

ART

A show of new paintings by the influential artist Agnes Martin opens Friday at PaceWildenstein in Beverly Hills. The exhibition is composed of 14 acrylic and graphite abstractions, including "Untitled #17" (1995), right.



CON KEYES / Los Angeles Times

BIG STEP: Ken Price, known for small, sensual works in clay, maintains an undercurrent of eroticism in larger pieces unveiled in Louver Gallery exhibition.

Reshaping the Image of Clay

Ken Price, part of a '50s mutinous gang that yanked ceramics out of the world of demure teapots and into the avant-garde, is the subject of an exhibition.

By Kristine McKenna

As the Fabergé of Funk, Ken Price has no rivals," declares art critic Robert Hughes, who describes Price's work as resembling "exquisitely glazed versions of stuff you'd want to scrape off your boot." Touted by critic Peter Schjeldahl as "the most underrated living American artist," Price has long been one of L.A.'s most invisible local heroes.

The subject of an exhibition opening Thursday at L.A. Louver Gallery, Price was a central figure in what's come to be known as California's clay revolution of the '50s. Led by artist Peter Voulkos (the subject of a retrospective at New-

port Harbor Art Museum through Feb. 25), a mutinous gang including Price, Paul Soldner and John Mason yanked clay out of the world of demure teapots and into the avant-garde. Approaching clay as a suitable vehicle for expressing the principles of Abstract Expressionism, the ranking style of the '50s, Price and company liberated clay from the crafts ghetto.

That done, Price struck out on a path all his own. Most of the radical clay work made in the '50s was marked by unbridled machismo—it tended to be big, aggressive and earthy. Working in that milieu, Price had the audacity to make small, discreet pieces infused with elegance, sensuality and wit. A gifted colorist who maintains an ancillary career as a printmaker and draftsman, he's turned out misshapen cups with lyrical glazes that affectionately parody cheap, border town pottery, geometric forms that serve as an armature for jagged planes of primary color, weird hybrids combining industrial and organic shapes, and ominous eggs with maggot forms pushing through fissures in their shell.

Presently completing several bronze castings of abstract forms, Price has also

published books, the most recent of which, "Heatwave," (out last year from Black Sparrow Press), paired 15 silk-screened images of Los Angeles by Price with poems by Charles Bukowski. Bigger news, perhaps, is that Price unveils the largest work he's ever exhibited at Louver. Whereas most of Price's work would fit comfortably in a small tote bag, each of his new pieces occupies an entire tabletop. Undulating forms with hand-painted, polychromatic surfaces that bubble and swell, this work is, however, squarely in the Price tradition in that it throbs with an undercurrent of eroticism.

"Modernism was a puritanical movement that banished many forms of sensuality and pleasure, but I've never understood that kind of thinking—I mean, what's the point of life?," says Price, speaking like the true blue Californian he is.

Price was born in Los Angeles in 1935. "I was an only child; my father was an inventor and my mother was a teacher. My parents built a house in the Palisades when I was growing up, and while the house was under construction we lived in a trailer park on the beach," recalls

the artist, who spent much of the '50s and '60s on a surfboard. "That was a wonderful time to grow up on the shoreline of Southern California, and I've always been real connected to the coast.

"I was one of those kids who drew all the time and wanted to be an artist from the time that I was very young. My dad had a jazz band when he was in college so there was lots of music in the house I grew up in, and jazz is my other great passion.

"My favorite American artist of the 20th century is Charlie Parker and I've listened to jazz just about every day of my life—I think it's affected my art too," he says. "I work intuitively and believe in the idea of skill as a highway to the unconscious. I think you have to master your materials so well that you don't need to think about technical things when ideas start to flow."

Graduating from high school in 1953, Price enrolled at Santa Monica City College, where he took his first clay class. "Things didn't start to percolate for me until 1957, though, when I took a class at Otis taught by Peter Voulkos. Peter was a total onslaught—he'd just

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▶ KEN PRICE EXHIBITION, L.A. Louver Gallery, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice. Dates: Thursday through Feb. 10. Open Tue.—Sat. 11 a.m.—5:30 p.m. Phone: (310) 822-4955.

Price

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dive in, make big powerful work and lots of it."

More important than Voukos' ferocious energy, was his rejection of conventional notions about clay.

"In those days everything was supposed to reflect the inherent nature of the materials, which is an old crafts idea, and consequently there wasn't much colored sculpture prior to the '60s," Price says. "I didn't think it was a big deal to put color on form though; L.A. was the city of cars and of fabrication shops where you could have anything made, so it didn't seem unusual to me to make an organic form then give it an industrial paint job.

"The real pottery tradition of Southern California is Mexican and Native American, but just before I started working with clay, three influential figures—the Japanese art historian Dr. [Muneyoshi] Yanagi, British potter Bernard Leach

and Japanese potter Shoji Hamada—passed through California sowing the seeds of the Asian approach to pottery," he says. "Japan is the mother church of pottery, but their aesthetic has little to do with the ceramics heritage of California—nonetheless, Japanese ideas about clay were hugely influential here in the '50s.

"In a way it was an advantage having these strong traditions to react against, but we didn't set out to overturn the apple cart—we just wanted to make work that had to do with our own time and place."

Things moved fast for Price early in his career. Earning an M.F.A. at New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in 1959, he landed a show at L.A.'s ultra-hip Ferus Gallery the following year.

"I didn't realize there was such a stigma against clay when I started working with it, but I soon discovered it was considered really radical for an artist who worked with clay to show in the same

gallery where painters showed," he recalls. "People seemed equally shocked by the size of my work. People assume big art is important and small art is not. Small work forces the viewer to get uncomfortably close, and some people don't like that because it's harder for them to be critical when they're standing close. It's like lying to somebody when you're looking them in the eye," he laughs.

The same year Price had his solo debut at Ferus, he moved to Ocean Park, where his neighbors included Bob Irwin, Larry Bell, John Alton, John Chamberlain and Neil Williams. "We were really intense when we were young and had a good time together," he recalls. "I wasn't as nuts as some artists I knew but we were all pretty crazed, and by 1963 I needed to cool out, so I moved to Ventura. I got this great place right on the beach so I could surf every day."

Though Price is identified as an L.A. artist, that move to Ventura marked the beginning of a 20-year period during which he was largely absent from California. In 1968 Price married Happy Ward, and two years later the couple moved to Taos, New Mexico. "I wanted to get away from L.A., so we went Taos, then we lived in Massachusetts for seven years," says the artist, who has three children.

Price returned to L.A. in 1989 and now spends summers in Taos, where his wife lives year round. "My work changes dramatically in relation to where I'm living, maybe because I've always looked to nature more than to art history," says Price, who's taught ceramics at USC since 1991.

The influence of the Southwest was certainly central to Price's series produced from 1972–77, "Happy's Curios."

"I came across this curio store in Taos that was filled with the kind of stuff I used to see in the '50s when I'd pass through Tijuana on the way to Baja to surf," Price explains. "Mexican pottery wasn't yet geared toward the tourist trade, and they were producing beautiful stuff then—we didn't realize at the time that we were seeing the final flowering of a great folk art tradition. Part of what killed it off was the fact that the glazes they used were lead based, and the people who made the stuff got sick."

"Happy's Curios"—an elaborate series that involved display cases and an evolving variety of objects—has come to be regarded as the most accessible and greatly loved body of work Price has produced. That it was also the most lighthearted is probably no coincidence. More often, Price's art pulsates with a disturbing undercurrent that's intensified by the crisply beautiful face his sculpture presents to the world. Price obliquely acknowledges that there are indeed demons in these dreams.

"Everything I make has an inside because that's a dimension I really like," he concludes. "I've been working the void for years." □

Kristine McKenna is a frequent contributor to Calendar.

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