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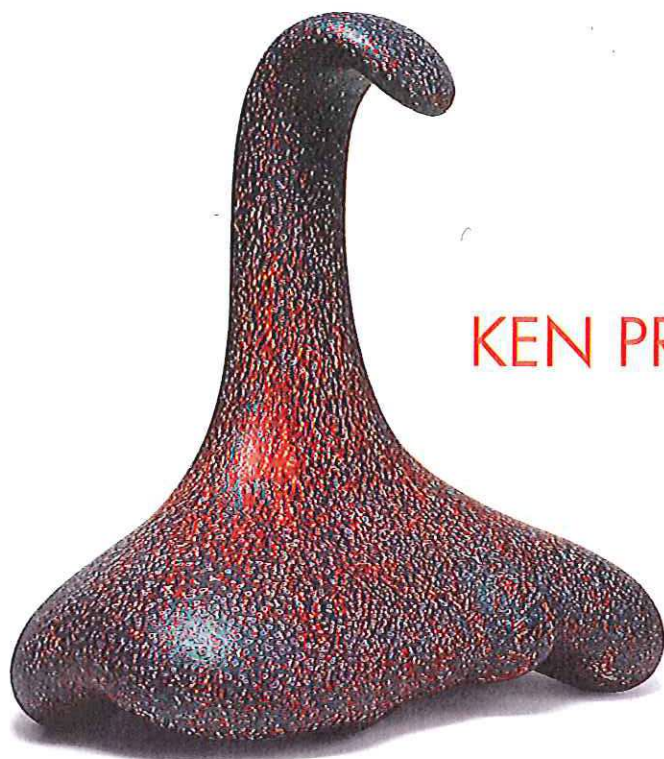
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KEN PRICE / FREDRIK NILSEN

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.

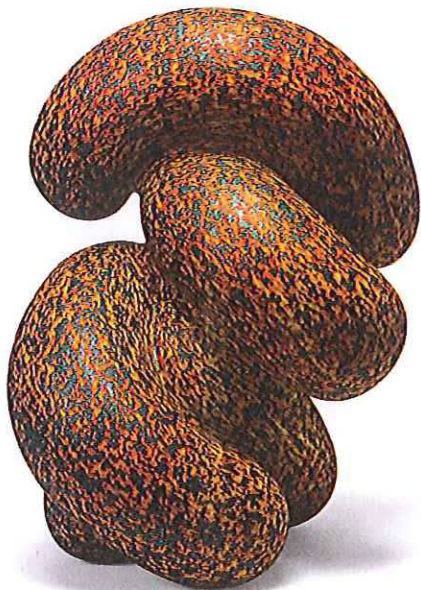
Because of the works' complex, reflective surfaces, Nilsen often had to do multiple exposures. Relighting them differently for separate shots, he then combined different takes on the computer in post-production, with the help of his assistant Adam Fratus. With the most challenging works, the final images 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
ALL PHOTOS: © FREDRIK NILSEN





Price, who grew up in Southern California, had also been an avid surfer, and two men bonded over that when they met, when Nilsen traveled to Taos to photograph his studio. By that time, Price was already ailing from the cancer that would claim him, in February 2012, seven months before the show opened. Yet even with the discomfort and pain, Price remained actively engaged by the challenge of photographing his works, and made an effort to be a part of the process. "He certainly talked about what he thought of the work," Nilsen recalls fondly. "What angles he thought are interesting, and what angles are not interesting." And when he saw the results? "He was very happy," Nilsen says. "He was stoked."

In appreciation of Nilsen's insightful approach, the LACMA exhibition included an AV presentation in a separate room near the middle of the exhibition, where viewers could watch a slideshow of some of his different images to contextualize the works and reveal new details and insights they might otherwise miss. Among Nilsen's images are compelling details of the works' shimmering skins and undulating surfaces, and of the mysterious and suggestive orifices that characterize numerous of his works, including a loose series from the late 1980s to mid-1990s, that offer gloppy multi-hued forms with neat monochrome slices cut out. "I got to look inside!" he jokes impishly. "I've stuck my fingers in those! You think it's solid, but it's not."

Among the most challenging works to photograph was *Yogi* (2011/12), a giant, coiling piece made of shimmering lime-green bronze. One of the last pieces Price ever made, it is also, at its near human scale, among the largest, since the vast majority of his sculptures were ceramic and had to fit in his 2-foot-high kiln. "At the end he started on these really large bronzes. I shot it in Taos, I had high anxiety attacks on that work, trying to figure out how to photograph it."

Why does he do what he does? "I just like the artists, I service the artists," Nilsen replies. "I take my job very seriously. The photograph becomes the artwork in a way, because 99% of people will never see the work. So it's like, sometimes I go overboard, because I have to represent it properly. Because it will become the record of the work."

In fact, Nilsen also works *with* artists, taking photographs for them to use in their work. Besides Kelley, he has made images for Pae



White—for whom he photographed the smoke that the artist transformed into a tapestry—and conceptual photographer Charlie White, working with him on various projects and "casting calls." "He calls me his Director of Still Photography," Nilsen says. Nilsen also has his own art practice; currently he is very interested in images of water. Some of his images are in fact posted online with LACMA, in a section of their webpage in which "Artists Respond" to Price's work.

Clearly, Nilsen responds to Price's work on numerous levels. Asked to pick out a favorite piece, Nilsen demurs. "I love all his late work," he admits. Gazing around the exhibition, he swivels around and points to various works that he admires, one after the other "This one. And this one. This piece is amazing. I think he just got better and better."

"Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective" is on view at LACMA, in Los Angeles from September 16, 2012 – January 6, 2013. The exhibition will then move to the Nasher Sculpture Center, from February 9 – May 12, 2013. Then it travels to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, from June 18 – September 22, 2013.

TOP FROM LEFT:

"KAOLIN," 2011

FIRED AND PAINTED CLAY, 19" X 22" X 17½"

"UNDERHUNG," 1997

FIRED AND PAINTED CLAY, 23½" X 21½" X 16"

"MOUNTAIN BALLS," 2006

FIRED AND PAINTED CLAY, 15" X 13" X 10"

PRIVATE COLLECTION

"WHITEY," 2003

FIRED AND PAINTED CLAY, 22½" X 23" X 20"

COLLECTION ALBRIGHT-KNOX ART GALLERY, BUFFALO, NEW YORK, CHARLES CLIFTON, ELISABETH H. GATES AND CHARLES W. GOODYEAR FUNDS

OPPOSITE:

"Mo" (DETAIL), 2000

FIRED AND PAINTED CLAY

13" X 29½" X 24½"

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