

OCTOBER 1, 2012

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# TIME

## 5 IDEAS

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# The Culture

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Orange (1987), from  
the smashing new  
retrospective of the late  
L.A. artist Ken Price  
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## Art

## Price Is Right

### A dazzling show sends an artist into the canon

By Richard Lacayo

EVERY SO OFTEN THE WORLD WAKES UP and decides that an artist who's been around for a while, and is even widely admired, is actually something more—like indispensable. This happened 25 years ago with the British painter Lucian Freud, thanks to a retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington that made everyone aware of how much was at stake in his every loaded brushstroke. It's happening again right now with the Los Angeles artist Ken Price. The new

retrospective of his witty and mysterious ceramic sculpture at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) is an event that settles him firmly in the canon of great American artists. Though Price died in February at 77, he was able to consult closely on the show with Stephanie Barron, the curator who organized it. In galleries designed by his old friend, the architect Frank Gehry, this luscious exhibition—which runs at LACMA through Jan. 6, then moves to Dallas and New York City—is Price as he wanted to be seen. It's a doozy.

From the point of view of long-term reputation, Price spent his career in risky territory. In the hierarchies of art history, marble, wood and welded metal are the stuff of art. Ceramics are just craftwork. Working with clay can get you relegated to the museum-world equivalent of the cupboard, the place where they stash the

Wedgwood china and the Wiener Werkstätte coffee service. But by the mid-1950s, L.A. artist Peter Voulkos was making powerful abstract clay sculptures—scorched, cracked and swollen things that drew on the traditions of pottery while exploding them. Price became Voulkos' student and found his calling.

Within a few years, Price was showing abstract clay objects in retina-searing colors with mysterious openings. They were portable enigmas you could hold in both hands. Like the Surrealist biomorphs they descended from, Price's works resembled all kinds of things—body parts, bird's eggs, secret chambers—without looking exactly like any of them. Look at *L. Blue* from 1961. A roughly heart-shaped form with green tubes emerging from a vertical slot at its center, it invites interpretation but resists any final decoding. Its opening is faintly vaginal and

the tubes may be phallic, but at the same time they hint at something excremental. And indeed, turd piles are a motif in Price's universe of funny shapes. He's happy to draw delight and disgust into the same small package.

Early on, Price moved away from traditional ceramic glazes to acrylic paints in the Day-Glo palette he used for 1963's *L. Red*, a sunset-colored egg with a field of purple unfurling across it. That painted shape is exactly the kind of applied decoration forbidden by the modernist rule that ornament must emerge directly from "truth to the material," meaning, say, the warp of the clay or the drips and crackle patterns of the glaze. But in the L.A. art scene of the 1950s and '60s, modernist dogma came from too far away—New York City and Paris—to carry much weight. Price and his artist buddies, guys like Ed Ruscha, Billy Al Bengtson and

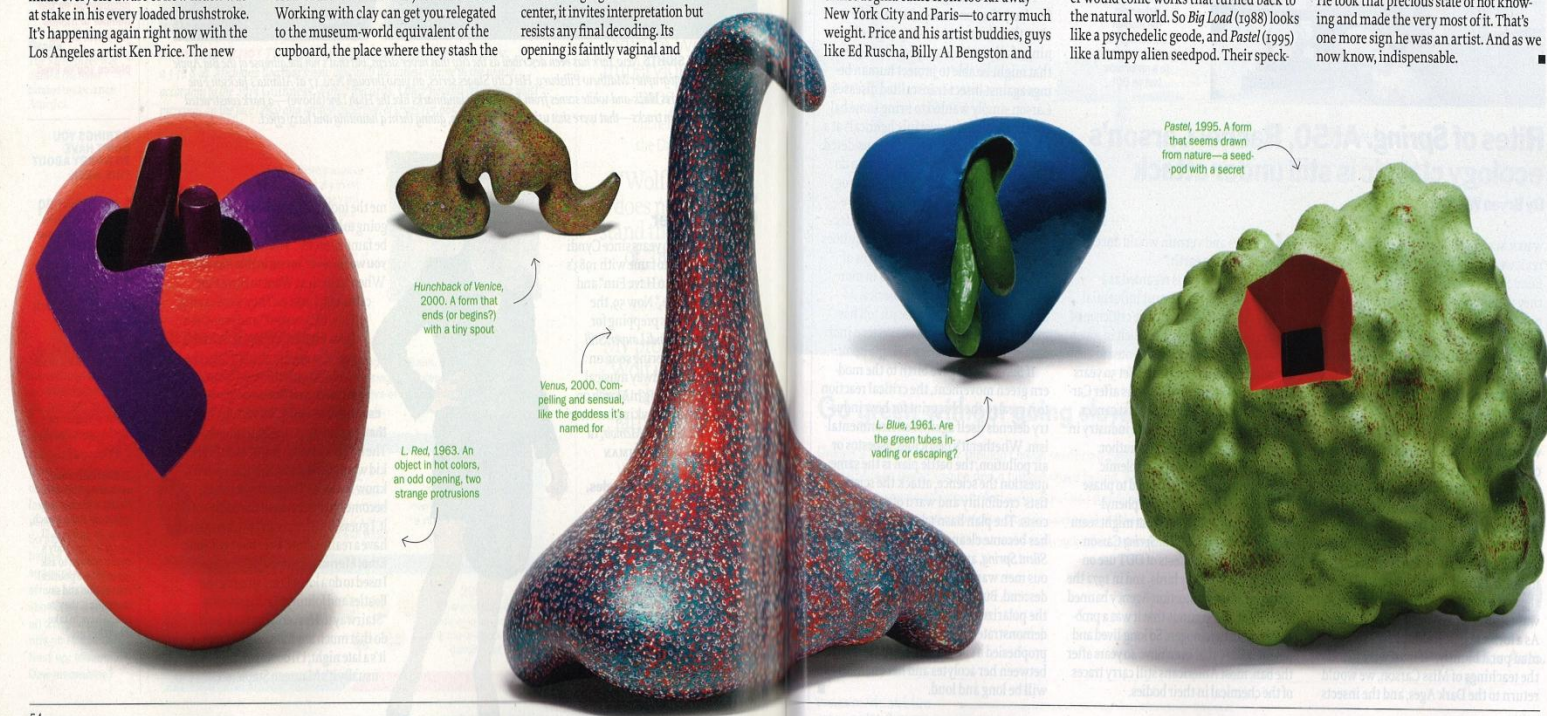
Larry Bell, were learning more from local surfboard glazers and auto-body spray painters.

So Price felt free to go on investigating what happens when you combine suggestive forms and shock-corridor colors in work that could be deeply serious and laugh-out-loud funny at the same time. (Does it help to know that his father assisted in developing the two-stick Popsicle for Good Humor? There were a lot of oddball molds around the house where Price grew up.) In the 1970s and '80s, he moved on to an architectural language of sharp-edged, irregular geometry built from smooth planes of contrasting color, each object offering an abrupt angular opening: a doorway into a black void. Later would come works that turned back to the natural world. So *Big Load* (1988) looks like a psychedelic geode, and *Pastel* (1995) like a lumpy alien seedpod. Their speck-

led surfaces, produced by painting and sanding down each work dozens of times, could resemble some hybrid of granite and frogskin.

And over the past decade or so, Price just cut loose entirely. Pneumatic cartoons like *Hunchback of Venice* and *Venus*, both from 2000, take the pleasure principle out for a long, loopy ride. He was working in what looked like sheer ectoplasm, in larger and freer forms, with associations that might be both anatomical and art-historical. Some of the last works are like merry thought balloons, floating shrewd proposals about life and death.

Price once said, "A craftsman knows what he's going to make, and an artist doesn't know what he's going to make." He took that precious state of not knowing and made the very most of it. That's one more sign he was an artist. And as we now know, indispensable. ■



*Hunchback of Venice*, 2000. A form that ends (or begins?) with a tiny spout

*Venus*, 2000. Compelling and sensual, like the goddess it's named for

*L. Red*, 1963. An object in hot colors, an odd opening, two strange protrusions

*L. Blue*, 1961. Are the green tubes invading or escaping?

*Pastel*, 1995. A form that seems drawn from nature—a seedpod with a secret