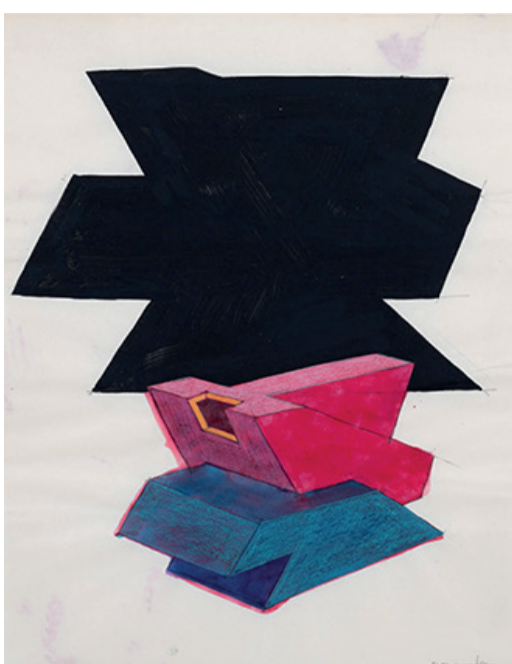


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Ken Price

"Why don't you give Kenny a show?" Vija Celmins suggested to me, as we were preparing her exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Winterthur in 1997. Kenny was the Californian artist Ken Price, whose work I had encountered in exhibitions at Franklin Parrasch in New York and come to appreciate. A show at Winterthur? What a nice idea. However, the context was lacking, as in most European museums, namely the art of the West Coast of America – from Larry Bell to Maria Nordman. A museum's programme should draw and expand on its collection, I was convinced, rather than take place in a vacuum.



And so the exhibition did not happen, but in 2005 I met Ken Price at the opening of John Chamberlain's "Foam Sculptures" at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa. Instead of conducting strenuous conversations in the usual private view mode, Price and Chamberlain withdrew to sit in front of the television all weekend and watch baseball games. Price invited me to come to Taos and visit his studio; Taos was not on my route, so I failed to take up his offer. In 2012, Price passed away. A decade later, Price's work was at last on show in Zurich, thanks to Larkin Erdmann; the introduction to the exhibition catalogue gave me the opportunity to engage with his unusual oeuvre again.



For those who have only seen Price's ceramic objects and drawings at a distance, it may come as a surprise to learn of his connections with Donald Judd and John Chamberlain. Price was friends with both artists from the start of the 1960s, for in spite of the different orientation of their work they shared the aim of transcending the conventional boundaries of art genres in their own practice. When Judd was making plans for the Chinati Foundation in the 1980s, he intended to have an adobe church restored in the desert of West Texas and to invite Price to make works for the interior. Unfortunately, this plan was never realized.



With Ken Price's choice of clay as his medium he kept out of sculpture's mainstream, while at the same time distancing himself from ceramic wares for daily use in an Asian tradition, which were in vogue when he was a student. What mattered to him became evident in the exhibition "Abstract Expressionist Ceramics" in Irvine in 1966; his pieces, in John Coplan's eyes, demonstrated an unconventional translation of abstract expressionist painting into a distinct new idiom. A year previously, Price had shown his work alongside Chamberlain in the exhibition "New American Sculpture" in Pasadena, where it became apparent that there was no fundamental difference between fired clay and welded car body parts, nor between hand-sized and monumental works. Rather, a defining feature of the practice of both artists was that colour played a central role in their sculptures instead of being only a superficial ingredient. The intention was, according to Price, "to make the work look like it was made out of pure color." To this end, Price painted his fired ceramics using a great variety of techniques and then continued to work on them. Under the amorphous surface of these stone-like objects, in which he made an incision, an inscrutable interior of a geometric nature was apparently hiding. The flowing forms of his late works were covered with numerous layers of paint; Price sanded these down in order to reveal the unexpected colour within.



Price was always drawing; at first, the motifs were unmakeable imaginary sculptures. In one group of drawings from the 1990s he depicted cityscapes. In these evocations of Los Angeles, he let the eye wander from interior spaces out of the window to scan houses and street scenes. He paid attention, not only to the motif as such, but equally to the succession of subtly chosen colour hues, which he unfolded with relish. Josef Albers was an inspiration here, as the exhibition "Albers/Price" that Brooke Alexander presented in New York in 2010 confirmed. As Price recalled, he had been drawing for as long as he could remember: "I loved the comics in the newspaper: the color, the drawings, and the story – in that order."

Dieter Schwarz