





# KEN PRICE

## *Remembered*

*After a prolonged illness, sculptor Ken Price passed away in February 2012 at the age of seventy-seven. Although he did not live to see his retrospective, Price was involved in planning the show and the publication with us until two weeks before his death. He had approved the installation design, read every word of the catalogue, made suggestions about the nature of the illustrations, given us notes on the height of each sculpture we displayed, and even how he would like the works illuminated. On September 12, prior to the opening of **Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective**, LACMA organized a celebration of his life with remembrances by close friends and artists, including Tony Berlant, Vija Celmins, Frank Gehry, Ron Nagle, and Ed Ruscha. We have invited several additional artists to share their thoughts and memories of Price. The comments here reveal the deep impact Price and his work had upon the art community.*

*John Mason and Price studied together under Peter Voukos at the Los Angeles County Art Institute (later renamed Otis College of Art and Design) from 1956 through 1957. Ken Price shared a Venice studio with Billy Al Bengston from 1960 to 1962, and they, together with Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, and Ed Moses, all became friends through the Ferus Gallery. Tony Berlant's friendship with Price began when he saw one of Price's exhibitions at the Ferus Gallery while Berlant was still in high school. In the 1970s, Price purchased a timeshare with Bell in Taos, New Mexico, where he met, among other artists who spent considerable time in the area, Lynda Benglis and Doug Wheeler, who had also become an admirer of Price's work after seeing his exhibitions at LACMA and the Mizuno Gallery. Price taught at the University of Southern California from 1991 to 2001, during which time he met Sharon Lockhart, who had joined the faculty in 2000.*

Stephanie Barron, Senior Curator, Modern Art, LACMA

OPPOSITE: Ken Price, *Balls Congo* (detail), 2003, fired and painted clay, collection of Linda Schlenger, © Ken Price, photo © Fredrik Nilsen

I first met Ken around 1958. I was a student of Robert Irwin at Chouinard. Bob was a friend of Kenny's and introduced me to him at Barney's Beanery, where they used to go. Coincidentally, I had a job at a little coffee house on Sunset very near, and I would go to Barney's after work. I met a lot of artists there—from Altoon to Kienholz. I got to know Billy Al Bengston, and Kenny was his closest pal; they shared a studio together the next year in Ocean Park. I took a studio the next street south, and Altoon moved in next door.

Ken had a studio in a small strip of stores on Robertson. One night burglars pried open Kenny's back door and entered with plans to punch a hole in the wall that adjoined an appliance store. They chose an area where Ken kept his greenware to dry. When Ken discovered the destroyed wall, he called me and I was right there. Ken was picking up demolished plaster and wood when I came in, and I was shocked by the scope of the damage to the room. I asked how much work he lost. He pointed to the other side of the room, "Nothing! Nothing was damaged. They moved everything; the only thing they took from my studio was that photo you gave me." These were pretty sensitive burglars.

Ken was probably the most unique sculptor of the times. From my perspective, he was a giant in my life and the personification of a serious artist with an incredible sense of humor. Ken moved to New Mexico around 1970, and I followed him in 1972. I moved to New Mexico because he moved there. I ended up in the house that he had originally bought, and I lived there for thirty years. When we were younger, we hung pretty close together with a few other bros. When Ken's family grew, I tried not to be in his face, although I know he loved the company of his pals. Knowing that Ken was at work was all I needed to nourish my strength in the studio.

Kenny's awesome skill and totally "off the wall" sense of humor will live with me all my days, and I feel totally blessed to have known him. **LARRY BELL**



To quote my mother:

“Ken was as sharp as a razor  
and as gentle as a dove.”

Ken was always a dedicated and focused artist,  
but never lost the humor in life.

A longer life has some rewards—

one thing that is not one of them  
is writing about friends that have passed.

Ken truly was a gem.

He was clear,  
He was sharp,  
He was amused.

True, we can speak of him as a rare gift  
and a rare and brilliant artist.

Without metaphor—

Without metaphor— **JOHN MASON**



I envied his studio, his music, his studio habits,  
his complete immersion, and his passion for his  
work. Kenny Price was the first and still the best  
contemporary sculptor to employ the full power of  
color: its physicality, its weight, density, and  
unique ability to articulate form and feelings.  
Looking at Kenny's work, you were always touched  
by the color and the unique feeling that if you  
were to break one of his works in half, it would be  
the same intense color all the way through. Kenny  
Price was an artist to whom I owe a great debt...  
and I love him for it. **ROBERT IRWIN**

ABOVE: Ken Price, *L. Red*, 1963, ceramic painted  
with lacquer and acrylic on wood base, San  
Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Evelyn and  
Walter Hass Jr. Fund Purchase, 82.155, © Ken Price,  
photo © Fredrik Nilsen

LEFT: Ken Price, *Snail Cup*, 1967, glazed ceramic,  
collection of Vija Celmins, © Ken Price, photo  
© Fredrik Nilsen

OPPOSITE: Price in Japan, 1962, courtesy the Ken  
Price archives

When I was a young man going to Chouinard,  
I felt lost—certain that I was an artist, yet  
unsure about the meaning of the work I was  
making. The big question that plagued me  
and seemed to doom my every effort was  
“YEAH, SO WHAT?” All these years later, these  
doubts seem overly fraught and kind of  
ridiculous, but at the time, I felt I was in the  
fight of my life to find my way.

I remember vividly when I first encountered  
Kenny Price's works, those magical little  
cups at my friend Riko Mizuno's gallery.  
A beautiful installation that itself became a  
critical part of the experience—completely  
confident and unassuming, it took me from  
the micro to the macro and back. And when  
I saw his show that he shared with Bob Irwin  
at the L.A. County, it truly changed me.  
Here was a guy, who really dug what he did.  
There seemed to be a joy and playfulness  
that lived with a deadly seriousness. The  
sculptures I saw in that show stopped me,  
slowed me down, and I looked, really looked  
at the beautiful complexity of color and  
texture and shape, shapes within shapes of  
these serious yet whimsical sculptures. It was  
a transformational experience for me, and  
one that gave me the confidence to keep  
pursuing my course and permission to find  
some joy in the making.

I feel lucky I was able to finally get to know  
Kenny in the years since. He was an incredi-  
bly generous artist and a true friend to the  
many who loved him. The world he created  
with his work and his beautiful family was  
a continuing touchstone about the best  
way to live and work, something for which  
I will always be grateful. **DOUG WHEELER**

I first met Ken through his work when I saw his  
show at Ferus Gallery, while I was still in high  
school. Each stood powerful—with plenty of room  
for their individuality to shine. I noticed  
a small cactus that looked like a split pebble in  
the gallery window and asked Irving why it was  
there and he said that Ken had told him to point it  
out if anyone asked him to explain the work.  
Ken's work, in fact, remained objects of nature—  
his nature. It was always comforting to hear him  
say “I only provide the labor.” A shamanistic  
mantra—a conviction that a wonderful thing  
would come out of us if we surrendered to our  
impulses and gave all we had to give in following  
them. When I saw Ken's work I thought of him.  
When I saw Ken I thought of his work. Now he is a  
radiant laughing presence, in his work and in my  
memory. **TONY BERLANT**



*Ken is the artist of many forms—a draftsman,  
a craftsman, an abstractionist of primary  
form who always took color and surface into  
considerate detail. Those primary organic  
forms have universal meaning with emotive  
content and energy. I shall miss his presence  
and ongoing conversation.* **LYNDA BENGLIS**

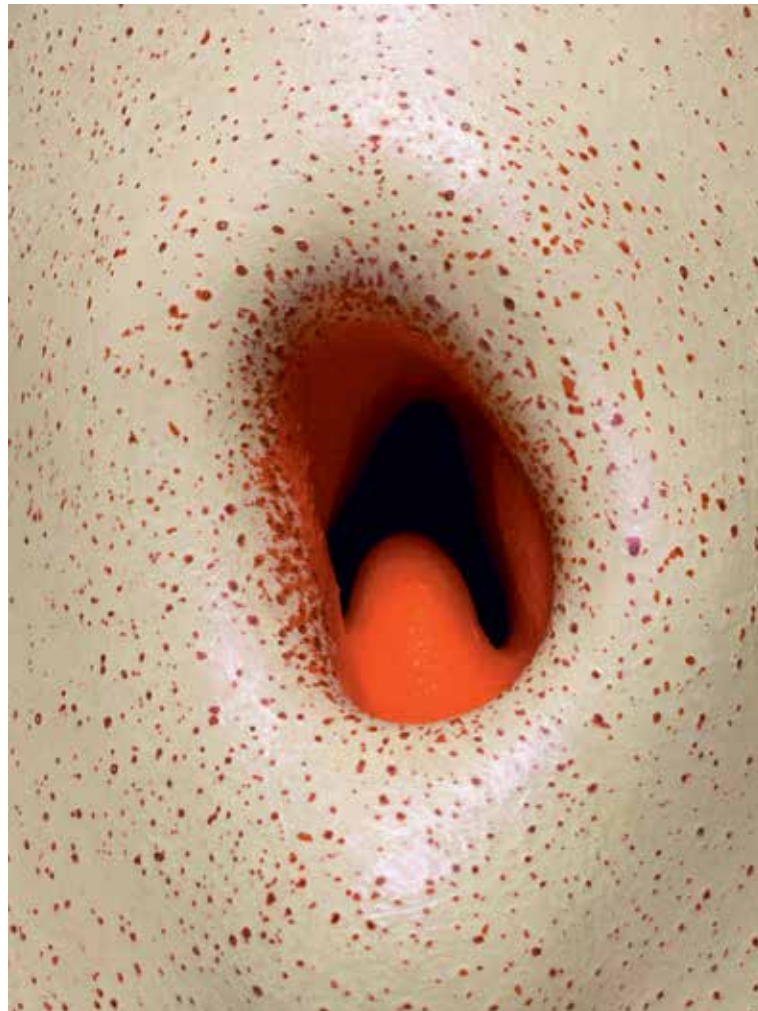
I first met Ken Price in 2000, when I was hired to teach at USC. In fact, he was one of the reasons I took the job. I was honored to be in his presence and to sit in meetings with him. We talked a lot about his house and studio in New Mexico, which he was building together with his wife, Happy. It was his dream, and it was so inspiring to watch it come true for him.

For years, I thought of asking Ken if I could make a portrait of him in an open studio class among a handful of his students. He moved to New Mexico to live his dream before I got up the courage to ask to make the photograph. Years passed, and each week I would walk by the double-decker industrial lockers in the hallway outside of the ceramics studio where Ken had kept his tools and supplies. Left on them was big black vinyl lettering that spelled out "PRICE" on each of the four lockers' doors. I always felt his presence when I walked by them. He was a kind, laid-back man who was eternally inspired. **SHARON LOCKHART**

RIGHT: Ken Price, *Arctic* (detail), 1998, fired and painted clay, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Edward R. Broida, 757.2005, © Ken Price, photo © Fredrik Nilsen

OPPOSITE TOP: Ken Price, *Zizi*, 2011, fired and painted clay, LACMA, purchased with funds provided by the Modern and Contemporary Art Acquisition Fund and gift of Matthew Marks, © Ken Price, photo © Fredrik Nilsen

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Price signing earthenware cups at Gemini G.E.L., February 1992, photo © 1992 Sidney B. Felsen



I FIRST MET KEN IN JULY OF 1953. MY CAMP-SIDE PAD, DOHENY BEACH STATE PARK. HE WAS ON A SURFING SAFARI WITH THE MALIBU TRIBE. FROM 1953 UNTIL 1966, WE WERE AS CLOSE AS BOYS GET ART-WISE AND FUN-WISE. KEN WAS PROBABLY THE BRAVEST AND MOST DEDICATED STUDIO RAT IN THE WORLD OF ART.

HE TOOK FARTHY DE OUT TO FARTHY DE IN. IN OTHER WORDS, MOVE IN SUCKER AND TAKE A CLOSE *LOOK*. **BILLY AL BENGSTON**



Kenny and I used to talk about fishing a lot—we had a fantasy that we shared of going fishing together, though neither of us was much of a fisherman. Anyway, we decided to do it. We got all of this gear, and we hiked and hiked, and the gear was getting heavier and heavier. We hiked up to the edge of this precipice that overlooked a lake and started to go to the edge of this path that curved around. All of the sudden both of us heard a rustle in the bushes, and then a brown bear came out and was sort of pushing his snout around. Anyway, he took off after Kenny, and soon both the bear and Kenny fell off the edge of the precipice. The bear landed on a ledge and was dazed. But Kenny kept falling. After about fifty feet or so, Kenny came out into this perfect dive and pierced the water in the lake. I had taken off running after him down the hill, and I had to stop to take a look down, and there was Kenny at the bottom, sitting buck naked with two trout strung up. He already had a fire going. I had made us a purchase of hand bobs and fishing gear, and his line was bobbing away.

He was an amazing person. He was a driven, poetic man. He had a chance to be a trumpet player, but he approached Chet Baker and Chet Baker told him to be an artist. Kenny also had a tremendous record

collection. Kenny could listen to records all day—Happy said you could slip a plate of food under the door and he'd be fine.



There's nothing more to say. He is total magic. He's a magnificent perpetrator of these forms. He is pure heart and impeccable character.

**ED MOSES**

