



CULTURE MONSTER

ALL ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Sculptor Ken Price captured from all angles for LACMA retrospective

Much care and attention is brought to an exhibition on the late artist, including a catalog with detailed photographs by Fredrik Nilsen.

By Jori Finkel, Los Angeles Times
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Fredrik Nilsen's brilliantly detailed catalog photographs take the full measure of Ken Price's sculpture, to be shown in a major retrospective at LACMA. (Fredrik Nilsen / LACMA / September 25, 2011)

When L.A. photographer Fredrik Nilsen traveled to Taos to visit Ken Price last September, a few months before the artist died of throat and tongue cancer, he did not know what to expect.

Although Nilsen had traveled within New Mexico a bit before, he had never spent time in Taos, let alone on the dramatic 7,500-foot-high mesa where Price had a home and studio with 360-degree views. He had never met the ceramic artist, who first came to fame through the Ferus Gallery in L.A. in the 1960s before moving with his wife, Happy, to New Mexico. And he had not seen pictures of his studio.

"It was incredible — there were boxes of clay, piles of gloves, stacks of sandpaper and dozens of works in progress," Nilsen said. "I walked in and practically had to sit down. It felt to me like it must have felt walking into a Renaissance master's studio."

PHOTOS: Ken Price Retrospective at LACMA

Price, then 76, was weak enough that he did not want to be photographed straight-on, so Nilsen asked for his permission to shoot him from behind watching baseball on TV, a habit of the artist while working. They talked about the Dodgers. Because it was hard for Price to speak, their conversations were brief.

But by that time Nilsen was already getting to know Price in another way. A photographer known for his work with art and artists like Mike Kelley, Nilsen had spent much of 2011 crisscrossing the country to document dozens of Price's sculptures for the catalog accompanying the artist's big retrospective, which opens at LACMA on Sept. 16. (The show later travels to the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas and the Metropolitan Museum in New York.)

Along with shoots at LACMA, Nilsen also visited various storage facilities and back rooms at SFMOMA, the Whitney Museum and Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Albright-Knox in Buffalo, N.Y., and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in D.C. And he entered the homes of private collectors on both coasts. In the end, he photographed all but two of the 93 sculptures in the show. In those cases, he sent off a style sheet with instructions to guide the photographer who did the shoot.

FALL ARTS PREVIEW: Critic's Picks

The result is an exhibition catalog full of large, brilliantly detailed images that reflect the full range of Price's boldly colored ceramics: from the rough-hewn surfaces of his late '50s and '60s pieces to his slicker geometric volumes of the '80s to his celebrated recent work: voluptuous and playful biomorphic forms on which he layered different colors of acrylic paint so that sanding creates a mottled, multi-hued effect.

Nilsen describes these later works, often called "blobs" by the most articulate of art critics, as animalistic in their energy. "It's hard not to anthropomorphize them — they seem like sea creatures or some sort of sci-fi entities." And catalog readers will have the chance to see some of these beings reproduced not just from one but multiple angles.

The show's curator, Stephanie Barron, accompanied Nilsen and his assistant on almost all of the shoots, suggesting different angles and approaches. She also brought this sort of attention, even devotion, to other aspects of the show, creating what she calls "a dream team" to work on a project that had an added urgency and intensity because of Price's illness.

PHOTOS: Ken Price Retrospective at LACMA

Early on Barron asked architect [Frank Gehry](#), an old friend of Price, to collaborate by doing the exhibition design. (A basic goal: to make sure Price's sculptures, many of which are small enough to fit on a bookshelf, do not get dwarfed by the cavernous space of LACMA's Resnick Pavilion.) For book design Barron turned to Lorraine Wild, a leading designer, who in turn thought of Nilsen for the photography.

"I've done a lot of books in more than 35 years as a curator, and I've never had the luxury of approaching [art]works the way we did for this catalog," said Barron, who noted that LACMA received an "early and significant" grant from the Shifting Foundation for the book's production. "Being able to get one photographer to shoot everything is very rare."

It also gave Barron the chance to look at the works in a focused, uninterrupted way and time to think about exhibition display. She remembers being struck by some sculptural details, like how the "windows" of some of Price's more architectural pieces relate to the Taos pueblos. Also, she said, "it was about halfway through the photo shoots that I had an epiphany that the way to present the show was in reverse chronological order."

This decision to lead with the new and end with the old, in exhibition and catalog layout alike, appealed to the artist, she said, for obvious reasons: "Any artist doing a retrospective is most interested in their recent work and least interested in their old work."

But it also makes sense in terms of building an audience for Price's life's work. Starting with recent works in clay, which were shown to great acclaim by L.A. Louver and Matthew Marks galleries and are widely appreciated as sculpture, offers a way to shed new light on his early series of "cups," "eggs" and more traditional-seeming or craft-based ceramic vessels.

For her part, Wild had a rather radical idea for the book design: What if she reproduced all art objects (whether in full or in detail) at actual size? "I'm really interested in what I would call almost a forensic approach to documenting art in books because of the fact that books are the printed record and fixed," she said, describing how you can't always judge the true color or scale of an artwork reproduced on a computer screen. "It's a secret campaign to make sure the book stays valuable, addressing the very place where books can do what other media can't."

According to Wild, Price wasn't sold on the idea because it would make the book too large, so she ended up not going that route. But notions of scale did help to shape her design, which Price had the chance to review (along with the exhibition checklist and display mock-ups) before he died. And the book does have a visual timeline in back that reproduces works at relative scale.

As for Nilsen, he said the photography was full of logistical challenges, like how to set up a makeshift photo studio in a collector's bedroom. "We used the bed as a staging table — a place for our tools and cases," he said.

But the biggest challenge by far was lighting. "I knew from the start it shouldn't be dramatic lighting. Most work of his I had seen photographed had that noir, product-like look to it. I wanted to make the work look like it's in a room with a giant, very diffused skylight, so it feels more organic," he said.

The trick was that several of Price's works are shiny, so that Nilsen's own light sources would get reflected back at him. "The dark, round, glossy ceramic pieces were by far the hardest," he said. "They act like mirrors."

He called "Avocado Mountain," a mossy green vessel from 1959 with a craggy, Japanese-inspired surface, "one of the most difficult pieces I've ever shot." "There was so much glare it would obliterate all the details." His solution was to stage a few different lighting setups, positioning black or gray cards to reduce reflection. He later worked up these different shots in postproduction, essentially creating a composite image.

But Nilsen wasn't especially interested in discussing the technical details of his shoots. He preferred to talk about the power and apparent ease of Price's art.

Artist Robert Irwin once described the happy coincidence of form and color in Price's sculptures this way: "You had the feeling that if you cut that thing in half, it would be that color all the way through. The color was so right, so tuned to the shape, and so informative of the shape that to me, there was real brilliance in it."

Nilsen talked about this phenomenon in terms of "fluidity," mentioning Price's years as a surfer and the wave shapes visible in some of his works. "There's a real fluidity not just in his forms, but in the way the paint is layered, distressed, removed. I see life in it — microbial life and all this energy," he said. "The more I looked at his work, the more I saw the flow of water."

jori.finkel@latimes.com