



Ken Price

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Ken Price's User-Friendly Modernism:
Mutant Handsome Things, Matter-of-Fact Mysteries

Abstract modernist sculptures are reluctant, disobedient things. Most seem eager to stray from their status as "pure" geometries and all too ready to be interpreted as stylized birds, lightning bolts, fronds, craters, trees, nudes or piles of poop. They also seem embarrassingly prone to point out the cleverness of the artists who dream them up and stick them together. After being interpreted, the objects themselves can seem unmoored; losing touch with their stone, wooden, metal or clay forms, they fly away into the realm of ideas and airy metaphor. Aesthetic self-consciousness – the kind of preciousness that reflects back on the artmaker – transforms the modernist enterprise into a queasy-making ego-fest. The "perfectly formed aesthetic object" becomes merely a bauble dangled on the engorged conceit of the master-artist.

The best works by early masters of the medium, such as Brancusi and Arp, however, achieve a "thingness" that evokes an alternate Nature, somehow beyond or behind the real one. In different ways, Brancusi and Arp both pursued ideal, streamlined forms, smoothing out the rough edges of Nature in sleek, polished shapes that take on a kind of self-sufficiency. Re-casting the smoothed-off shapes of Cycladic and prehistoric artifacts, they each found their own way to make objects with living presences. In reducing geometric shapes to their essences, Arp's eggs and ectomorphs and Brancusi's ovoids and monoliths elide particularities and textures; they are mute embodiments of primal, fetal and amoebic life that transcend the artist's touch.

In our own art-saturated age, few artists dare attempt to create such formally self-contained objects; Post-Modern doubts about the integrity of art objects – as well as a kind of reveling in abjection and technological obsolescence – have obscured most quests for formal stability. Those who attempt such works usually fall into the traps of mystical piety and spiritual pomp. It has become especially difficult to make an



Phantom, 1995, ceramic and acrylic paint, 26" x 27" x 21", collection Joan and Don Beall, Corona del Mar, Calif., courtesy L.A. Louver Inc., Venice, Calif.

abstract sculpture that takes on a life of its own, one whose form seems wholly "natural," devoid of the heavy-breathing presence of its maker.

Yet, now, after 40 years of experimenting with ceramic cups and small sculptural forms, California artist Ken Price quietly presents a group of medium-sized painted sculptures endowed with a self-sufficiency and formal resolution that complement the triumphs of the early modernists, while still feeling completely contemporary. With their organic folds and irregular contours, these abstract shapes are



Green Glow, 1996, ceramic and acrylic paint, 14" x 14" x 10", courtesy Franklin Parrasch Gallery, New York

loaded with anthropomorphic mysteries that transcend both ceramic and sculptural expectations. Imposing but welcoming, they are painted in shimmering, iridescent blues, violets, greens, browns and pinks, most with mottled effects from sanded-off, multi-hued layers of paint. Without idealizing Nature, Price manages to create irregular, quirky organisms, imbued with both formal integrity and comic personalities.

A left fielder in a right-field medium, Price has for more than 30 years tussled with ceramics' conventions and expectations. With their geometric accumulations and reptilian appendages, his cups have stretched the boundaries of "cup-dom." The tongue-like obtrusions, expansive add-ons, and angular slices of his "eggs," geometric sculptures and geode-like forms have defied ceramic strictures by literally severing and puncturing the sanctity of the "vessel." As surrogates for organic life, Price's ceramics are scrappy mutants, with their own standards of beauty.

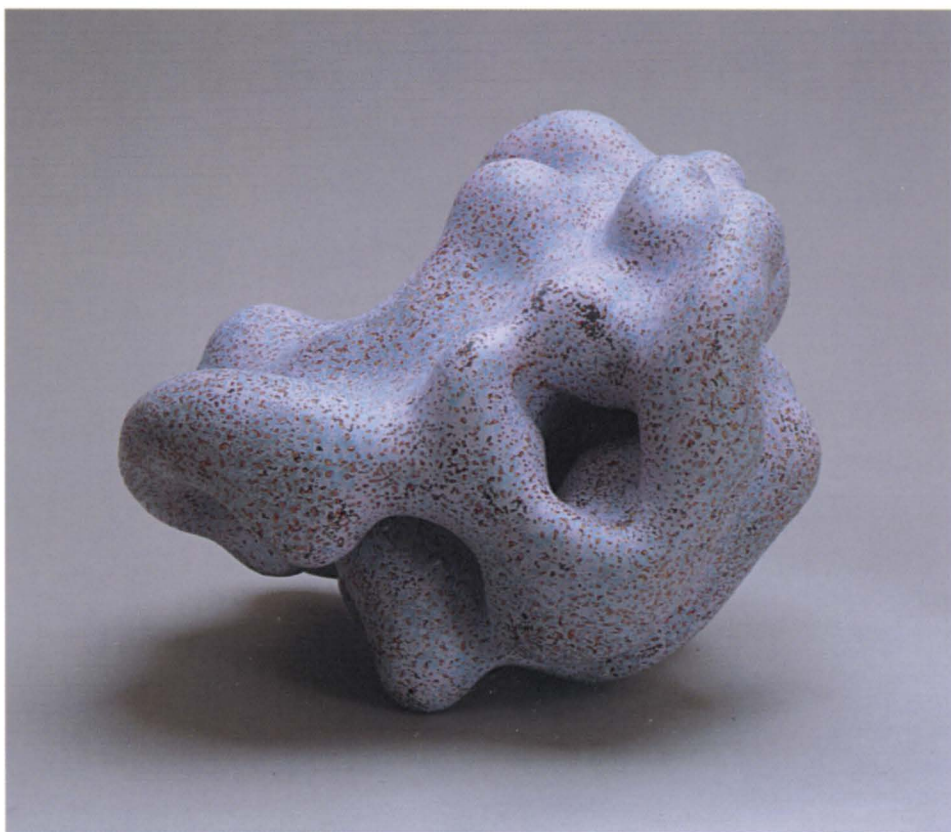
In the new sculpture, Price's craft – his masterful control of color and sculptural contour – elevates his idiosyncratic forms to the "objecthood" of idealized Modernism. The new pieces both enlarge the scale of his geode-like

sculptures of the late 1980s and eliminate the angular slices that were cut into them. By eliminating those slices, it is as if Price has decided to stop interfering with forms and to present them whole. In a bolder way than before, he allows the new works to stand on their own and to assume their own eccentric presences.

The unassuming quality of clay – a medium often snubbed in this century by “high art” mavens for its utilitarianism – works here to Price’s advantage. Rendered in marble, wood or metal, his comically outlandish forms might seem pretentious or stolid. The skin-like warmth and sensuous fragility of clay enhance the objects’ hand-molded folds. Like oddball figurines, the sculptures seem naturally born objects, formed intuitively, as Price says, by “rubbing and feeling” his way in the clay.

Tucked in amongst the nodule-ridden blobs are unobtrusive yet unsettling orifices that invite a kind of polymorphous penetration. Unlike Anish Kapoor’s ominous, spiritually laden black holes, however, the openings seem matter-of-fact, innocent and human-scaled. The shapes of the orifices resemble sphincters, vulvae, mouths and ear canals; they play formally with the shapes of the works’ nodules and protrusions. Sensual without being portentous, Price’s orifices function as incidents rather than major events. These cavities have no implied function; they are ornamental, and therefore unpredictable and perverse. By cluing the viewer to the works’ hollowness, the orifices imbue the nearly closed-off ceramic vessels with an organic lightness that further enhances their human, animal and vegetal forms.

These sculptures shift restlessly between kingdoms; in fact, depending on light and point of view, any of them may seem animal, vegetable or mineral. *Whisper* from certain angles resembles a sea shell, from other angles a clenched fist or mutant penis. *Phantom* is a knobby, deep purple collection of humps that resemble elbows, breasts and knees. The rough mound shape of *The Stuff* evokes a mesa topped with weather-worn boulders. The more



Whisper, 1997, ceramic and acrylic paint, 12" x 15" x 13", collection Alan E. and Ellen Cober, Pleasantville, N.Y.

vertical form of *Shadow* seems to incorporate the melded embrace of two stubby lovers. Like a new model of bell pepper enhanced by Pontiac designers, *Celtic* tucks away its custom-made orifice, discreetly out of sight of the neighbors and the kids.

Devoid of any craft-like fussiness or adherence to conventional form, the curvaceous, glistening shapes all sit on short stumpy legs. The slight elevation helps them retain domestic charm; perched or lounging like well-fed cats, they’re ready to warm up a living room.

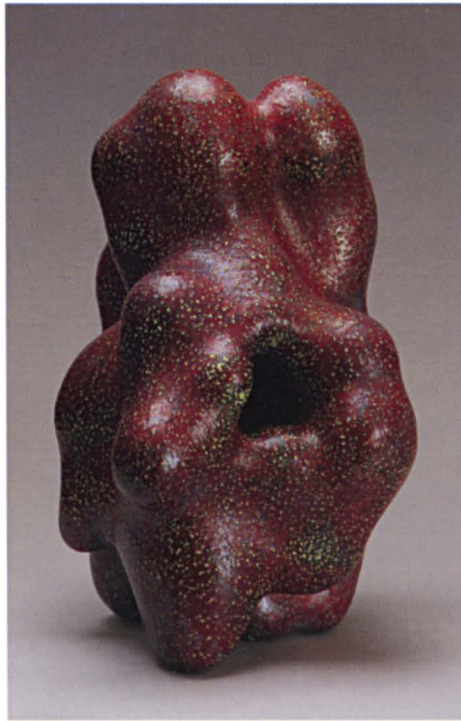


The Squeeze, 1995, ceramic and acrylic paint, 19½" x 27½" x 14", courtesy Hill Gallery, Birmingham, Mich.

Smaller than humans, but larger than dolls or teapots, they are lap-sized, and their anti-monumental scale evokes a natural sympathy. Like fetishistic talismans, they seem accommodating and accessible, inviting us to rub their tummies and make a wish. An implicit value system seems conjured by these forms, one that esteems modesty, humor, physical beauty, surprise, sexuality, touch and – most importantly – color.

Their vibrant colors distinguish these works from most of this century's sculpture. Polychromed sculpture – so familiar to the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans – didn't fit with the modernists' focus on raw materials; surprisingly, their prejudice seems to have lasted to the present day. Trained as a ceramicist, Price brings to sculpture none of those bugaboos against color; he enjoys the cup- and pot-maker's freedom to embellish works with buoyant, decorative shades that establish emotional tones. Yet, as any knowledge of his cups indicates, Price is not locked into the rules of his craft. The logic and function of each piece determine its form. Since the new works are not meant to be functional, he sees no need for ceramic glazes, opting for the increased control over color that paint provides.

Molded by hand and fired slowly, the



Shadow, 1996, ceramic and acrylic paint, 17" x 10" x 12¼", courtesy private collection

works are afterwards painted with layers of acrylic that are chemically treated and then sanded to achieve their luscious patinas. The sanding creates weathered-looking color contours, emphasizing the curvaceous folds and nodules of the organic, terrestrial forms. The works' dense color combinations further enhance the glow of their smoothly

textured skins. The 1950s color contrasts of pink and powder blue, with flecks of yellow and black, for example, give *Whisper* its sexy energy, enhanced by its horizontally relaxed, come-hither posture. The queasy green surface of *Phobia* is speckled with unsettling bits of brown. Various revealed flecks of peach, reddish brown, blue-black and dull purple give *Green Glow* its eerie sheen. The swoony, glistening mounds of *Celtic* are swept up by the bold intensity of its royal blue.

In these larger-scale pieces, Price retains the playful nature of his cups of the last 40 years. Without endorsing the "bigger is better" ethos, his new works' seemingly effortless leap in scale endows them with a living presence that ups the ante of his enterprise, completely unmooring it from the ceramic traditions of cup, pot and vase. With this body of work, Price joins other members of his generation – such as Craig Kauffman, Ed Moses, Lynn Foulkes and George Herms – whose works have been revitalized by the current Los Angeles resurgence. His new work seems charged by the city's younger, less established art that thrives on casual, formal experimentation and eye-grabbing colors. The unassuming insouciance, quirky humor and good-natured presence of Price's new works make them quite unlike other contemporary sculptures. With an uncannily light touch, devoid of religiosity or showmanship, Price offers objects that feel completely right for the 1990s. Sneaking in through the back door of the ceramics shop, Price is making some of the best art of our time.

– Michael Duncan, Los Angeles

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Cover: *Celtic*, 1995, ceramic and acrylic paint, 26½" x 25" x 24", courtesy private collection, Birmingham, Mich.



Phobia, 1995, ceramic and acrylic paint, 17½" x 22" x 18", collection The Edward R. Broida Trust