.

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## Los Angeles Times



### Sculptor Ken Price captured from all angles for LACMA retrospective by Jori Finkel

When L.A. photographer Fredrik Nilsen traveled to Taos to visit Ken Price last September, a few months before the artist died of throat and tongue cancer, he did not know what to expect.

Although Nilsen had traveled within New Mexico a bit before, he had never spent time in Taos, let alone on the dramatic 7,500-foot-high mesa where Price had a home and studio with 360-degree views. He had never met the ceramic artist, who first came to fame through the Ferus Gallery in L.A. in the 1960s before moving with his wife, Happy, to New Mexico. And he had not seen pictures of his studio.

“It was incredible — there were boxes of clay, piles of gloves, stacks of sandpaper and dozens of works in progress,” Nilsen said. “I walked in and practically had to sit down. It felt to me like it must have felt walking into a Renaissance master’s studio.”

Price, then 76, was weak enough that he did not want to be photographed straight-on, so Nilsen asked for his permission to shoot him from behind watching baseball on TV, a habit of the artist while working. They talked about the Dodgers. Because it was hard for Price to speak, their conversations were brief.

But by that time Nilsen was already getting to know Price in another way. A photographer known for his work with art and artists like Mike Kelley, Nilsen had spent much of 2011 crisscrossing

the country to document dozens of Price's sculptures for the catalog accompanying the artist's big retrospective, which opens at LACMA on Sept. 16. (The show later travels to the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas and the Metropolitan Museum in New York.)

Along with shoots at LACMA, Nilsen also visited various storage facilities and back rooms at SFMOMA, the Whitney Museum and Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Albright-Knox in Buffalo, N.Y., and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in D.C. And he entered the homes of private collectors on both coasts. In the end, he photographed all but two of the 93 sculptures in the show. In those cases, he sent off a style sheet with instructions to guide the photographer who did the shoot.

The result is an exhibition catalog full of large, brilliantly detailed images that reflect the full range of Price's boldly colored ceramics: from the rough-hewn surfaces of his late '50s and '60s pieces to his slicker geometric volumes of the '80s to his celebrated recent work: voluptuous and playful biomorphic forms on which he layered different colors of acrylic paint so that sanding creates a mottled, multi-hued effect.

Nilsen describes these later works, often called "blobs" by the most articulate of art critics, as animalistic in their energy. "It's hard not to anthropomorphize them — they seem like sea creatures or some sort of sci-fi entities." And catalog readers will have the chance to see some of these beings reproduced not just from one but multiple angles.

The show's curator, Stephanie Barron, accompanied Nilsen and his assistant on almost all of the shoots, suggesting different angles and approaches. She also brought this sort of attention, even devotion, to other aspects of the show, creating what she calls "a dream team" to work on a project that had an added urgency and intensity because of Price's illness.

Early on Barron asked architect Frank Gehry, an old friend of Price, to collaborate by doing the exhibition design. (A basic goal: to make sure Price's sculptures, many of which are small enough to fit on a bookshelf, do not get dwarfed by the cavernous space of LACMA's Resnick Pavilion.) For book design Barron turned to Lorraine Wild, a leading designer, who in turn thought of Nilsen for the photography.

"I've done a lot of books in more than 35 years as a curator, and I've never had the luxury of approaching [art]works the way we did for this catalog," said Barron, who noted that LACMA received an "early and significant" grant from the Shifting Foundation for the book's production. "Being able to get one photographer to shoot everything is very rare."

It also gave Barron the chance to look at the works in a focused, uninterrupted way and time to think about exhibition display. She remembers being struck by some sculptural details, like how the "windows" of some of Price's more architectural pieces relate to the Taos pueblos. Also, she said, "it was about halfway through the photo shoots that I had an epiphany that the way to present the show was in reverse chronological order."

This decision to lead with the new and end with the old, in exhibition and catalog layout alike, appealed to the artist, she said, for obvious reasons: "Any artist doing a retrospective is most interested in their recent work and least interested in their old work."

But it also makes sense in terms of building an audience for Price's life's work. Starting with recent works in clay, which were shown to great acclaim by L.A. Louver and Matthew Marks galleries and are widely appreciated as sculpture, offers a way to shed new light on his early series of "cups," "eggs" and more traditional-seeming or craft-based ceramic vessels.

For her part, Wild had a rather radical idea for the book design: What if she reproduced all art objects (whether in full or in detail) at actual size? "I'm really interested in what I would call almost a forensic approach to documenting art in books because of the fact that books are the printed record and fixed," she said, describing how you can't always judge the true color or scale of an artwork reproduced on a computer screen. "It's a secret campaign to make sure the book stays valuable, addressing the very place where books can do what other media can't."

According to Wild, Price wasn't sold on the idea because it would make the book too large, so she ended up not going that route. But notions of scale did help to shape her design, which Price had the chance to review (along with the exhibition checklist and display mock-ups) before he died. And the book does have a visual timeline in back that reproduces works at relative scale.

As for Nilsen, he said the photography was full of logistical challenges, like how to set up a make-shift photo studio in a collector's bedroom. "We used the bed as a staging table — a place for our tools and cases," he said.

But the biggest challenge by far was lighting. "I knew from the start it shouldn't be dramatic lighting. Most work of his I had seen photographed had that noir, product-like look to it. I wanted to make the work look like it's in a room with a giant, very diffused skylight, so it feels more organic," he said.

The trick was that several of Price's works are shiny, so that Nilsen's own light sources would get reflected back at him. "The dark, round, glossy ceramic pieces were by far the hardest," he said. "They act like mirrors."

He called "Avocado Mountain," a mossy green vessel from 1959 with a craggy, Japanese-inspired surface, "one of the most difficult pieces I've ever shot." "There was so much glare it would obliterate all the details." His solution was to stage a few different lighting setups, positioning black or gray cards to reduce reflection. He later worked up these different shots in postproduction, essentially creating a composite image.

But Nilsen wasn't especially interested in discussing the technical details of his shoots. He preferred to talk about the power and apparent ease of Price's art.

Artist Robert Irwin once described the happy coincidence of form and color in Price's sculptures this way: "You had the feeling that if you cut that thing in half, it would be that color all the way through. The color was so right, so tuned to the shape, and so informative of the shape that to me, there was real brilliance in it."

Nilsen talked about this phenomenon in terms of "fluidity," mentioning Price's years as a surfer and the wave shapes visible in some of his works. "There's a real fluidity not just in his forms, but in the way the paint is layered, distressed, removed. I see life in it — microbial life and all this energy," he said. "The more I looked at his work, the more I saw the flow of water."

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## The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

### ***Ken Price, Sculptor Whose Artworks Helped Elevate Ceramics, Dies at 77***

By ROBERTA SMITH FEB. 24, 2012

Ken Price, whose small, worldly, exquisitely finished abstract sculptures in glazed or painted clay exploded the distinction between art and craft and established him as one of the outstanding artists of postwar America, died on Friday at his home in Arroyo Hondo, N.M., outside Taos. He was 77.

His family said that the cause was cancer, which was first diagnosed in 2008.

Mr. Price belonged to a talent-rich generation of artists who emerged across the United States in the late 1950s and '60s, responding to the innovations of Abstract Expressionism with innovations of their own. Until the last decade of his life, when he started working larger, his compressed, bravura objects rarely measured more than 10 or 20 inches on a side. Their forms oscillated between the biomorphic and the geometric, the geological and the architectural. They reveled in synthetic color, unusual textures and carefully calibrated erotic innuendo. And they fit in at several points across the fertile landscape of American art of the last 50 or more years.

With artists like Billy Al Bengston, Robert Irwin, Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell and Craig Kauffman, Mr. Price was a progenitor of the Finish Fetish school of meticulous object-making that did so much to establish Los Angeles as an art capital. With artists from both coasts, including John Chamberlain, Donald Judd, John McCracken and Dan Flavin, he helped to usher



Ken Price in his studio in Venice, Calif., in 1992. Courtesy Ken Price Family

vibrant color irrevocably into modern sculpture, often with the help of automobile lacquer and enamel.

But Mr. Price's greatest achievement may have been to help foment a revolution in ceramics that was in many ways the true genesis of the Southern California art scene. Allied with the ceramic sculptors Peter Voulkos, who was briefly his teacher, and John Mason, he insisted on ceramics as high art — an argument that Mr. Price, a man of few but well-chosen words, left to his sculptures to articulate.

Mr. Price enjoyed sustained critical success, but his penchant for working small and his allegiance to clay sometimes obscured his originality. It became almost reflexive for critics and curators to write that his art was paradoxically celebrated yet underappreciated.

In 2007, the American critic Dave Hickey called Mr. Price “the Glenn Gould of object-makers,” comparing him to the pianist as someone who was “predisposed to step away from the spotlight, similarly driven by meticulous eccentricities and beguiled, as Gould was, by the full, intimate grandeur of his practice.”

Only one museum survey of his work was held during Mr. Price’s lifetime — organized at the Menil Collection in Houston in 1992. A 50-year retrospective is to open at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in September and travel to the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2013.

After his first three exhibitions in 1960, 1961 and 1964 at the legendary Ferus Gallery, the epicenter of Los Angeles cool, a succession of unusually loyal art galleries kept his work in sight with frequent shows, especially the James Corcoran Gallery and L.A. Louver in Los Angeles and the Willard, Franklin Parrasch and Matthew Marks galleries in New York.

If small, his works were still bold in every other way: color, internal scale, visceral effect and associative richness. Even their smallness exuded a nervy, David-against-Goliath confidence. Mr. Price liked to quote the artist Joseph Cornell, whose small boxed assemblages he admired: “Tiny is the last refuge of the enormous.”

Mr. Price first became known in the early 1960s for his so-called Eggs, intensely colored ovoids punctuated with small openings from which slimy-looking forms might protrude, suggesting fingers, phalluses, worms or perhaps entrails. At once beautiful and disturbing, abstract and overly specific, these objects were sometimes presented on pedestals that placed them, rather imperiously, at eye level, calling attention to their every shift in color, texture and shape, inside and out.

His subsequent efforts were stylistically diverse, but he rarely strayed far from the tensions he had achieved in his Eggs, between dazzling exteriors and mysterious interiors, foreshadowed by openings that could appear

either soft and vaguely sexual or severely geometric, with the implied monumentality of the entrance to a Mayan temple.

As Mr. Price’s work evolved, he managed to synthesize, in series of works, from just about every 20th-century art style and several corners of popular culture, especially Surrealism but also Russian Constructivism, Japanese prints and Mexican tourist wares. The sculptures of Constantin Brancusi were particularly influential. Other inspirations included natural crystals, the jagged forms of the American Southwest and the coastline of Massachusetts, where he lived during the 1980s.

In his most extended series, he created numerous variations on the common tea cup. The earliest had snails for handles; the later ones, glazed with glossy primary colors, suggested abstract Bauhaus architecture. His first solo show in New York, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1969, consisted entirely of cups.

His svelte yet pneumatic forms could suggest cartoonish hands, abbreviated Loch Ness monsters or salacious tongues. Others conjured up jellyfish or rogue ocean waves, which Mr. Price, a surfer, knew well. He named one such piece “Pacific.” The announcement card for his 1961 show at Ferus featured a photograph of him on a surfboard, his arms extended exultantly skyward.

The critic Lucy R. Lippard identified Mr. Price as “something of a Surrealist, something of a purist, something of an expressionist, something of a naturalist.” Mr. Price himself remarked on the associational richness in his work in a letter to a friend in 1959. Referring to one of his mound-shaped sculptures — which preceded the Eggs and would form his 1960 Ferus debut — he wrote that making it kindled “fond memories of mountain peaks, breasts, eggs, worms, worm trails, the damp undersides of things, intestines, veins and the like.”

Kenneth Martin Price was born on Feb. 16, 1935, in West Hollywood in Los Angeles, the only child of Kenneth Albert Price and the former Joan Agnes Collins and the son and grandson of inventors. A grandfather had invented headlights, among other things, and his father had helped develop the Popsicle and double

Popsicle for the Good Humor Ice Cream Company in the 1930s.

“I remember the garage at our house being full of Popsicle molds and all kinds of interesting stuff,” Mr. Price recalled in a 2008 interview.

He grew up near the beach in Santa Monica and Pacific Palisades, where his parents designed and built a house. He surfed almost every day from the age of 15 to 30, briefly studied the trumpet with Chet Baker and thought of himself as an artist from an early age. He recalled that nature and Mexican folk pottery were central, early visual experiences, and once said that his idea of a perfect day was one spent drawing while listening to jazz.

While still in high school he took classes in cartooning and life drawing at the Chouinard Art Institute and later enrolled at Santa Monica City College. He enjoyed his first ceramics course there so much that he began taking classes at colleges and art schools all over Los Angeles.

By the time he earned his bachelor degree in fine arts from the University of Southern California in 1956, he was aware of Voulkos, who was applying the scale and gestural freedom of Abstract Expressionism to large clay forms. Voulkos’s conviction that ceramics was a full-blown art was a galvanizing antidote to what Mr. Price called the “crafts-dogma hell” he had encountered in other schools.

Along with Mr. Mason, he pursued graduate study with Voulkos at the Los Angeles County Institute of Art (now the Otis College of Art and Design) for about a year. But finding Voulkos’s influence oppressive after a while, he attended the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in western New York — famous for its traditional studio ceramics program — where he completed a two-year master’s program in one.

Back in Los Angeles, immersing himself in its burgeoning art scene, Mr. Price joined a kind of boys club of artists that included Mr. Bengston, Mr. Ruscha, Mr. Bell, John Altoon and Ed Kienholz and that used the Ferus Gallery as its base. He also drew inspiration from surveys of European modernism that featured the work of Hans Arp and Joan Miro, and from the Pasadena Museum of Art’s 1963 retrospective of the

work of Marcel Duchamp, whose smaller sculptures often exerted an ambiguous sexual charge. In 1962, he spent six months traveling in Japan, visiting potteries and master potters, enthralled by a country where, he observed, “everyone uses a handmade teacup if they can afford it.”

In 1968, Mr. Price married Happy Ward, who survives him, along with three children, all of whom work for him in some capacity: two step-daughters, Romy Colonius and Sydney McDonnell; a son, Jackson Price, and nine grandchildren. The family moved to Taos, in 1971, first into a vacation home that he owned with Mr. Bell and eventually into the house and studio in Arroyo Hondo, which he and his wife designed.

Rather than ignore the protocols of craft, as Voulkos tended to, Mr. Price made its intimations of control, patience and obsession implicit in his work. Especially after the mid-1980s, it sometimes seemed that each new series introduced a new way of applying and showcasing color. He began painting his forms with scores of thin layers of bright acrylic paint that he then sanded down in patches, revealing multiple hues. Undulant surfaces treated this way suggested rough-hewn stones or meteors from a Technicolor world. On smoother forms the process could yield tiny pore-like starbursts of contrasting colors, to startlingly skin-like effect.

In his last years Mr. Price turned to making larger but still eminently blobby, loquacious pieces in bronze, continuing the process of layering color and sanding. He also continued to resist explaining his work’s meaning. As he said in a talk delivered at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Tex., in 2005, “My primary satisfaction comes from making the work, and my idea of success is getting it to look right.”

“I can’t prove my art’s any good,” he added, “or that it means what I say it means. And nothing I say can improve the way it looks.”

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## NEW YORK

### Jerry Saltz Remembers the Sculptor Ken Price, 1935-2012

By Jerry Saltz



"100% Pure" (2005), by Ken Price.

One of America's greatest sculptors died today in New Mexico. Ken Price made dazzlingly colored visionary clay constructions, planar extensions of Cubism as complex and concentrated as Picasso's absinthe cup, mineral-mini-worlds with reptilian skins and black-holes, and super-color-saturated sexual drawings. His large scale phosphorescently flecked mounds with their flickering bird-of-paradise surfaces look like living hallucinations. All of these are among the most densely sensuous and inspired sculptural works ever produced in this country. Price said "every aspect of the physical work should be brought to full resolution." That is exactly the optical intensity Price achieved over 50 years of brilliance.

Price was consistently championed by a hardcore group of artists, critics, and art-dealers who unabashedly loved and supported his work. He was regularly collected, was on the cover of *Artforum* at the age of 28, and had had a solo show at the Whitney Museum by the time he was 34. Yet, in his lifetime, he was perhaps the least known first-rate American genius alive. Maybe it was because he spent his entire career in California and New Mexico. More likely is that he worked in clay, and clay doesn't cut it as "major art" in most people's minds — unless of course its Duchamp's urinal or Méret Oppenheim's fur-lined tea-cup — and then no one mentions that these works are ceramics.

Saltz, Jerry. "Jerry Saltz Remembers the Sculpture Ken Price." *New York Magazine*, February 24, 2012.

Fortunately, the Los Angeles Museum of Art will mount a full-scale Price survey this coming September, and the show will travel to the Met the following year. I'm thrilled, though it makes me wonder why it won't be at MoMA or the Whitney, which ought to have been paying attention.

For me, Price's organically shaped large hollow hillocks of curvy clay are a complex combination of sexual, sensual, and excremental. His objects are otherworldly silicon-based life forms, unclassifiable as art, form, or ideas. They send me. They have the presence of those magnificent Mesopotamian wall reliefs of gods and kings, except that they're rendered into abstract bulbous three-dimensional Möbius bulges of walk-around, floor-bound sculpture. Or maybe Neolithic stones reshaped and placed in a time machine set to the 25th century. Think of one of Calder's fabulous standing painted planar arching shapes that sit like spaceships on floors; fill in all the space and connect every part of the form with every other part of it, then inject helium inside, place it in a cosmic spray-paint booth, and cover it with luminescent color flecks that make it look like a million-eyed being from another dimension. These are some of Ken Price's ideas of sculpture.

He must have seen even the three dimensions of Cubism as being too limiting or flat, and so, like Donald Judd, began building shapes that tried to elaborate the inside of things. Price explored the myth of sculptural emptiness and tried to show how the an object has other surfaces beyond its outer skin — below, in-between, within every pucker of color, in every nook and cranny of every crack and crevice. Yet Price's feel for density makes his objects seem to emit compact force fields of binding energy. His sculptures in the shapes of cups and pitchers have the implied metaphysical sense that if you poured liquid into one of the holes it would vaporize or come out on Mars or the Ganges. I feel the self at play in the fields of bliss.

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## Ken Price, an internationally known artist dies in Taos, New Mexico at age 77



The "Death Shrine" installation by artist Ken Price on display in Taos, N.M. Price, who died Friday, is being remembered by family and friends for his sense of humor and for the influence he had over modern sculpture. AP Photo/The Harwood Museum of Art, Tina Larkin.

By: Susan Montoya Bryan, Associated Press

**TAOS (AP).**- Ken Price, an internationally known artist whose glazed and painted clay blurred the lines between ceramics and sculpture, is being remembered for his humor, his love of natural shapes and for the long hours he spent in the studio perfecting what became a style all his own.

Family and friends gathered at his studio in Taos to share their stories Sunday following his death Friday morning at his home in Taos. By Monday, the makeshift memorial of flowers and notes at The Harwood Museum of Art, where one of his installations is on exhibit, continued to grow.

A hand-written note tucked under one of the bouquets summed it up: "A life well lived..."

Price's death at age 77 was first reported by The Los Angeles Times. His family, friends and fellow artist Larry Bell confirmed Price's death for The Associated Press on Monday.

Price had struggled with tongue and throat cancer for several years, but friends said he continued working despite being ill.

Inside his studio, there were works in progress and current notes and drawings lying on his desk. His son Jackson said work still continues on fabricating some of the colors and forms proofed by Price over the last five years into large-scale outdoor sculptures.

"He was just one of those artists who just worked. That's what he did, that's what he lived and breathed," said Jina Brenneman, a ceramist herself and the curator at The Harwood. It was Price who inspired her to come to Taos.

His son agreed, calling him the master of clay.

"You would be hard pressed to find anybody who manipulates clay better than him anywhere in the world," Jackson Price said. "For aspiring artists, he's inspiring based on how prolific he is. He's worked every day for 50 years. That's what he did. He was into family and work."

The debate among art critics and historians about whether Price's colorful, organic pieces were more sculpture than ceramic art was not something that concerned him as he worked in his studios in Taos and Venice, Calif.

One of the reasons he was able to elevate ceramics to such a high level is because the medium eventually became an irrelevant part of his creative process, Brenneman said.

Bits of his personality, particularly his humor, also carried through to his work, said friend and fellow artist Larry Bell.

"The thing that was amazing about Kenny is how inventive he was with form and surface and color. He just invented these totally goofy shapes and then caressed them until they became just magnificent little objects," Bell said.

"He just kept working on extending that kind of direction — that very personal, intimate relationship with his material — until it took on an incredible life of its own," Bell said.

Price didn't see himself as a ceramist, but rather a sculptor, Bell said.

Before of his death, Price completed preparations for a 50-year retrospective scheduled to open at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art this fall.

In a post on its website, the museum said its entire community was saddened to learn of his death. It described his work as remarkable and innovative and said his pieces helped redefine the practice of contemporary sculpture.

From the spherical 1963 piece dubbed "L. Red" to "Zizi," which he completed in 2011, the classic elements of color and fluidity are always present in Price's work.

The range of color is what evolved over his career along with the endless shapes he had stored in his mind, his son said.

Born in Los Angeles in 1935, Price was known for his bright colors. Early on he used traditional means, such as glazing. He moved on to acrylic paint, which was enough to cause a stir among ceramic purists.

By the early 1960s, Price emerged as a seminal figure of the West Coast ceramic sculpture movement. His first solo exhibit was in 1960 at the famed Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, which nurtured Bell, Andy Warhol and other significant modern artists.

While Price's work has not been widely exhibited until relatively recently, the upcoming "Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective" will look at how his work progressed over a career that spanned more than five decades. It will also explore the work of other artists who were inspired by him.

Stephanie Barron, senior curator of modern art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, told The Los Angeles Times: "Price's practice has remained resolutely original, challenging categorization and redefining contemporary sculpture."

At The Harwood in Taos, Price's "Death Shrine I" is on exhibition. The Mexican folk-inspired funerary altar sits behind a white picket fence. It's one of only three in existence and the only one on display for public viewing.

Brenneman called it an important installation within the history of Price's work. She gave up her office so that a new space could be created at the museum for the shrine.

Price also created prints, drawings and even mescal labels for his friend Ron Cooper.

Brenneman said whatever the medium, Price's work was always meticulous, refined and witty.

Price liked to read newspapers during breakfast and listen to jazz and baseball games while working in his studio. His only break during the day would be for lunch.

"He touched a lot of people," Jackson Price said. "It's a big loss but he left behind a lot of beautiful stuff for all of us to remember him by."

Price is survived by his wife, Happy Ward, their son Jackson and step-children Romy and Sydney.

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# ARTWORKS

A VOICE FOR THE ARTS



**KEN PRICE  
WOLF KAHN  
RYAN SHULTZ  
DANIEL DOUKE  
COLD WAR KIDS**



Bamsey, Ben. "Ken Price." *Artworks Magazine*, Spring 2011, pp. 20-27.

# KEN PRICE

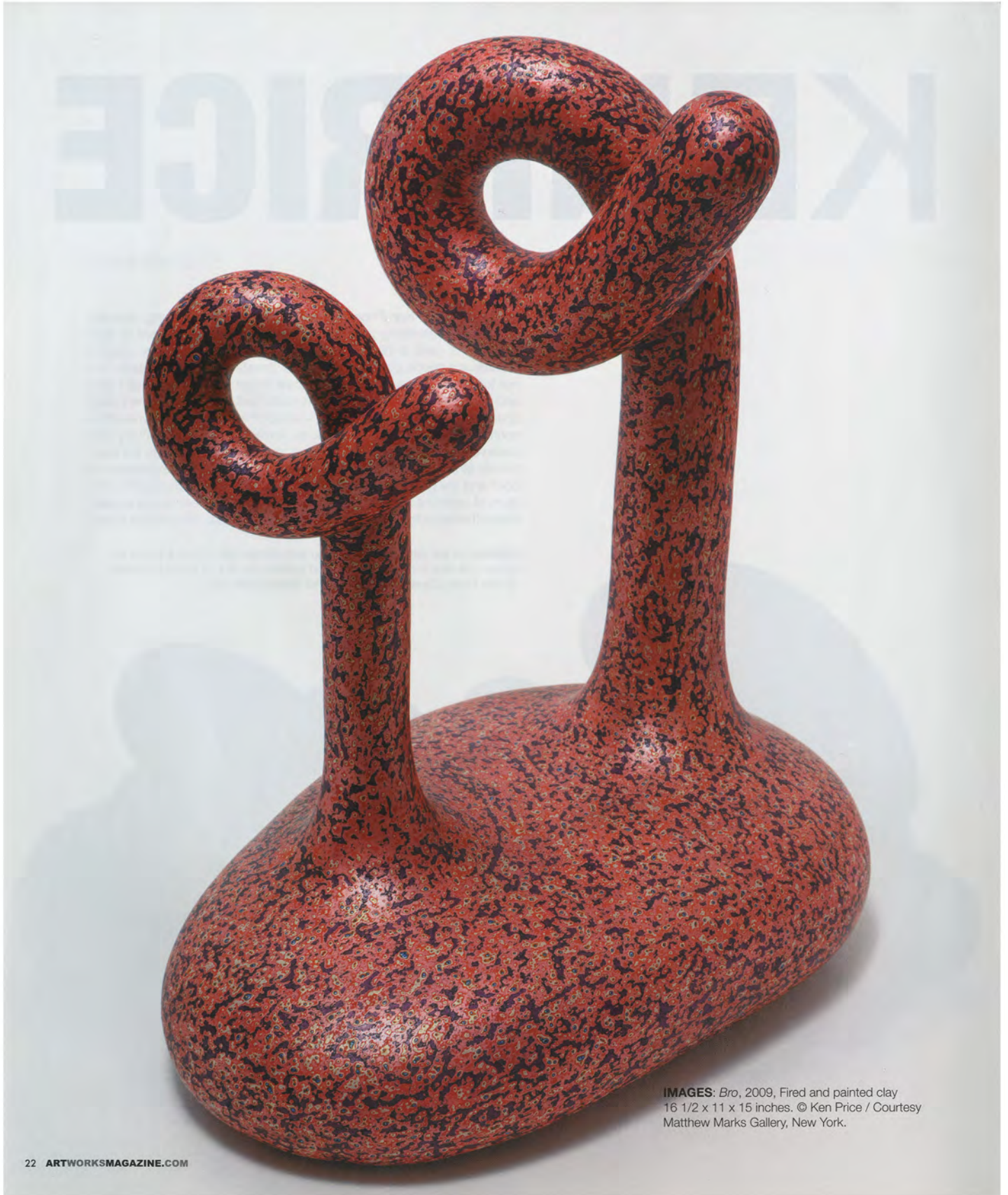
BY BEN BAMSEY

By all accounts, Ken Price is a *real* artist. No dollar chasing, concept borrowing or gimmicky pan flashing, just a guy who has spent at least 60 hours a week in his studio for his entire life. "For me, the creative process is a deeply personal, subjective, private activity," Price says. "I'm not trying to get critical distance. I want to get inside it as far as I can, and deal with the internal logic of the work itself." To get there, he'll often spend an entire day scraping clay – monotonous ups and downs with a spring steel rib. Never breaking focus. Never losing patience. Every inch deserves to be exact. Through his early egg-shaped designs to the functionally fantastic cups and pots to the boundary pushing exploration of color and the geometric vessel, Price has profoundly re-shaped the medium of ceramics as a whole. Clay as craft is a long-abandoned conversation thanks to the inventive sculptures and brilliant mind of Ken Price.

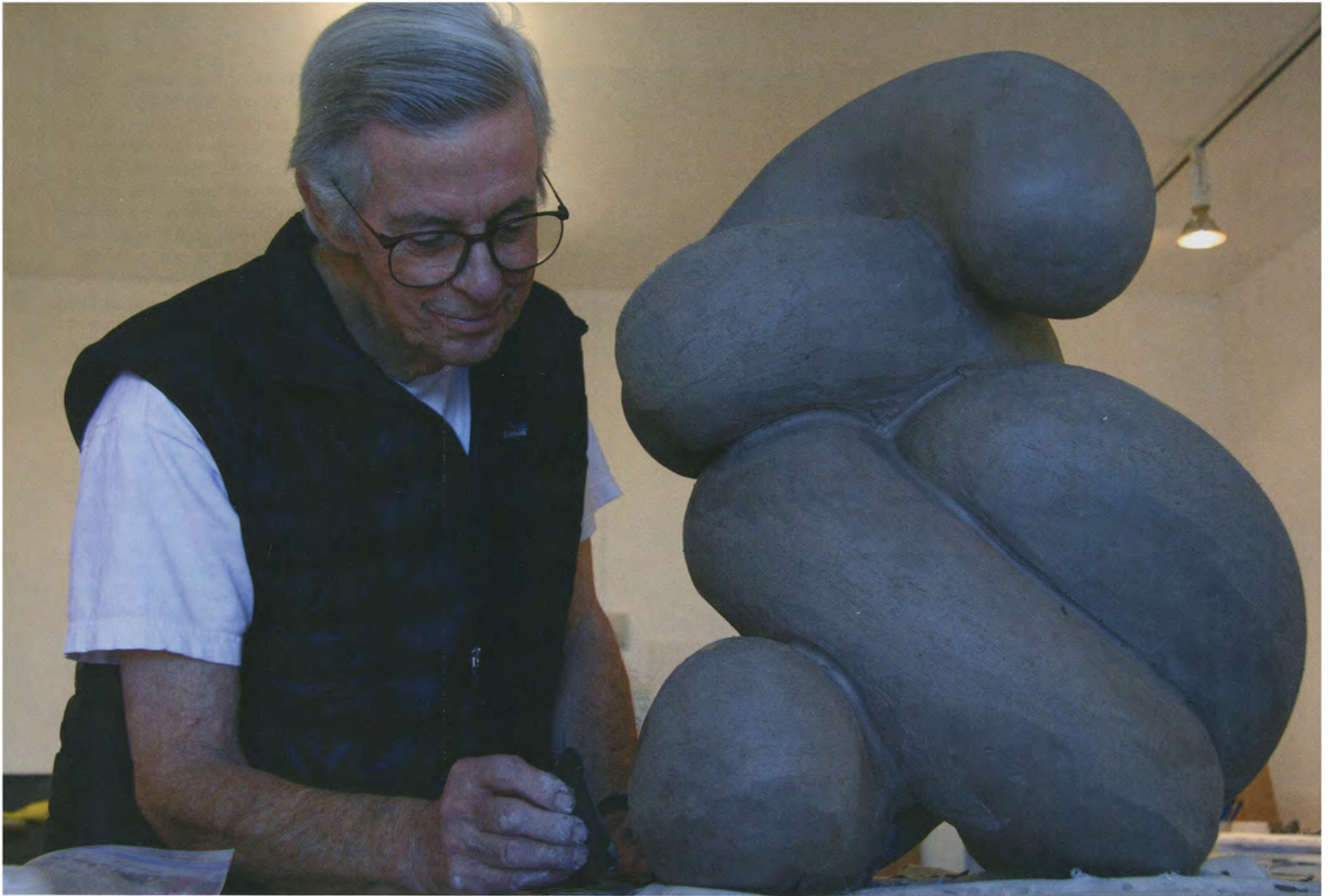
**IMAGES:** At left, *Gertrude*, 2008, Fired and painted clay, 13 1/2 x 12 x 9 1/2 inches. *The True Form*, 2007, Fired and painted clay, 8 x 12 x 18 1/2 inches. © Ken Price / Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



ARTWORKSMAGAZINE.COM 21



**IMAGES:** *Bro*, 2009, Fired and painted clay  
16 1/2 x 11 x 15 inches. © Ken Price / Courtesy  
Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



“Ceramics always seemed like a private void in the world of art,” according to renowned painter Ed Ruscha. “Ken Price brought the world of art to ceramics, making breathtaking chemistry between the two.” Known for an ever-evolving arsenal of eccentric shapes, along with their mottled myriad of color combinations, there’s never been a dull period in Price’s career. He has always taken chances, not because of some fetish to stay relevant, but because this artist has no choice. Forms are continuously heating up deep within his soul, waiting to explode like popcorn kernels. None look or feel the same, but they all have to get out. Once they do, searching for implicit meaning or an explicit agenda is fruitless. “My primary satisfaction comes from making the work,” Price says, “and my idea of success is getting it to look right. So if it looks right, if it has some kind of presence or energy, or comes alive, or has magic – those are all visual things, and it’s very hard to translate those into words.”





Ken Price's home in Taos, New Mexico, is an insulated metal compound split in two... one side living quarters, the other a studio – both expansive and modern. The view outside causes a condition known as speechlessness, as the open plains and sagebrush fields of the Hondo Mesa stretch untouched towards the snow-capped Sange de Cristo Mountain Range. Long inhales of nature's freshest air are welcomed involuntary reflexes. That clarity of mind and body is achieved in a much different way amidst the clutter of sculpture and constant rhythm of jazz music coming from Price's studio. The raucous bass of Charles Mingus, the spirited sax of John Coltrane and nimble piano of Bud Powell bounce around the room, as forms in various phases of completion line tables, pedestals and the floor. Each has a story worth knowing... 'Where do those signature holes lead, who's the lumpy slug-like muse and how can clay wave so organically,' one wonders? When it comes to answers, thankfully, this artist is stoically elusive. Longtime friend and legendary artist Billy Al Bengston looks at Price's body of work this way, "There are many great soloists – all pleasant to listen to, but then there is that rare composer of music who stops you cold. There truly is nobody better that's alive today, and there aren't a lot of dead ones that are as good as Ken, either."



Price has always been able to bathe in praise from peers, but fame and notoriety is something he's never sought. In fact, he's been dubbed the quiet "fifth Beatle" of the 1960's L.A. Art Movement that produced such heavy-hitters as Ruscha, Bengston, Robert Irwin and Larry Bell. While the legacy of Ferus Gallery continues to explode, the importance of Ken Price's artistic voice within it grows louder by the day – though certainly not by personal trumpet. Price has never cared much for marketing, selling or even fitting into an art scene. Never once has his focus shifted from clay to dough. While each of the renegade, surfer artists of the era found ways to push their mediums forward, Price has been the most prolific in doing so. That's why, ultimately, critical and financial success caught up to him, because of the staggering output of original material that defines his career. "I have never known an artist who is as sublimely committed to their studio as Ken Price," Ruscha says. "He would be in heaven if he never, ever, ever had to leave his studio."

All that artistic energy was tested in a big way, recently, as cancer took Price's throat, and, along with it, his ability to swallow. He had to physically re-learn how to speak, and all six of his daily meals now come from a feeding tube. The good news is that after gnarly treatment, the cancer is gone, and the even better news

**IMAGES:** Photographs © Happy Price.

for Price, is that his creative drive is not. While doctor visits and twice-a-week Pilates sessions have altered the routine a bit, most of his hours are spent just as he likes them. "Once he recovered, he came back firing right where he left off, his forms always diversifying from themselves," according to Jackson Price, his son and right-hand man in the studio for the last fifteen years. When it comes to process, there is no ceramist quite like Ken Price. He is the Fred Astaire of clay. With grace and ease he dances the material into structural submission, molding it into various different parts, and then surgically piecing the sculpture together. Once assembled, he cuts the 50 pounds of clay in half and guts it before putting it back together again. Next comes the fine-tuning of the form. After the clay dries, Price painstakingly scrapes off unwanted edges with dozens of tiny tools that look like dental instruments. The sculptures are then smoothed with sponges, pulling the grog to the surface of the material. Finally the form is fired. They emerge from the kiln a brownish-gray and course to the touch. That visible, rough grog is a key component to the eventual coloration of the pieces.

Color is so important to the work, that Price built a lab in his studio to test paint properties and combinations. The tedious study begins by mixing the acrylics, creating hue tabs and then devising complicated schemes. As many as fifteen different shades are then slapped on the surface – five to six thin layers each over a 28 day period. Once dried, they are meticulously scrubbed with sandpaper, and as the grog disappears, a constellation of unrehearsed colors and stunning patterns is revealed. The resulting forms twist and meander organically while exuding an almost paranormal glow. The sublime sculptures beckon an experience, not an interpretation. "I find it humorous when people walk around museums with headphones being spoon fed what to think," Price says. "The way to understand my work is to experience it physically."

Creative juice drips unfiltered from Price's DNA strands. Being an artist is all he's ever wanted to be. "Even when I was a kid I would make drawings and little books, and cartoons and build forts," he says. It should come as no surprise that most sets of teeth in the Price family were cut from creativity. His dad invented the twin Popsicle during the Great Depression, and before that, his grandfather helped design the first car headlights. Ken grew up in Pacific Palisades during the 1940's and 50's. Back then, that area of Los Angeles was undeveloped, and as a teenager he had wanderlust for nature. Streams, beaches, mountains – he absorbed it all, as long as he made it home before dinner. Ken had a paper route, and later sold cigarettes and candy from a local drug store. His family made it through WWII by growing their own fruits and vegetables. In high school, Ken



IMAGE: Color study © Happy Price

was the cartoonist for the school newspaper. His ability earned him a scholarship to take art classes during the summer at Chouinard. The experience of going to a real art school at that age only solidified his career path.

Ken's journey into the third-dimension began in a ceramics class at Santa Monica City College in 1953. His initial love affair with clay,

time who was serious about being an artist, so we became friends," Price says. The duo quickly earned notoriety for its talents, as well as its antics. They enrolled in a clay course together at L.A. City College, and as the slow work and boring approach dragged on, Ken and Billy Al decided to spice things up a bit. They broke into the classroom on a weekend and decided to have a throwing contest. Each made more than

*"My idea of success is getting it to look right. So if it looks right, if it has some kind of presence or energy, or comes alive, or has magic – those are all visual things, and it's very hard to translate those into words."*

however, was tempered by what he calls the "crafts-dogma hell" of the era. "When I grew up, sculpture wasn't supposed to be colored. It was supposed to reflect the inherent material it was made out of. It was called 'truth in materials,' and there were lots of other tenants like it." So clay as art, and clay as career, were both dead and buried notions until Ken met two very important influences – Billy Al Bengston and Peter Voulkos.

Ken first bumped into Billy Al during a surfing trip at Doheny Beach State Park. Ken was 18, Billy Al, 19. "He was the only person I had met at the

100 pieces that day, using all of their own allotted clay, and everyone else's, too. The teacher scoffed, they laughed and eventually found their artistic Elvis at Otis.

In 1957, after earning his degree at USC, Price (along with Bengston) went to the Otis Art Institute to check out a newly-hired, upstart professor named Peter Voulkos. His teaching method was to walk into the studio and just start cranking the clay. "He approached ceramics by a method I call 'direct frontal onslaught,'" Price says. "He was open and powerful, but loose and relaxed, working in large scale with ease.

*"I have never known an artist who is as sublimely committed to their studio as Ken Price. He would be in heaven if he never, ever, ever had to leave his studio."*

Ed Ruscha

He just blew our minds." So much so that after a year of graduate work with Voulkos, Bengston became a painter and Price moved to New York and Alfred University to try and get rid of Voulkos's influence on his art.

During his time at Alfred, Price found his own idiom, melding influences of European, Japanese and Mexican pottery with Miró, Jean Arp, Picasso and Voulkos. He also developed his own version of a lead glaze, opening the floodgates on what would become a lifelong investigation of color. When Price moved back to Los Angeles in 1959, he officially became a "professional," joining Bengston and a handful of other very committed artists at a tiny lot on North La Cienega called Ferus Gallery. At the time, the museum downtown frowned on contemporary art, the local newspapers didn't like them and sales were slow and cheap. Price and Bengston shared a crappy flat in the Bonnie Brae and often could only afford heads of lettuce, coffee and cigarettes for meals – a Snickers bar, if they were lucky. "I was confused about a lot of things at that time, but not about being an artist. I knew that's what I had to be," he says emphatically. By the mid-1960's, things had started to change: galleries, museums and art foundations began cropping up, and Ken Price and the Ferus gang were at the center of a cultural revolution that officially put California art on the map.

The West Coasters had an all-chips-in artistic attitude, and Price, Bengston, Bell, Irwin, Ruscha, John Altoon, Craig Kauffman and Ed Moses challenged each other to do something real and new to be good. In the vein of Voulkos, Price found his authentic voice by refusing to view ceramics as a limited medium. Like his former instructor, he appreciated the functional aesthetics of the material, while unlocking its potential as fine art. But what Price brought to the worktable that nobody had before was an endless vault of unique and inventive forms, the technical fortitude to turn them into sculpture and the ability to form an explosive bond between fired clay and vivid color.



The earliest examples of this were his egg-shaped works of the 1960's. They varied in size and texture; some were smooth ellipses, others featured indents, cutouts or multiple forms. Quite often, Price executed separate color value studies on the internal and external elements of a single sculpture. He hand-painted several layers of enamels, lacquers or acrylics to the surfaces, and then rubbed them out, creating subtle color changes, magical reflections and a translucent depth to the work. "Using color is one of the most challenging parts of my work because there's no formula, or system, or theory of color that works on three-dimensional forms," Price says. "You just have to go by feel, and experience, and luck." Over the years, Price has also been fascinated with scale... from the wavy, globular sculptures that have stretched up to five feet in length to the complex shapes and

shifting textures of his maquette-sized work.

The cup has also fascinated Ken Price. It's a theme he's revisited throughout his career, using the preordained structure of the object as a vehicle for wild ideas. His earliest efforts included plaster reptiles, amphibians, and even sultry female figures for handles. The cups later evolved into architectural wonders of geometry – rock, slate and crystal pieces comprised of dozens of planes, edges and brightly transparent colors. Oftentimes, when a concept cannot be executed in the kiln – like the legs on a hermit crab cup – Price will draw it, instead. "I think sculptors learn to draw so that they can see what they've been visualizing. Most sculptors can draw pretty well, and they draw in illusionistic space, because if you can't draw it, you can't see it," he says. His drawings are so much more than preparatory work, however, running the gamut from glorious seascapes to bland L.A. interiors. The drawings are imperfect, almost comic-like, and vibrate with humor. They've appeared in everything from poetry books by Harvey Mudd and Charles Bukowski to a Ry Cooder album cover and the labels of Del Maguey tequila bottles.

As Ken Price's work got more adventurous, so did his social life. The Ferus gang was known to play as hard as it worked, and all that drinking wasn't doing Ken any good. It took a chance encounter with a woman named Happy to save his liver and complete his soul. Price was with Bengston when they bumped into the brunette beauty at a party in L.A. For Ken, it was love at first sight, even though it would be a full year before he'd lay eyes on her a second time. Forty-three years of marriage, three children, and nine grandkids later – in more ways than one, Happy taught Ken how to be happy. "She probably had a lot to do with him selling work, too," Jackson Price says, "because I don't think he'd ever go out and sell work. He's always been an amazing artist, but there's that whole other side of being an artist, and Happy pulled him out of his studio and brought him out to functions."

Price's six-year long installation project called *Happy's Curios* served as an epic, artistic tribute and thank you to his wife. The obsessive homage to Mexican pottery was Price's magnum opus. He fell in love with the style during surfing trips to Tijuana, and after moving to Taos in 1971, Price stumbled into a curios store full of 1950's-era Tonalá and Oaxaca pottery. His idea was to design, craft and curate an entire store full of his own Mexican-inspired art. "It was kind

of a fantasy," he recalls humbly. "It was supposed to be a small store with some billboards outside and a storefront window, and inside would be this bombardment of images and colors. I figured it would take me about a year, maybe two, to make it." Instead, it took six, and left him completely broke. In the end, he'd made enough tequila cups, bowls, plates, weavings and erotic drawings to fill a village, but ultimately, *Happy's Curios* fell short of Price's ambition. "I

hadn't thought it all the way through," he says. "I hadn't realized that in order to make this thing, I would have to buy a store and build in it. So what I ended up doing was breaking it up into units."

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art was the first to show one of those now legendary units, and in the fall of 2012, a portion of *Happy's Curios* will return to LACMA, along with six decades of Ken Price's groundbreaking work. The major retrospective will then travel to the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas in 2013, before landing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York later that year. It's the pinnacle in the career of this patient pioneer who has kept the creative juices flowing by maintaining his senses of defiance and humor. Just like the brilliant improvisation of the jazz music that echoes in his mind, Price's sensual sculptures have the ability to make life more interesting and enjoyable. So, as the appreciation from the art world escalates, please don't mind Ken Price if he skips the party. He'll be in his studio working.

**AW**

**IMAGES:** At left, *Nail Polish and Lipstick*, 1980. Glazed earthenware, 9 3/8 x 6 3/4 x 2 5/8 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchased with funds from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation and the Painting and Sculpture Committee. This page, *Troncoso*, 2010. Fired and painted clay 17 1/2 x 17 x 19 inches. © Ken Price / Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



ARTWORKSMAGAZINE.COM 27

## Art in America

### EXHIBITION REVIEWS

#### KEN PRICE

MATTHEW MARKS

The 12 new abstract sculptures that Ken Price recently installed at Matthew Marks's 22nd Street space felt like an extended family, with three large-scale pieces in painted bronze composite displayed on low-lying platforms at the front of the gallery and smaller pieces on pedestals beyond. The works (all but one 2009) ranged in form from unitary and simple to convoluted and complex, and in spirit from playful and humorous (as reflected in titles like *Lying Around*, *Fung* and *Weezie*) to serious and unsettling.

Price fires most of his ceramics before adding painted colors in multiple layers (sometimes as many as 30), which, when sanded, form an iridescent skin that becomes each work's distinctive exterior personality. Since the 1990s, Price has favored the biomorphic; his output, including a steady stream of

With his colorful hand-built cups, mounds and eggs of the late 1950s and early '60s, Price was one of the pioneers who transformed the utilitarian past of ceramics into a sculptural future. His approach to polychromy continues to evolve with impressive finesse. In the recent show, the piece titled *Maureen*, in which sausage-shaped components balance amoebic blobs, was characteristic of the sheer visual beauty and rambunctious playfulness of the recent work. Like kindred

View of Ken Price's exhibition, showing (foreground) *Maureen*, 2009, fired and painted clay, 20 by 18 by 17 inches; at Matthew Marks.



pieces *Eskimo LA* and *Hello Isaac*, *Maureen* stands out as a feat of sculptural choreography: eccentric forms improvised in space, pliant and graceful, with a touch of understated drama.

If works like *Zoot* and *The Loop* project buoyant confidence, *Eeezo* (fired and painted clay, 1995-2009), which was sequestered in its own room, feels prickly and aggressive, a wayward sibling.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

## THE NEW YORKER

### **KEN PRICE**

Quietly, over half a century, Price has become the most captivating sculptor in the world. His new, sublimely animate blobs—of modest size, in painted and sanded, iridescently mottled clay, and large, in similarly lustrous painted metal—split impossible aesthetic differences between painting and modelling, Surrealism and minimalism. They evoke Brancusi-like ideality and exercise Calder-like charm while remaining forthrightly objective. They evince Price's grounding in ceramics with dizzyingly sensual, closeup temptations to touch. Seen from farther away, they organize the world like Wallace Stevens's jar in Tennessee. Through April 17. (Marks, 522 W. 22nd St. 212-243-0200.)

THE NEW YORKER, MARCH 1, 2010

13

# 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.

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



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

## The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2006

### Art in Review

#### Ken Price

Sculpture and Drawings,  
1962-2006

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

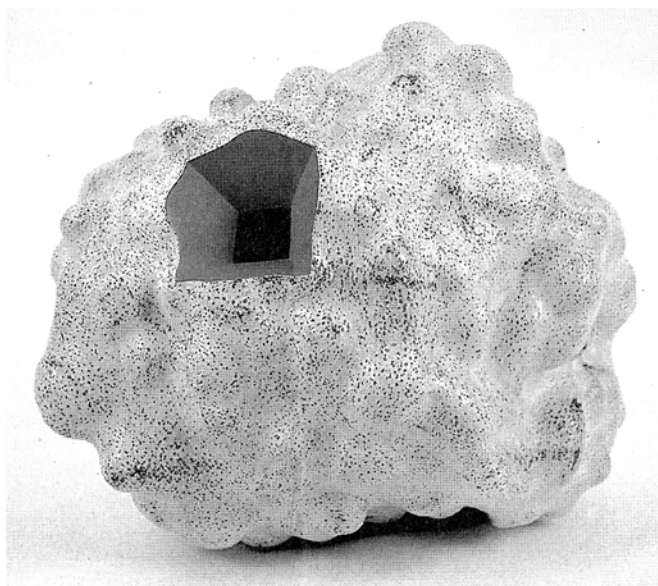
Divided into sections that might be labeled past, present and future, this is the largest New York exhibition yet devoted to Ken Price's work. Although somewhat unshapely in the curatorial sense, it states the obvious: some local museum should drop everything and give Mr. Price's scintillating, polymorphous 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

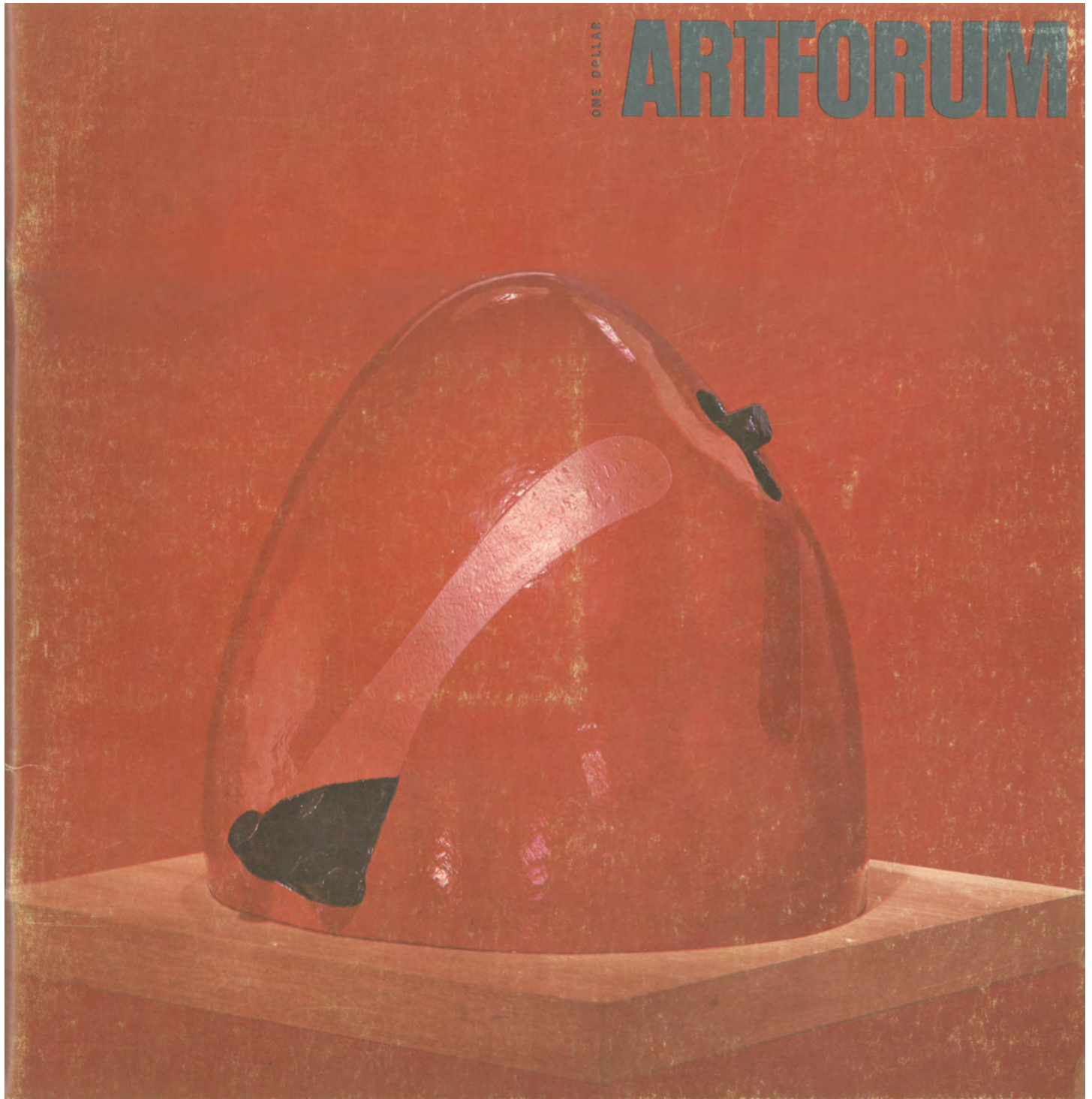


Photographs from Matthew Marks Gallery

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

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047



Hopkins, Henry T.. "Kenneth Price." *Artforum*, August 1963, cover, p. 41.

# Kenneth Price

Born 1935, Los Angeles.  
BFA, University of Southern California, 1957.  
MFA, State University of New York, 1959.  
Represented by Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles.

Kenneth Price was born in Los Angeles in 1935, received a BFA degree from the University of Southern California in 1957 and an MFA from State University of New York in 1959. Ordinarily the academic background of an artist is of little importance, but in this case it offers two important clues to Price's unique imagery. First, his graduate degree came from an intensive study of ceramic as a scientific, engineering material as well as a creative medium; and second, his undergraduate work introduced him to the zoological laboratory where he developed an interest in primary life forms. The precise lab drawings from this period are still important among his possessions. A respect for the art of Leger, Brancusi and Arp should be added to these foundation stones, which can be mortared together with Price's own intellectual and spiritual nature (which must be somewhat akin to that of Paul Klee).

By looking at a single object (represented here by "G. Orange," 1962) it is possible, at least partially, to determine intent. The basic material is a buff clay body that can stand up under manipulation, can be brought to a fairly thin edge without cracking, and that can mature at a relatively low temperature. This structure is coated with a hard skin made of many burnished layers of automobile lacquer. The soft inner parts are sometimes glazed, sometimes painted with a mat surface. Price is skilled in combining materials. He is intentionally not a pure craftsman in his denial of glazed surfaces. In this way he helps to overcome traditional limitations placed on this medium. His carefully constructed pedestals also help to remove his objects from the area of ceramic craftsmanship by giving each piece a dignity which must be taken seriously. The formal whole is a complex series of contrasts; the geometric rigidity of the pedestal against the organic flexibility of the object, smooth surface against rough, glossy against mat, solid against near liquid. These elements are controlled to work in both two and three dimensions.

The content is as old as life because it is life. The images are as new as mid-twentieth century, but they carry with them the desert cactus, the Sea Urchin, the Tortoise, all the creatures and plants that have survived the aggressive actions of man and nature. (Sometimes the healing wounds of these aggressions still show on the surface.) A hard shell protects the tender organs. It is interesting that Price uses a material for life that also protects the delicate instruments of destruction in the nose cone of a rocket.

The intensity of surface color (strong yellow, red, vivid green) seems also to have meaning beyond its beauty. Perhaps like the geometric redness of the Black Widow's belly or the burning rings of the Coral Snake, these objects announce their intent to survive.

Henry T. Hopkins

"G. Orange," fired and painted clay, 8x5½", 1962.

