

# the village VOICE

By Peter Schjeldahl

## Ken Price: Career Survey

Franklin Parrasch Gallery  
588 Broadway  
Through May 12

**This, the most beautiful show in town,** highlights maybe the most underrated living American artist, Ken Price, with a sampling of his art since 1964. All 18 works are ceramics rarely measuring more than a few inches in any dimension. They are pocket dynamos of serious visual pleasure, powerfully nutritious snacks for intelligent eyes. Their sensibility is lyrical-formalist, grounded in the hedonistic Southern Californian variant of circa 1960s modernist abstraction—dated, in other words, but hardly tired. Can there be a revival for an artist who never had a turn in fashion?

Ken Price, 59, was the star student of Peter Voulkos, the ceramist who in the 1950s bootstrapped a major art in California from a fusion of Abstract Expressionist painting style, Asian craft aesthetics, and congenital pizzazz.

From the start, Price displayed a double instinct for small physical scale, in touch with conventions of cups and other little vessels, and for big frames of formal reference, playing out in clay some untapped potentials of Surrealism and geometric abstraction.

A vessel has an inside and an outside. From that fact, among others, Price has made poetry. The earliest piece here, *Yellow and Green Egg*, is an egg shape whose interior seems unhappy with being sealed off, pushing outward a disquieting tumescence or tumor. (Sexual symbolism comes easily to clay work; in Price it is

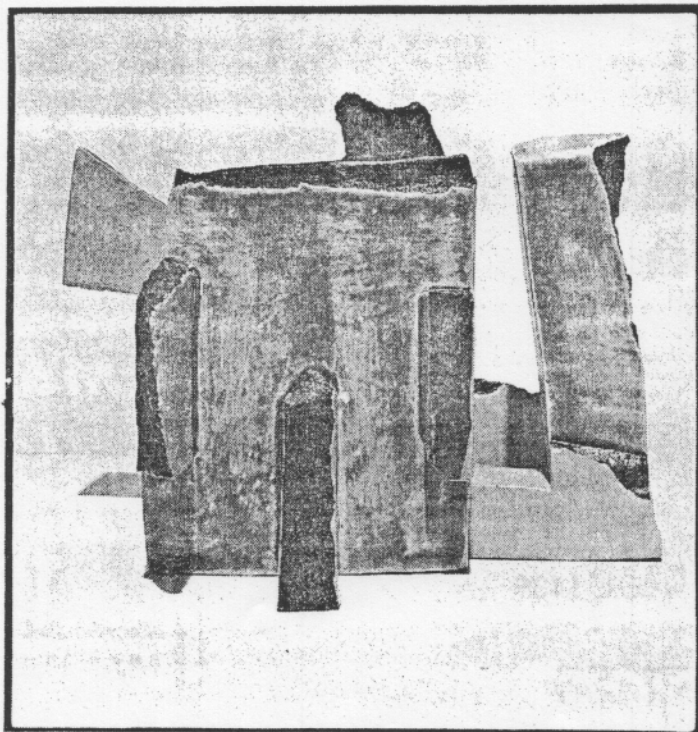
omnipresent but never forced, as second-nature as an accent.) The egg's intense colors, painted rather than glazed, are what you most remember.

An incredible colorist, Price projects a crazy sense that each shape and size in his work is decided by a color's will to make itself comfortable. The glazed planes of his geometric cup forms—an intermittent series since the early 1970s that amounts to a great bonus payoff of modern art—broadcast self-filling glees of color: the joy of a blue to be present in exactly the right amount, snug within a clever

polygon. These objects would fit in your hand, and yet when you are looking at them with open senses they loom, crowding out the rest of the universe.

Price's work of the last decade or so often entails lumpy forms with scumbled glazes—aqua simmering beneath lavender, for instance—with slicing planes of solid color (a dense, sleeping black is frequent) that frame literal holes. In one way, the holes are like portals to all mystery. In another, they announce the pieces as over-qualified vases.

Only a couple of works in the show exemplify Price's vast elaboration in the 1970s of designs from Mexican curio ceramics. That project got denigrated, as either kitschy or somehow exploitative, by people numb to the titanic vitality of Mexican culture



Ken Price: *Slate Cup* (1972)

## Art

and the passionate intimacy of Price's homage to it.

Few artists have suffered more misunderstanding. Price came up in a time of raging New York chauvinism and still must weather the big town's philistine ignorance of ceramics. In the world of '60s style, he was seen as providing, at best, a marginal grace note to the formalist juggernaut of machos like Frank Stella and Anthony Caro. Now the overblown stuff of that era looks worse and worse, and Price looks better and better. ■