



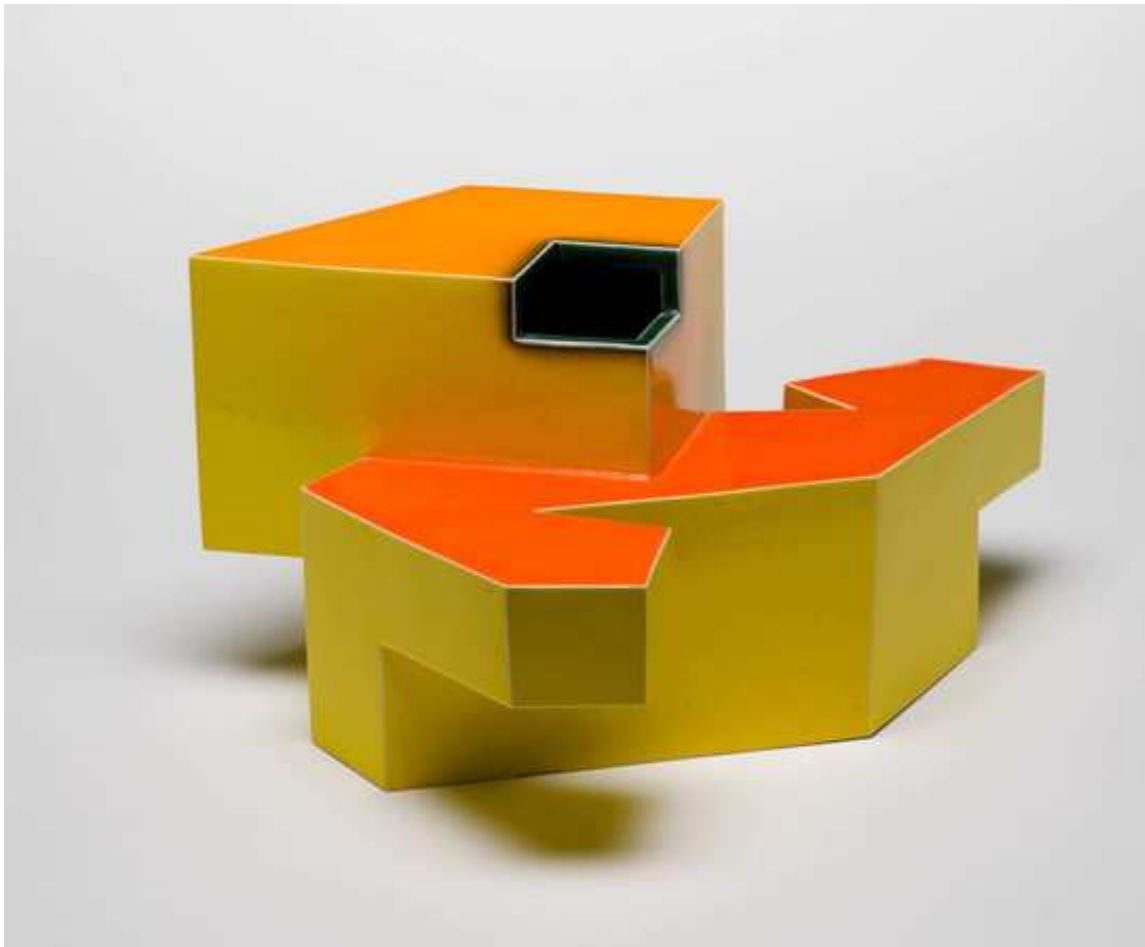
CULTURE MONSTER

ALL ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Review: Ken Price's voluptuous works seduce in LACMA retrospective

The Ken Price retrospective at LACMA marvelously captures the force and craft of his sculptures.

By Christopher Knight, Los Angeles Times Art Critic
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Ken Price, *Hawaiian*, 1980, Glazed ceramic, Betty Lee and Aaron Stern Collection (Fredrik Nilsen / LACMA /September 6, 2012)

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.

PHOTOS: Ken Price retrospective at LACMA

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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