

Los Angeles Times

Friday, January 26, 2001

Price's Lush Work Defeats Language

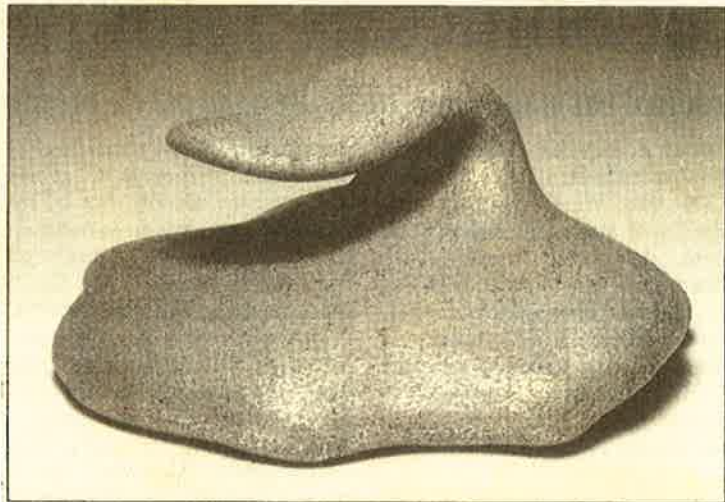
Art Reviews

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT
TIMES ART CRITIC

One of the great art stories of the last decade has been the resurgence of sculptor **Kenneth Price**. Price has made important work ever since the early 1960s, when he was included in the original stable of artists at Ferus Gallery and emerged as heir apparent to Peter Voulkos among artists who chose clay as their principal medium. However, in the 1990s, Price pushed his work into extraordinary new territory, and he hasn't let up since. The 11 new painted sculptures in the 65-year-old artist's exhibition at L.A. Louver Gallery include some of the finest works of Price's long and distinguished career—and some of the finest work being made anywhere today.

The new work may be the sexiest yet. Sensuality and sexuality are recurrent motifs in Price's art. These lush sculptures, most between 1 and 2 feet tall, arrive at their joyful erotic charge through means both splendidly flagrant and subtly refined. Some grab your attention straightaway, making possible the slow dawning of other remarkable effects.

Price's abstract shapes, built from fired ceramic clay, suggest aquatic sources: mollusks, mantas, turtles, cephalopods and other squishy, vulnerable sea creatures. Here they metamorphose into allusions to the sea itself—swells that rise into curling abstractions of breaking waves. Blending animal with environment, figure merges into ground.



L.A. Louver Gallery

In tabletop sculptures such as "Flare," Kenneth Price emphasizes richly saturated color to heighten the form's sensual experience.

Like life forms crawling out of the sea, these aqueous shapes further evolve into male and female sex organs. Phallic and vaginal forms interpenetrate.

Together, they suggest something unforeseen. You find yourself unconsciously responding to works like "Flare," "Mo," "Venus" and "Pacific" by rolling your tongue around behind salivating lips. The overall form in these sumptuous sculptures bears a startling resemblance to the tongue and soft palate in a human mouth.

Price cranks up the sensuous experience ignited by these tabletop forms by emphasizing richly saturated color. Instead of ceramic glaze, each piece is painted with multiple layers of acrylic. The surfaces were then sanded, so that bumps and hollows in the irregular clay topography alternately reveal and conceal the layers of color.

A surface of metallic grape, for example, will be punctuated by a galaxy of turquoise stars, each of which glows around a radiant nucleus of yellow, orange and red. Elsewhere, the surface of an already fluid form seems to erupt into a volcanic flow of fiery hues. Another is studded with tiny flecks in unexpected combinations of orange, cobalt blue and emerald.

Stressing color, Price italicizes the inadequacy of language to encompass sensory experience. Given these sculptures' formal resemblance to human tongues, which seem to have risen up in a futile effort to speak, it's easy to see this new work as a witty repudiation of the primacy afforded language in recent theoretical arguments about art. Price's lush eroticism suggests that, for art, the tongue has less to do with language than with indulging the spiritual and carnal communions of sex.