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 AROUND THE GALLERIES

Off into the world with a playful guide

Ken Price's latest show at L.A. Louver pulls it off with panache.

By David Pagel, Special to The Times

It's rare for an artist to have two solo shows at the same gallery in the same year, but **Ken Price** pulls this off with so much panache that you leave L.A. Louver fully convinced that the 70-year-old artist should try for three in 2006.

Part of the pleasure of the 39 small watercolors in this knockout exhibition involves their relationship to the 10 ceramic sculptures Price showed eight months ago. His compact landscapes have nothing — and everything — to do with his abstract sculptures.

None of the works on paper is a study. In fact, eight depict finished sculptures. Price's biomorphic blobs appear as polka-dotted cartoon characters that have set off on treks through Southwestern landscapes.

The journeys include carefree walks in the park ("Peace in the Valley") and long slogs in the sun ("Twenty First Century Southwestern Art") as well as vivid instances of willful striving ("The Highest"), hangdog exhaustion ("Outdoor Sculpture") and forlorn isolation ("The Trouble With Beauty"). "Hot Bottoms" suggests the joy of being a fish out of water and finding one's soul mate.

All of Price's images stand on their own. Most depict volcanoes burbling over with molten lava or belching dense plumes of smoke into skies of liquid light. They could be windows onto prehistory or glimpses of a post-apocalyptic future. The rest feature mobile homes set in landscapes whose beauty is fierce — so far beyond inhospitable that whoever lives there must be good at going it alone and even better at getting the most out of every scrap of culture.

That's what Price does in his page-size pictures. Each is a concise essay on mutability, a condensed exploration of the ways matter changes from solid to liquid to gas. Volumetric blocks of color play off fluid, wet-on-wet washes and vaporous atmospheres.

In this sense, Price's watercolors are a lot like his three-dimensional works, which are brilliant fusions of sculpture and painting in clay. Likewise, the watercolors combine the instantaneousness of stop-action photography with the textural richness of abstract painting.

They also fuse the graphic clarity of comic strips with the color-saturation of animated cartoons and the sophisticated stylization of 19th century Japanese woodblock prints. It's hard to believe how fresh and easy Price makes it all look.



Road Trip
 (LA Louver Gallery)