

Radiant Blobs

Ken Price's carnal clay **BY R.C. BAKER**

Ken Price

Metropolitan Museum of Art
1000 Fifth Avenue
212-535-7710, metmuseum.org
Through September 22



Underhung (1997)

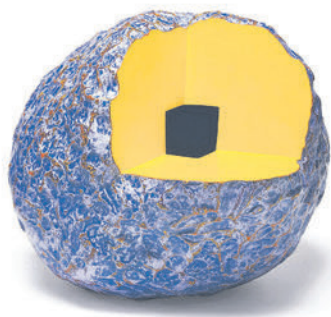
The brilliant ceramicist Ken Price was born in West Hollywood in 1935 and died last year in Taos, New Mexico. Too late (but not with too little), the Met is hosting his first New York museum retrospective. There are many theories as to why our bastions of taste have overlooked Price's wildly fecund objects: They're too small to be considered consequential sculpture; they're comically flashy rather than seriously beautiful; the shapes are just too shapeless to matter.

All nonsense.

Price indeed worked at an intimate scale, rarely over two feet high, and you might find yourself wanting to caress these radiant blobs as if they were alien pets from an old *Star Trek* episode. He drew cartoons for his high school yearbook and college paper, and the same zeitgeist that spewed forth California's underground comix aesthetic can be felt in the exuberant carnality of Price's clay menagerie, which progressed from recognizable tableware to peculiar entities enclosing mysterious volumes. Many of the pieces are punctured by holes that suggest bodily orifices such as mouths, ear canals, or genitals. No matter how obdurately abstract Price's sculpture became, these openings reached back across millennia to pottery's original purpose: utilitarian containers for pouring water,



Balls Congo (2003)



Big Load (1988)



Snail Cup (1967)

containing food, burying ashes. Utterly necessary objects, but rarely exquisite.

Price's playful coffee cups from the 1960s—perched on the backs of turtles, fragmenting into colorful constructionist cubes—are models of robust formal invention. In a series of "Slate" cups, built up from slabs of clay like geologic deposits, the smoothly clashing hues include fungal browns, moss greens, taxi-garage yellows, and dried-blood reds. Luminous speckles—like mutant stardust—grace the bulbous contours of Price's later work, a finish derived partly from surfboard painting techniques. Price dug surfing and jazz as a kid, and the free-form thrill of both endeavors shines through the decades of work on exhibit.

In a video interview featured in a companion show at the Drawing Center (35 Wooster Street, 212-219-2166, drawingcenter.org, through August 18), Price notes how the great trumpeter Chet Baker would "make terrible mistakes" that he somehow managed to transmute into beautiful riffs. Explaining how the style of pianist Earl "Fatha" Hines influenced his own working methods—"Throw out a bunch of stuff and then don't stop, 'cause it's not wrong until it's over, and then collect it all back up"—Price concludes, "I do that in a way too—I start out with a bunch of stuff until it's really out of control, and then I try and resolve it."

That resolution proves breathtaking in 1994's *Sweet Paste*, beginning with the powdery pink flecks that crust the mauve rind and lend the object a patina as visually pungent as rotting fruit. If not for the museum guards, you might risk poking your finger into the triangle cut into the lumpy surface of this 18-inch-tall... what, exactly? Perhaps it actually is an overripe melon—imported from Venus. Absurd? Part of Price's genius is to invite surreal speculation. The pigments are so dense that the dark space could be an opening or just a painted illusion—you must twist and crane your neck to sort out the shifting depths of its shadows. The vaguely pyramidal overall shape echoes that smooth, triangular incision, the sort of compositional cross-fertilization that gives so much of Price's work its engagingly corporeal presence.

In the tapered, gelatinous pile of *100% Pure* (2005), the heavy, layered folds seem a conflation of excretion and collapsing surf, while the chrome-green surface, shot through with a rusty pox, could be some woody's fender ravaged by salty spray. (The earthy spirit of these gloppy forms

has been re-engineered to Brobdingnagian proportions in Anish Kapoor's recent poured-cement sculptures.)

A selection of Price's fabulous drawings appears both here and in the downtown show. One series of acrylic and ink paintings dated between 2000 and 2005 combines head-shop romanticism—turbulent clouds over roiling seas, lava flowing through dark mountains, desert dunes writhing like snakes—and an ungodly lush palette to create landscapes only slightly more tethered to reality than his sculptures.

Aware that he was transforming an ancient, utilitarian craft into that most useless of commodities—art—Price once stated: "A craftsman knows what he is going to make and an artist doesn't." His undeniably exquisite vessels contain not the stuff of life but the elusive essence of cultural wonder—beautiful things handed down from age to age even as their meanings constantly evolve.

Dario Escobar

Josée Bienvenu Gallery
529 West 20th Street
212-206-7990, josebienvengallery.com
Through July 18

In previous work, Dario Escobar has re-chromed bumpers extricated from crashed trucks, letting chance determine the forms of his sculpture. This serendipitous exploration continues in his new series of fascinating paintings.

In small blacksmith shops—still going concerns in Guatemala City, where Escobar lives and works—such wares as gates, railings, religious figures, and furniture are propped against back walls and spray-painted. Escobar attaches blank canvases to these makeshift spray booths and regularly visits the establishments to see how the accumulated layers of paint applied by various workmen are progressing, and to determine when to remove the canvas. Punctuated by the stark silhouettes of actual-size objects, space and scale shift amid hazy, overlapping geometries. In their blurry immediacy, these engaging paintings hark back to David Smith's magnificent spray-enamel works, which the abstract-expressionist sculptor created by employing studio detritus as stencils. Other antecedents include surrealist photograms and Jim Dine's outlining of workaday tools in primary colors. Escobar expands on this panoply of art history with his own conceptual disappearing act, relying on a changing cast of collaborators and the ghosts of utilitarian objects to create images of absence.