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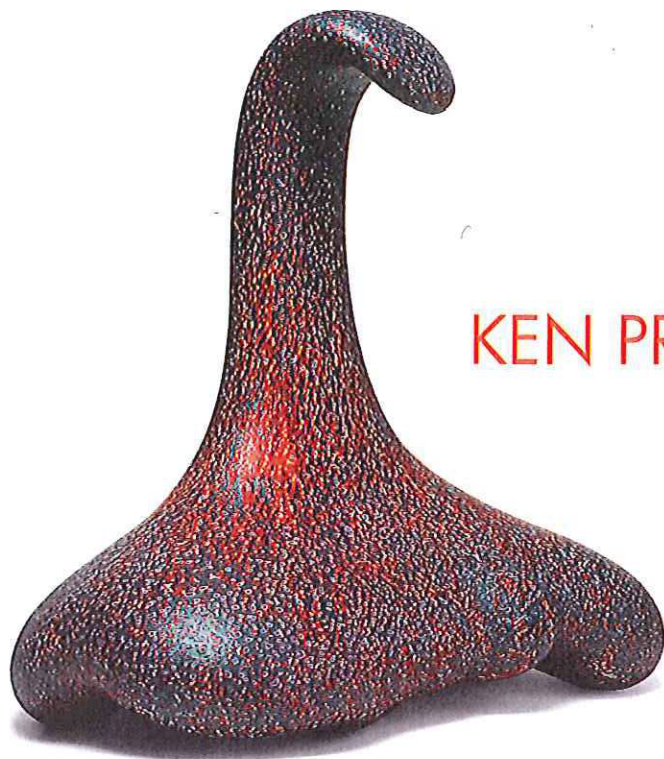
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KEN PRICE / FREDRIK NILSEN

By George Melrod

From the outset of his extraordinary career, Ken Price liked to push the boundaries of what clay—and LA art—could be. From his early mounds and his provocative eggs of the 1960s, through his playful cups and geometries, to the curvaceous, organic, sumptuous freeform sculptures of the last two decades, Price continued to dazzle, challenge, and seduce with roguish good humor and startling technical prowess. The recent exhibition at LACMA, “Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective” which closes January 6—and then moves on to the Nasher in Dallas and the Metropolitan Museum in New York—gives ample testimony to Price’s range and legacy.

It is a legacy that Fredrik Nilsen understands well. One of LA’s best-known and respected art world photographers, Nilsen has made a notable career out of photographing other people’s artworks. For the ambitious catalogue for the Ken Price retrospective, he photographed over 90 of the artist’s works. “I was familiar with his work, but not deeply familiar with it,” Nilsen recalls. “It didn’t take me long to get hip,” he adds laughing. “I just started seeing things in his work that I relate to in my work... I just felt like I grocked.”

Of Norwegian stock, Nilsen was born in California. “I never went to art school or anything like that,” he says. “I’d been living in Europe for a few years, photographing bands.” Eventually, he moved back to LA and got a job in a lab. Around 1989, “some art friends who were out of school asked me to photograph paintings, that’s how I got started.” In 1996, two other active LA art photographers skipped town, and offered him their client list. From then on, all through word of mouth, the jobs began rolling in. For a few years, he was the photographer for MOCA. “I shot a lot of sculptural work,” he recalls. “Mike Kelley, Thomas Houseago, Ricky Swallow... I’ve shot a lot of installations, too.”

During the planning stages of the Ken Price exhibition, Nilsen was brought in to consult about how to shoot and light the work for the catalogue, by its designer, Lorraine Wild. Before long, he was zipping around the country, photographing Price’s works. Some of the pieces

he shot at collectors’ homes, such as the Weisman House in Bel Air; other times, he found the works in storage at other museums such as the Whitney, MOMA, SFMOMA, and the Smithsonian Institution. A lot of the works were shot at LACMA too, when institutions graciously shipped them in advance of the show for that purpose.

Because of the works’ complex, reflective surfaces, Nilsen often had to do multiple exposures. Relighting them differently for separate shots, he then combined different takes on the computer in post-production, with the help of his assistant Adam Fratus. With the most challenging works, the final images combine up to 4 or 5 different shots. “The color folds into the form, and the form is defined by the color, it’s so psychedelic,” Nilsen says. The challenge is “lighting it in such a way that it is not dramatic, and yet it demonstrates the drama of the work, reveals its color and fluidity.” Standing in the front room of the exhibition, amid the shimmering convocation of elegant organic forms, he adds, “I see it as very fluid, both in its colors and its shapes.”

Nilsen leads me over to a work titled *Venus*, from 2000. Coated in shimmering metallic blue stippled generously with red and other colors, in the intricate chromatic camouflage Price was known for, the piece rises from a blobular base like a long, lapping tongue. “This is like surfing to me, I see this when I’m looking to get out on a wave,” Nilsen explains. “I see so much water in what he does, but this one especially.”

“VENUS,” 2000
FIRED AND PAINTED CLAY, 18" x 19" x 15"
LAURA-LEE W. WOODS, © KEN PRICE

“ORANGE,” 1987
FIRED AND PAINTED CLAY, 16" x 15" x 10½"
PHYLLIS AND JOHN KLEINBERG, © KEN PRICE
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