



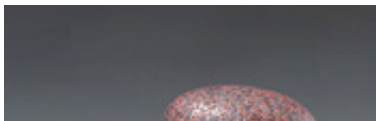
Ken Price at L.A. Louver, 2008, installation view



Ken Price at L.A. Louver, 2008, installation view



Ken Price
Argonne
2008
L.A. Louver
Private collection



A LIFE IN CLAY by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

Ken Price is the quiet "Fifth Beatle" of the Los Angeles art scene of the '60s. Known for his lovely, eccentric ceramic sculpture, he is the least-quoted artist in The Cool School, the recent film about L.A.'s pioneering Ferus Gallery, and the least accessible of its artists, since moving to New Mexico in the early '70s.

Such reserve has not put off collectors and art dealers, however. He now is represented by heavy-hitters like Matthew Marks in New York and L.A. Louver in Los Angeles, where his latest work is on view, Oct. 10-Nov. 8, 2008. Concurrently, a selection of Price's works from the late '80s can be seen at Franklin Parrasch Gallery in New York, Sept. 23-Nov. 15, 2008.

Given all this, it seemed like a good time to ask Price a few questions. Naturally, I started with the most important one first. . . .

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp: Did your father invent the Popsicle?

Ken Price: He may have, it's hard to know for sure. He definitely developed it into a product. During the 1930s he was employed by the Good Humor Ice Cream Company to come up with ways of merchandising ice cream, and while he was there he invented the Twisty, the Pop-Up, the Milk Nickel, the two-part Popsicle and some other things. I remember the garage at our house being full of Popsicle molds and all kinds of interesting stuff. My grandfather was an inventor by trade who developed practical things like headlights for cars. Probably because of this, I have a romantic idea of the American inventor, and a deep admiration for inventors I know like Steve Baer and Tom Morey.

HDP: Could you describe growing up in the Pacific Palisades in the '40s and '50s?

KP: When I was born in 1935, my parents were living in an apartment in West Hollywood. When I was two or three years old they built a house in Pacific Palisades at 727 Chautauqua Blvd. While the house was under construction we lived in a trailer on Santa Monica beach next door to the Marion Davies mansion. About two years went by before we moved up to the house in the Palisades. Across the street from our house was a cliff overhanging the north side of Sunset Boulevard as it snaked down the hill leading to Rustic Canyon, and on the other side of Sunset was a mountainside covered with Eucalyptus trees leading down to the Uplifter's Club polo field.

The Palisades was a different world from what it is now. It was sparsely populated and seemed far from the city. My father told me his friends thought he had moved out to some religious cult. We lived at the foot of the Santa Monica Mountains, which were completely undeveloped and full of wildlife, including the occasional mountain lion in our backyard.

As a kid I had great freedom to roam and spend a lot of time by myself down in Rustic Canyon. I was out of the sight and control of my parents



Ken Price
Blakey
 2008
 L.A. Louver
 Private collection



Ken Price
Spirit of '08
 2008
 L.A. Louver
 Private collection



Ken Price
Yeow
 2008
 L.A. Louver
 Private collection



because the place seemed to be completely safe. We didn't lock the doors to our house or take the keys out of the parked cars. I walked to and from the Palisades Grammar School in the 5th and 6th grades, which was not a hardship in any way, and I delivered newspapers by bicycle, including the *L.A. Times*, *Santa Monica Evening Outlook* and the *L.A. Mirror*. Later I worked at the Palisades Drugstore selling cigarettes, candy and magazines, and delivered prescriptions to customers in a 1937 panel truck. So I knew the Palisades pretty well and knew some of the people that lived there.

During the Second World War we had air raid drills (my father was a block warden) and big gun emplacements along the Palisades facing the ocean. My friends and I played war a lot. I was 10 years old when the war ended. We also played sandlot baseball and pickup football games as there were no organized leagues at that time, but the school hired a person who worked in the playground after classes to checkout balls and supervise the games.

During and after the war we grew lots of our own food as did many of our neighbors. We had oranges, tangerines, lemons, avocados, figs, boysenberries, tomatoes and other vegetables in our back yard and the vacant lot next door.

There was no public transportation, but a bus took us to and from the nearest junior high school, which was in Westwood. At age 14 I got a driver's license, which was a wonderful ticket to freedom, even though it was only to be used to drive to and from school or work.

One of the great parts of growing up there was the opportunity to experience nature in a relaxed aimless kind of way, just walking down a stream or on to the beach or into the mountains, as long as I was home by dinner.

HDP: How did you come to know that you wanted to be an artist?

KP: As far back as I can remember I have always wanted to be an artist.

HDP: When you attended Chouinard Art Institute during summer school, did you study with anyone who was an influence?

KP: When I was at University High I got a scholarship to attend Chouinard for summer school. I took two courses. One was a life drawing class that I barely remember and the other was a cartooning class given by a guy named Tee He. He laid out the geometry of cartooning, which I wasn't aware of, even though I had been drawing cartoons for years. Going to a real art school was exciting.

HDP: How did you come to work in ceramics?

KP: At Santa Monica City College in 1953 I took a ceramics course and discovered how much I enjoyed working with clay and working in three-dimensions.

HDP: You attended a number of different schools in Los Angeles and elsewhere. Could you chronicle your studies a bit and explain the evolution of your education in ceramics?

KP: During the '50s I took several life drawing classes at different places. The most memorable of which was one from Herb Jepsen at Otis in 1955 or '56. That was essentially a course in learning how to see. The drawing classes were very enjoyable to me. I took ceramic courses and workshops at Chouinard and other places, which I have to characterize as crafts-

**Ken Price**

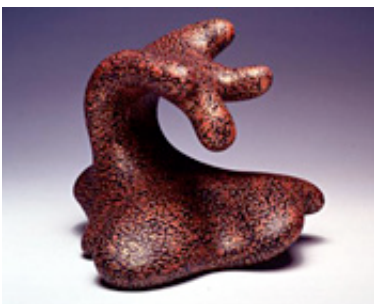
Vona
2008
L.A. Louver
Private collection

**Ken Price**

Cocodo
2008
L.A. Louver
Private collection

**Ken Price**

Hotso
2008
L.A. Louver
Private collection

**Ken Price**

Vim
2001
www.kenprice.com

dogma hell, with lots of rules about "form following function," "truth to materials," "life and lift," and dripping teapot spouts. In those days clay as an art medium was dead and buried.

When I was taking a surfing trip down south, I ran into Billy Al Bengston, who was living and working at Doheny Beach State Park, and he was also an art student who was into using clay. He was the only person I had met at the time who was serious about being an artist. So we became friends and eventually took a clay course together at L.A. City College, which he had already been attending. He was more advanced than I was, had a great touch with clay and was already making some good work.

We were there to use the facilities, but the class itself had a typical crafts approach with lots of boring discussion and not much work going on, which was frustrating. So one day on a weekend Billy Al and I broke into the classroom through an unlocked window and had a throwing contest where we each made over 100 pieces, using all of our clay and everyone else's too, and we ate all the food that was put away to consume during those discussions. And -- of course -- the reaction was very negative with lots of scolding and threatening, but we saw it as funny, which was kind of a liberating moment.

Then one day we heard that there was going to be a demonstration by Peter Voulkos, who'd been hired to teach at Otis, but was unknown to us. So, we went to see him and were completely amazed. He worked directly -- better and faster than anything we had expected. He was open and powerful but loose and relaxed and he worked in large scale with ease. We were drawn to him and his approach. He opened the whole thing up for us.

HDP: How did your approach to ceramics differ from others when you started?

KP: When I started making ceramics I didn't have my own approach at all. I was influenced by lots of other people's work, including European pottery, Japanese pottery, Mexican pottery, Miró, Arp, Picasso and Voulkos, among others. I tried out many different ways to make things and worked my way into my own idiom around 1959 while I was at SUNY at Alfred University in New York State.

HDP: Could you expand upon the story of painting a nude of Bengston on a ceramic plate and getting in trouble at the University of Southern California?

KP: One of the reasons I went to U.S.C. was to take ceramics from Susan Peterson, who was a nice person who allowed me to experiment and try to find my own direction. But in the last semester before my graduation they hired a second person to teach ceramics named F. Carlton Ball, who was another guy from craft hell. He didn't like what I was doing, he was against representational decoration and was up to his neck in rules about what not to do. He would walk right past me in class, and when I got home there would be a two-page letter from him about why I was failing his course.

When we did talk we would have to go into the cloak room and close the door so nobody could over hear us. My grad presentation was in a glass case next to the Art and Architecture Library, and I had representational décor on everything including plates with reclining nudes of Bengston and Voulkos. There was a big stink about it. These were cartoons! I found some leaves to paste over the genital areas and the reaction was even worse.



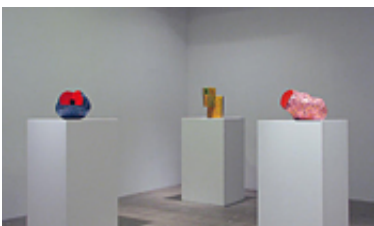
Ken Price
Crank
2000
L.A. Louver



Ken Price
Underhung
1997
Collection of the artist



Ken Price
Sweet Paste
1994
Private collection



Then Ball tried to get me kicked out of the educational department (my parents had agreed to pay the USC tuition if I took an education minor). I was saved by the dean, who I had shown slides for in his art history courses, and another professor who liked my work. This all seems so trivial now, but there it is.

HDP: What was the role of Peter Voulkos at Otis?

KP: In the mid '50s Otis got some new funding and was renamed L.A. County Art Institute, under the direction of Millard Sheets, who hired Voulkos to teach there and outfit a new ceramics building. Voulkos' teaching method was to come into the studio at the school and make his work right in front of the students, who were making their own work at the same time. There were no class hours, no assignments and no crits, just an on-going demonstration of how a serious artist functions in the studio.

All this stuff about Voulkos and the crafts establishment happened over 50 years ago, and I haven't thought about it for a long time. It's my belief that everyone has a distorted view about everything, so this is just my own feeling about what happened. Most of the people I am talking about have already died or I have avoided naming them.

At this point it may be hard for clay artists to realize what a unified position and tight hold the crafts establishment had on teaching clay courses at that time. They collectively presented a position that a student could follow or go against. They didn't like Voulkos because he beat them at their own game and moved on. Voulkos is the man who liberated clay from the crafts hierarchy in America, and everyone here using clay to make art owes him a debt of gratitude.

HDP: What happened that forced Voulkos to resign?

KP: For the full year of 1957, I was a grad student at L.A. County Arts Institute in ceramics, but I didn't attend any other classes. I can't remember a lot of the details, but I recall that getting a degree involved executing mosaic murals by Millard Sheets on Home Savings and Loan Buildings, which he also designed, in a style he called "timeless architecture." And I refused to do it, along with several other students. So I was gone by the time Voulkos resigned and don't really know exactly what happened, but I've heard stories.

HDP: Could you tell the story of Otis trying to rescind the scholarship money that Voulkos obtained for you?

KP: The Art Institute (Sheets was the dean) rescinded my scholarship retroactively and sent the L.A. Sheriff Department to collect. I was at my parents' house in the Palisades when the County Sheriff came to the front door looking for me, and I slipped out the back where my car was parked and took off. About that time I had joined the Army Reserves to avoid being drafted, and spent six months of training at Fort Ord, and then went to grad school at Alfred in New York for a year. When I returned to L.A. the issue never came up again.

HDP: How did your 1962 trip to Japan affect your work?

KP: In 1962, for the six months or so that I was in Japan, I lived in an inn in Kyoto, and was also able to visit some of the artists making pottery in other towns and villages, thanks to the good fortune of having a letter of introduction from an important museum director, and my friendship with an American potter who'd been living there and seemed to know everyone. At least two of the artists that I visited became Living National

"Ken Price: Works from the Late '80s" at Franklin Parrasch Gallery, 2008, installation view



Ken Price
Borges
1987
Franklin Parrasch Gallery
Private collection



Ken Price
Untitled
1989
Franklin Parrasch Gallery
Private collection



Ken Price
Magritte
1986
Franklin Parrasch Gallery
Private collection

Treasures. I was amazed by their medieval lifestyles and the connection of their own work to historical Japanese pottery. After being that close to the real thing, I was never tempted to make quasi-Japanese work, but I was strongly influenced by the experience in a non-stylistic way.

HDP: Did you intend your early ceramics -- "Bumps" and "Lumps" and "Eggs" I think they are called -- to be interpreted as erotic?

KP: I've always seen those pieces to be more about nature than about sex. My work is layered with references, many of which are unintentional. I wanted to leave their meanings open to personal interpretation.

What's inside the viewer seems to be just as important as what the work is. There is a prominent collector I know who won't own any of my work because he is offended by the erotic content he sees there. I wonder what the poor guy is thinking when he is driving along a road lined with telephone poles, and then has to pass through a tunnel?

HDP: What was the role of Billy Al Bengston and the use of sprayed paint on your ceramics? How did it work with the glaze?

KP: When Billy Al and I shared a studio in Ocean Park from 1960 to 1962, he started using a spray gun to make his paintings. At that time I was making the "Egg" pieces and was glazing the inside sections and then hand painting the surfaces with acrylic, enamel or lacquer. I definitely got my idea of spraying pieces from Billy, but didn't really get into spraying until I came back from Japan and had a studio in Ventura with a spray booth in it. I was a cook in the Army Reserves, which is a standing joke in our family because I can't cook! We cooked one Sunday per month at the Camarillo State Mental Hospital, and one of my fellow cooks was a guy who did furniture restoration specializing in re-painting refrigerators. He showed me how to use a spray gun and what sealers and primers to use and I sprayed my pieces with lacquer for a couple of years.

HDP: You said that you are not really interested in the technical aspect of ceramics. Could you talk about that a bit?

KP: I am not interested in technique as an end in itself. When I made that statement a common defect of a lot of ceramic work was its attempt to dazzle the viewers with technical prowess. I don't know if that is the case anymore because I am no longer aware of what is going on.

Now I think of technique as a highway to the unconscious -- of having enough technique to accommodate ideas as they flow in. My technique is shifting along with my conception all the time.

HDP: Could you talk about meeting your wife in 1968 and then pursuing the 1970s series called "Happy's Curios?" What was the idea behind them?

KP: *Happy's Curios* was a failed installation piece in the form of a curio store that was intended to pay homage to the Mexican Folk Pottery of the 1950s. I named the piece *Happy's Curios* but it didn't have anything to do with her personally. I worked on it off and on from 1972 to 1978. I focused a lot of attention on making the pieces to go into it, and completed some sections of it, but didn't have the foresight or the money to own a building to house it in. I got so involved with making the parts that I lost sight of what it was as a whole. This probably happened because I was drinking too much at the time.

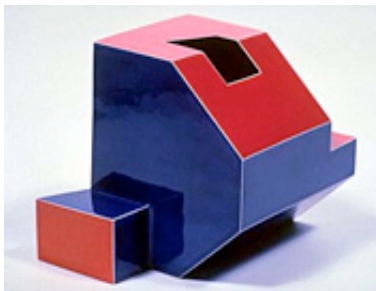
HDP: In 1968, you lived in London where you had a show with the



Ken Price
The Void That's There or Perhaps Isn't There
 1988
 Franklin Parrasch Gallery
 Private collection



Ken Price
Snug
 1989
 Franklin Parrasch Gallery
 Private collection



Ken Price
Red Top
 1979
 Private collection



Ken Price
 Two Cups from Town Unit Z, from "Happy Curios"
 1972-77

HDP: In 1968, you lived in London where you had a show with the Kasmin Gallery. Could you talk about that visit and what it was like?

In 1968 I went by myself to London to have a show with Kasmin and ended up staying for about six months because Don Factor let me stay in his Mews flat in South Kensington, rent free. London in '68 was a happening place and people there were enjoying life. It was such a civilized city, with wonderful museums, a great music scene and smart eccentric people. There was an art scene in Europe that I previously knew nothing about. I had an enjoyable time.

Happy and I got together after I returned from London, which is the best thing that has happened to me in my life. Now we have been married almost 40 years and have a wonderful family with eight grandchildren.

HDP: Why did you move to Taos in 1971?

KP: That's a hard question to answer. People would ask us how we got to Taos and we would say "by car." We wanted to raise our kids outside of the city.

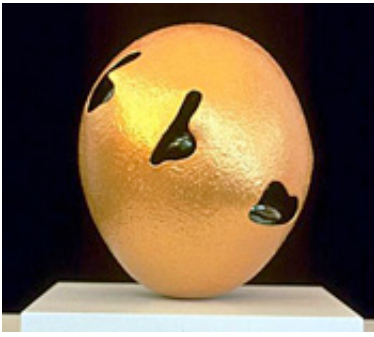
HDP: Your ceramic work has grown markedly larger, with soft forms and iridescent color. Can you talk about this direction in your work?

KP: I've been using iridescent colors off and on since the 1960s, but not as much as I have in the last 10 to 15 years. I made larger forms in the '80s and '90s too, but large for me means no more than 30 inches in any dimension. Otherwise the pieces become too heavy to deal with. Around '95 or '96 I made a piece that was five feet by three feet by 29 inches in Taos. The piece took eight strong men to lift, and broke a worktable by just sitting on it for awhile. I made geometric forms in the '50s and '70s and tried them again in the early '90s but without the transparent glazed surfaces -- they just amounted to flat planes with flat colors, even when the forms were successful and original. For the last 15 years or so I've been using rounded forms with active surfaces that continue to offer possibilities for me that are interesting and challenging.

HDP: After a steady but not superstar career, you are now experiencing a rise in the prices for your work and representation by New York dealer Matthew Marks. How does that feel?

KP: In the studio when I'm into working and operating outside myself it feels the same as before. In other ways, things have improved a lot. Matthew Marks is a great art dealer who has helped me to succeed in my work, and relieved the financial pressure I felt for years. He has really supported me -- I'm enjoying it very much.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP is author of *Full Bloom: The Art and Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*, published by W.W. Norton.



Ken Price
Gold
1968
Collection of the artist



Ken Price
C. Violet
1963
Private collection



Ken Price in his studio
Photo by Brian Forrest