

Bachelor of Science in Art History and Theory Thesis

Ken Price & The Egg Series  
Phenomenal Transgressions in Post-war Ceramics

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Kenneth Martin Price (1935-2012) was a key protagonist in moving ceramics into the avant-garde realm during the 1960s. At this time, Price made his first major contribution to the expanding field of ceramic sculpture with his *Egg* series. This series represents a significant breakthrough in ceramic sculpture by transgressing the traditions and processes of mid-century ceramics. Post-war ceramic conventions were generally dominated by the craft theories of the folk pottery movement. During the 1950s, Peter Voulkos and others had begun making interventions aimed at broadening ceramic practices, but relied upon the techniques and processes of the very practices they were challenging. Price's *Egg* series, which he made while in league with Los Angeles' revolutionary Ferus Gallery, pushed Voulkos' explorations of clay beyond the limitations of ceramic traditions and processes. My thesis offers critical and contextual analyses of the *Egg* series by interrogating its significance to broader trends in American post-war ceramics.

By the time of Price's death in 2012, his prolific fifty-year career solidified him as one of the key protagonists of 20<sup>th</sup> century ceramic art. Price was born in 1935 in Los Angeles and studied at the University of Southern California, the Otis Institute, and Alfred University during the 1950s for his undergraduate and graduate studies. During the 1960s, Price's unique sculptural language matured in concert with Los Angeles' revolutionary Ferus group with the *Egg* series. This idiom allowed Price to avoid the art market's pejorative connotations of craft and instead be critically recognized as a sculptor throughout his career. His oeuvre is characterized by explorations of vivid color and complex surfaces on intimately scaled, biomorphic and architectural ceramic forms. Common themes throughout his works are ambiguity, abstraction, eroticism, and humor. The *Egg* series epitomizes foundational elements of Price's ensuing career and should be considered as a breakthrough in the formation of his personal aesthetic.

At the beginning of Price's career in the 1960s, American ceramic practices were generally dominated by craft theories promoted by the prevailing folk pottery movement. The folk pottery movement grew out of the *mingei*, or folk art, movement that was advocated for by the British potter-writer Bernard Leach, the Japanese potter Shoji Hamada, and the Japanese philosopher Yanagi Soetsu. These individuals toured America during the post-war period, preaching an ethical-spiritual approach to pottery production and became highly influential on mid-century ceramic practices.<sup>1</sup> In 1950, for example, Leach gave over one hundred seminars in the States, effectively introducing American audiences to East Asian ceramic aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> His renowned treatise on pottery, *A Potter's Book*, was a central technical and ideological text for mid-century ceramists from its publication in 1940 well into the 1970s. Leach romanticized that the soul of the potter is expressed in each vessel and espoused the vocation of rural folk artists whose simple, functional wares he found virtuous. He demanded that potters strive to achieve the standard of ceramic design epitomized by elegant and functional Chinese Song dynasty wares, noting that "a pot should be alive, useful and should have beauty of form and glaze."<sup>3</sup> Leach and his followers used traditional production methods, such as the potter's wheel, to make generally sturdy, symmetrical, elegant, and simple vessel forms. They oftentimes employed monochromatic and subdued earth-tone glazes with minimal decoration. The *mingei* advocates especially espoused the appreciation of pottery through everyday use, not merely through display. Under the influence of this movement, much of mid-century American pottery was resolutely faithful to functional concerns. The restrictive limitations that these individuals imposed on ceramics left little space for non-functional explorations.

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<sup>1</sup> Koplos, Janet and Bruce Metcalf. *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*. Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press, 2010, 216.

<sup>2</sup> Koplos, 217.

<sup>3</sup> Burgess, Sally and Judy Lotz. "An Interview with Bernard Leach" Professional Publications, *Ceramics Monthly*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (January 1964), 17.

During the mid-1950s, Peter Voulkos began using pottery forms and processes for non-functional ends, effectively opening the door for ceramics to be considered a viable material for sculptural explorations. Voulkos had emerged during the post-war period as a successful and nationally recognized studio potter after winning multiple awards for his functional wares.<sup>4</sup> In the 1950s, he rebelled against the craft teachings of Leach, Hamada, and Soetsu while teaching at the Otis Institute. Instead, he looked to the American avant-garde, specifically the Abstract Expressionists. Works such as *Little Big Horn* (1959) and *Rocking Pot* (1956) exemplify his derisive interventions into 1950s ceramic practices. *Rocking Pot* comically violates Leach's notions that a good pot should rest solidly on its base, have a contained volume, and a recognizable function. *Little Big Horn* appeals to the Abstract Expressionists' gestural abstractions by capitalizing on the plasticity and responsiveness of clay. Instead of using minimal decoration to enhance his forms, Voulkos experimented with applied color in glazes and epoxies to violate his forms in a manner akin to his aggressive mark-making. Throughout this period, Voulkos continued using pottery techniques, like the potter's wheel, while his forms eschewed functionality in preference for formal innovations. His forms were oftentimes assembled out of multiple, altered thrown forms and were markedly asymmetrical, bulky, and dynamic. Voulkos essentially built a bridge the art world and the conservative world of ceramics by disregarding the dogmatic functional concerns of many ceramists and adopting the attitude of the avant-garde Abstract Expressionists.

From 1957 until 1959, Price pursued his graduate degree at the Otis Institute and Alfred University. While many individuals who studied at Otis, such as Paul Soldner and John Mason, followed Voulkos' vigorous approach to ceramics and produced large sculptures, Price worked

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<sup>4</sup> MacNaughton, Mary Davis; Duncan, Michael. *Clay's Tectonic Shift, 1956-1968: John Mason, Ken Price, Peter Voulkos*. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012, 42.

more precisely on small scale pottery forms<sup>5</sup>. However, he did absorb Voulkos' revolutionary idea that the conventions of a material were meaningless limitations for the production of art. In 1958, after refusing to complete the mosaic project required of graduate students, Price left Otis for Alfred University to escape Voulkos' heavy influence and pursue more technically focused ceramic training.<sup>6</sup> Alfred at this time was highly conservative pottery school, steeped in the "craft dogma" that Price had so despised during his undergraduate education.<sup>7</sup> At Alfred, Price produced asymmetrical pottery forms and developed a palette of low-fire glazes. The work that resulted from these investigations was in direct opposition to Alfred's standard of symmetrical pots displaying refined craftsmanship and strong considerations of functionality. Price's thesis reinforces his interest in exploring how clay could be exploited for "meaningful expression," with no regard for functional concerns.<sup>8</sup> In his graduate report, Price discusses traditional and contemporary Japanese ceramics as well as ceramic sculpture produced by European painters like Miro and Picasso.<sup>9</sup> This research epitomizes his increasing interest in exploring the relationship of surface, pictorial elements, and form. After completing his degree in 1959, Price moved back to Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles that Price returned to was on the verge of a decade-long transformation from a city with little presence in the art world to what is now seen as one of the most important art capitals of the 1960s.<sup>10</sup> In the mid-1950s, Los Angeles had a critical lack of art historical significance and the galleries, museums, publications, and critics that supported artists. This dearth of artistic institutions is credited as the fertile soil within which uninhibited individualism

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<sup>5</sup> Barron, Stephanie, Lauren Bergman. *Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective*. Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2012, 193.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Price, "A Life in Clay".

<sup>7</sup> Ken Price, "A Life in Clay".

<sup>8</sup> Price, Kenneth "Graduate Lecture" at NYSCC, Alfred University, May, 1959,2.

<sup>9</sup> Price, "Graduate Lecture," 1-14.

<sup>10</sup> Drohojowska-Phillip, Hunter. *Rebels in Paradise: The Los Angeles Art Scene and the 1960's*. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2011.

flourished during the following decade and produced some of the most radical new art of the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> By 1966, when Price was producing his *Egg* series, Los Angeles had the Pasadena Art Museum, the magazine *Artforum*, and seventy galleries in the city.

The Ferus Gallery, founded in 1957 by Ed Kienholz and Walter Hopps, would play a major role in cultivating the city's art scene and artistic reputation even after it closed in 1966. The Ferus Gallery liberally supported radical local artists whose work would precipitate the fall of modernist aesthetics and the rise of multiple dominant movements of the 1960s including Light and Space, Minimalism, and Pop Art. Modernist aesthetics, formulated by prominent American art critics like Clement Greenberg, imposed a strict theoretical framework for avant-garde art that demanded medium specificity, autonomy, and formalism. The Ferus group, however, had little regard for these restrictions and consistently undermined many of the main tenets of this aesthetic framework.

The Ferus artists irreverently transgressed the stifling restrictions of post-war aesthetics during the late-1950s and throughout the 1960s. Medium specificity, Greenberg's notion that resolutely divided sculpture and painting, deteriorated rapidly as Ferus artists treated canvases as physical objects and physical objects as canvases. Individuals like Robert Irwin and James Turrell were exploring to how surface and color, whether applied or intrinsic, could articulate, contradict, subsume, disguise, or transcend form. Artists like Andy Warhol, who had his gallery debut at Ferus in 1962 where he showed his *Campbell Soup Cans* (1962), explored serialized pop cultural imagery. Others, like Ed Kienholz, explored installation art, violating the materialist autonomy of art objects. Performance art also became prevalent, further violating the division between art and life that Greenberg had espoused. Many of these artists consistently employed new materials and processes for artistic ends, made possible by Los Angeles' flourishing car

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<sup>11</sup> Drohojowska-Philip, 134.

culture and aerospace industry. The “cool, semi-technological, industrially pretty art” that defined the “L.A. Look,” the “Finish Fetish” school, and much of the West Coast avant-garde became synonymous with the activity of the Ferus Gallery.<sup>12</sup> The interventions and innovations of the Ferus artists exemplify the 1960s trend away from divisive modernist aesthetics towards the inclusive, inventive, irreverent, and impulsive field of post-modern sculpture.

During the 1960s, Price lived with a cohort of Ferus artists in Venice Beach.<sup>13</sup> This bohemian atmosphere provided the ideal site for Price’s iconoclastic exploration of ceramics, now far from the craft dogma that surrounded his education. Like his neighbors Billy Al Bengston, Larry Bell, Dewain Valentine, and James Turrell, Price began exploring issues of surface and perception with great intensity. Price, Bengston, and others looked to then contemporary Los Angeles culture for color, surface finishes, and imagery instead of antiquated and distant artistic traditions. The sculptural languages that they developed during this time broke from the subdued color of both modern and traditional sculpture, more readily reflecting the radiant surfboards and slickly finished cars of 1960s Los Angeles.

The Ferus Gallery represented Price from 1960 until its closing in 1966 and played a significant role in his maturation as an artist. During this time, Price became critically recognized as a fine artist, avoiding the pejorative connotations and inherent restrictions of mid-century ceramics, craft, and the decorative arts by being exhibited at a fine art gallery. Price was given three solo exhibitions, in 1960, 1961, and 1964, and a duo show with Robert Irwin at the Pasadena Art Museum, through Ferus connections, also in 1964. Developments in his work,

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<sup>12</sup> Plagens, Peter. *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1974, 120.

<sup>13</sup> Venice Beach in the early 1960s was “a decaying wreck of peeling paint, ostentatious stucco and stinking sewers. Its proximity to the beach, however, and its cheap rents, made it attractive to every type of alternative lifestyle follower, including artists, writers, musicians, student drop-outs, dope smokers, Zen masters, vegetarians, gay men, and lesbians.”<sup>13</sup> Shrank, Sarah. “The Art of the City: Modernism, Censorship, and the Emergence of the Los Angeles’ Postwar Art Scene,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Los Angeles and the Future of Urban Cultures (September 2004), 674.

from his first solo show in 1960 to his museum debut in 1964 exemplify his radical abandonment of ceramic forms and processes. Price's large asymmetrical vessels evolved into a series of lustrous and mysterious biomorphic ceramic forms. The *Mound* series that he exhibited in 1960 had distinctive pottery elements, such as glaze, lids, contained volumes, and stable bases. The *Mounds*' lumpy topography is decorated with expressive and calligraphic tool marks and glazes in subdued tones. In stark contrast, the *Eggs* that he exhibited in 1964 were unrecognizable as ceramic objects and were finished with precision and clarity in intense colors.

Price worked on the *Egg* series for just under a decade from 1960 until approximately 1968. In each work, Price explored and developed different combinations of colors, pictorial elements, internal components, and surface finishes on generally ovoid, egg-like forms. The *Eggs* are all resolutely diminutive, rarely larger than twelve inches in any dimension. A majority of the *Eggs* are mounted to wooden bases, providing them with a sense of weightlessness. Price titled his *Eggs* with rather un-descriptive titles, for example *L. Blue, Green Egg*, and *B. G. Red*, which are devoid of any expressive or emotional reference other than their dominant color schemes.

The *Egg* series marks a distinct break from the forms and processes of mid-century ceramics. Throughout the series, Price resolutely abandons the relationship of form and function and normative ceramic anatomy, instead experimenting with the evocative capacity of biomorphic egg forms with various strange protrusions. Price obfuscates any recognition of normative ceramic processes through a variety of surface finishes. The exteriors of the *Eggs* are coated with exuberantly colored automotive lacquers and decorated with sleek biomorphic pictorial elements. The formal characteristics of these objects do not associate with conventional



ceramic objects and become conceptually enigmatic by virtue of their inability to be readily categorized.

Price's colorful *Eggs* challenge easy categorization by through their irreconcilable juxtapositions of form, content, and surface. This ambiguity creates and foregrounds a perceptually indeterminate encounter for the viewer. The *Eggs*' coloration and surface decoration reference threatening zoological coloration, while also being equally reminiscent of bright Californian surfboards and alluring hamburger joints. The *Eggs* are sometimes severely geometric but often feature internal components and carved apertures that conversely appear more readily organic. These interior elements emerge subtly and oftentimes resemble phalluses, alien embryos, luminous larvae, scatological concretions, and other arguably repulsive biological entities. These *Eggs* consequently appear paradoxically natural and unnatural, geometric and organic, seductive and vile, celebratory and ominous in stark contrast to the conventionally simple appearance of folk-inspired ceramics. Instead, Price's *Eggs* destabilize any single categorization and become epistemologically ambiguous.

Ken Price's *Pink Egg* (1964) is a prime example of the *Egg* series. *Pink Egg* is vividly polychrome, with a mainly pink exterior broken up by smaller regions of yellow, teal, and orange. Its materiality is indistinct due to a variety of surface finishes and no visual artifacts from the making process. Pictorial elements fragment its surface and create a strong visual emphasis on a sharp amoeba-shaped aperture on its lower portion. This aperture reveals a jumbled cluster of murky green capsule forms inside the *Egg*'s shell. *Pink Egg* resembles an egg in both form and scale, with visual incongruities that readily destabilize such a simple categorization. Price has mounted the form to a white wooden pedestal, leaving the *Egg* standing weightlessly vertical.

Price's use of color in the *Egg* series was unique in then contemporary ceramic practices by breaking away from the use of ceramic glazes and raw clay. Through synthetic paints, such as automotive lacquers, which lack any history on ceramics, the surfaces of Price's *Eggs* avoid classification and foreground a unique experience of the work. Synthetic paints afforded Price a level of control in color and surface texture that would have been difficult to attain with conventional ceramic glazes. Glazes also have distinctive qualities that make them recognizable and reveal the underlying material as clay. In addition, Price was able to create an object that was fully covered in paint by not using glaze for his surfaces. Ceramic objects, of course, can feature glaze everywhere except where they rest in the kiln, to prevent unwanted fusing. Price's luminous synthetic paints intimately unified with his forms, appearing as "if you cut that thing in half, it would be that color all the way through."<sup>14</sup>

*Pink Egg*'s exterior surface's polychrome coloration is used as a formal device to increase ambiguity between the natural and the unnatural by referencing both zoological warning coloration and seductive pop cultural designs. Applied bold pink paint dominates the exterior surface of its form until the lower half where two graphic undulating banding lines in subdued teal and saturated orange demarcate, in high contrast, a smaller section of striking yellow. This coloration is reminiscent of biological aposematism, or pigmentation that warns of potential danger, and color schemes designed for purposes of sexual selection and seduction. *Pink Egg* employs a color scheme that is found on venomous tropical creatures, though never on their embryotic shells. These references reinforce the biomorphic character of *Pink Egg*. On the other hand, the synthetic paint Price is using reflects the vivid coloration of custom car paint jobs and commercial products, denoting a more alluring rather than threatening subject. In this way,

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<sup>14</sup> Barron, Stephanie, Lauren Bergman. *Ken Price Sculpture: A Retrospective*. Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2012, 31.

Price's use of surface coloration discretely evokes contradictory referents, both biomorphic and industrial, that disrupt one's recognition and categorization of the object, adding a sense of ambiguity.

Price has given tremendous attention to how the surfaces of these *Eggs* articulate their materiality. While normal vessels and sculptures by Voukos immediately declare they're nature as clay objects, Price deftly disguised the clay's materiality by fusing industrial finishes with organic forms and surfaces. When the pieces were fully formed and unfired, Price repeatedly sponged the surface of the grog-laden clay. This process removes the fine-particles and reveals the larger grog particles, leaving a complex organic topography on the surface of the form.<sup>15</sup> These understated textures complicate the visual examination of the objects. This idiosyncratic quality of clay that Price has adeptly exploited homogenizes the surfaces of the *Eggs*, disguising any artifacts from the formation process. After the firing, Price sprayed or brushed synthetic paints in rich colors, further obscuring their visual association with clay. By confounding the materiality through cleverly concealing the formation processes and avoiding normative ceramic finishes, Price intensifies the ambiguous and biomorphic quality of the *Eggs*.

Price uses pictorial elements to create complex color relationships and visually fragment the surfaces of his *Eggs*. These pictorial elements disrupt the viewer's perception of contour and topography by imitating color schemes and designs from nature. However, Price doesn't copy the mottled surface of real eggs, but rather the threatening designs of creatures in oftentimes isolated, graphic patches. These vivid pictorial elements are often outlined with lines in highly contrasting colors that emphasize the element's profile and color, in addition to providing an illusory effect reminiscent of bas-relief, intaglio, or sgraffito. Price's merging of pictorial and

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<sup>15</sup> This technique would become fundamental to the intense polychrome coloration on Price's biomorphic forms from the 1990s and 2000s.

sculptural concerns through his use of pictorial elements on the surfaces of his *Eggs* is one of his most definitive contributions to 1960s ceramic sculpture. While Voulkos used epoxy and glaze to violate the surfaces of his forms, Price complimented and complicated his forms with applied color. Folk pottery oftentimes used pictorial elements, such as simple patterns and subdued gestural images, in a decorative manner to support and embellish form.

*Pink Egg*'s smooth exterior surface is complicated by pictorial divisions that allude to a variety of natural and unnatural subjects. The *Egg* is dominated by two amorphous sections of applied color that are divided by three thin curvilinear bands. These elements, in addition to the sharp curvilinear aperture, are primarily graphic. All of these features trace the shape of this aperture in the lower portion of the egg's exterior surface. These lines also encourage the viewer's eye to explore the ovoid's smooth topography and curvature. These pictorial elements evoke the illusory topographies and disruptive camouflage of certain animals. Mimicking a common cryptic coloration strategy from nature, the elements have been placed on the peripheral region of the ovoid form to disrupt the perception of its surface and the boundaries of its form. The elements also resemble geological flow banding and evoke false topographies reminiscent of tertiary layers revealed through surface erosion. However, they appear more confectionary than geological in nature. In addition, the lines create a sense of spatial dynamism because they cannot be fully viewed from any single perspective and visually entreat the viewer to move around the form.

The *Eggs* consistently have one or two small apertures that reveal the interior space of the forms. The apertures are generally loose undulatory shapes that range from resembling mouths to amoebas. Most of the *Eggs* have one or two apertures in variable sizes. These openings are oftentimes sharply defined and provide an immediate transition from surface to interior. Price's

unification of color, surface, and form is aided by the aperture's thin edge, where the precision in finish reinforces the unity of the whole.

*Pink Egg's* aperture dramatizes the relationship of interior and exterior. The surface's pictorial elements create a focal effect around this orifice on the form's lower portion. *Pink Egg's* pictorial elements radiate from the aperture, loosely imitating to its shape, in effect framing and visually emphasizing it. The simultaneous contrast and interference of its bold coloration creates an unstable visual effect of projection and recession that embellishes the spatial shift from exterior to interior. The warmest and most overpowering color is the bright yellow that surrounds the *Egg's* aperture. Inside of the aperture, by contrast, is a dimly illuminated dark forest green that helps to further enhance the rich colors of the exterior. This visual intensification reinforces both the spatial and cognitive shifts from its exterior to interior space.

Protruding from the interiors of the each of Price's *Eggs* are a variety of small, slender, and suggestive biomorphic forms. These interior elements range widely in character, but often resemble colorful and abstracted phalluses, vegetables, larvae, organs, fecal matter and other objectionable natural entities. Their surface finishes often provide a strong contrast with the exterior coloration and finish. Sometimes Price inserts them in clusters that can be seen concealed within the dim interiors of the *Eggs*. Other times, they extend enthusiastically out of the apertures. These components are highly allusive and playful, further disassociating the series from then contemporary ceramics. Folk-inspired pottery was supposedly "normal" and "wholesome," in stark contrast to these markedly strange and arguably indecent *Eggs*.<sup>16</sup>

Voukos' sculptures also evoke the human body through artifacts from his performative and

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<sup>16</sup> Mimura, Kyoko Utsumi. "Soetsu Yanagi and the Legacy of the Unknown Craftsman" *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Vol. 20 (1994) 212.

dynamic working process. However, Price's *Eggs* evoke and implicate the body of the viewer in a more abstract manner, without relying on the bodily simulations of Voulikos' gestural mark-making.

Inside of *Pink Egg*'s aperture, emerging from rather murky depths is a chaotic cluster of smooth glazed phallic forms. *Pink Egg*'s interior elements provide repulsive, natural, and bodily associations that contrast with the comparatively sterile exterior form and surface. The semi-gloss glaze finish on these elements makes them appear as if they are fresh, wet, and living, a characteristic that is enhanced by the viewer's inability to see them clearly from the within the *Egg*'s dark interior. Glaze itself is a controlled natural phenomenon comprised of heat induced chemical changes, thus asserting a sense of natural formation to the forms themselves. The subtly mottled texture enhances the exterior's uniform and matte surface, making the exterior appear increasingly unnatural.

*Pink Egg*'s biomorphic form associates with a natural subject, the egg. Eggs imply an interior that has a living being in certain nascent stages and that our interactions with it must be necessarily gentle due to the alleged preciousness of life. In this way, Price's form creates an intimate approach to viewing the *Egg* by evoking delicacy, preciousness, and vulnerability. While Price explored issues of surface widely, the forms of his *Eggs* are more or less consistently ovoid with variable distinctive asymmetries. The interior elements described above precipitate the most variety in form. Certain *Eggs* appear to have been pushed from the inside by these elements, emphasizing an unnaturally rubbery feel that distances the association of hatching eggs, which might normally crack and fissure. Others are more discretely revealed through sharp apertures.

Price's *Eggs* have a strong interplay between their exterior surfaces and interior spaces. The startlingly disparate characteristics of interior and exterior are equally captivating, but operate in different ways and create a sense of incongruity. The notion of incubation and hatching, inextricably tied to the form of the egg, imply that the internal components are in a liminal state of emergence. This juxtaposition creates a tension between the static, stoic, stable, and upright exterior and vulnerable, disorderly, and potentially active innards. The interplay of shells and their contents adds an air of mystery in that the interior space is spacious, inaccessible, and occupied by curious elements that are never completely visible. There is only a suggestion of what is going on inside. While pottery often deals with issues of containment, display, and volume, these enigmatic, industrial phalluses are a far leap from the typical vase's bouquet. The *Eggs'* interior elements facilitate a more confounding encounter than that expected of pottery and, more significantly, of post-war sculpture in general through their enigmatic reveal and suggestive characteristics.

The *Eggs'* small scale stimulates an alluring and intimate sensual encounter. The *Eggs* generally range in size from six to twelve inches at their longest dimension. Ceramic sculptures, like those of Voukos, relied on their monumentality to transgress ceramic conventions and the art market's pejorative connotations of mere decorative art. In contrast, Price's intimately scaled forms are more typical of decorative objects. Due to this scale, the viewer must approach the *Eggs* to inspect them fully in order to attempt comprehension. This personal examination contrasts with the dominating effect of Voukos' work and is more aligned with conventional encounters of ceramics. While conventional pottery, similarly small in scale, engages with haptic seduction and motor simulations in, for example, the haptic appeal of a mug's handle or how a pot's edge reveals how heavy it might be when lifted, Price's *Eggs* confound the familiar

encounter of ceramic objects. The *Eggs* become alluring, not imposing, and allow the viewer's body to dominate and envelop the work. This notion of seduction, especially of the body's visual and tactile senses, is intrinsically erotic.

Barely the size of a cantaloupe, *Pink Egg's* small scale plays with natural and unnatural associations. The *Egg* is 6" in height, 5.37" in width, and 5.62" in depth. Its proportions match eggs found in nature, though in comparison its size is rather large. Instead, it finds relatives in prehistoric eggs that are showcased in museums of natural history. In this way, it remains natural, but is associated with the unknown, mysterious, or alien. With the association of the unfamiliar, Price adds a sense of trepidation.

Price has distanced himself from normative ceramic displays by exploiting a modernist form of presentation. Price's *Eggs* lack any stable base and are instead mounted on custom-made wooden plinths, which allow them to retain verticality and visually levitate, further obscuring their actual, and indeed obdurate, materiality. This method of display is typical of modernist sculpture aesthetics, which attempt to create an autonomous space for sculptural objects.<sup>17</sup> The pedestal also distances Price's ceramics from the realm of domestic pottery and other decorative or utilitarian objects.

Price's careful manipulation of each element of the *Eggs*, from scale to presentation to materiality, evinces his interest in perceptual issues and the beholder's specific experience with the *Eggs*. As the *Eggs* are enigmatic and ambiguous, they invite inspection and consistently reveal new characteristics. Price's subversion of materiality through surface finishes plays with the subjectivity of objects, blurring the line between what the beholder encounters and what the object actually is. Each *Egg's* simple appellation gives the viewer no insight into its potential

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<sup>17</sup> Fried, Michael. "Art and Objecthood" *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. The University of Chicago Press, 1998, 148-171.



meaning. Instead, the meaning of the work is manifested in the far more complicated interaction between the object and the beholder. Price's superb balancing of suggestion and abstraction provides the *Eggs* with a strong sense of ambiguity, indeterminacy, and incongruity. These elements induce heightened states of awareness by fracturing the perceptual process of recognition. As Lucy Lippard eloquently stated in 1964, Price's *Eggs* "follow the 1960s trend away from art as object to art as experience and idea, though [Price] remains grounded in the production of objects."<sup>18</sup> The *Eggs* provide a rich experience, akin to virtuosic musical performances, in which names and words become insufficient. Price's *Eggs* ask us to set aside notions of stable interpretation for a rich voyeuristic experience saturated with celebratory eroticism and ominous mystery.

Price's distinct handling of each element of the *Eggs* breaks away from ceramic traditions. By manufacturing highly subjective, unfamiliar, and destabilizing experiences with his *Eggs*, Price eschews the conventional notion of post-war ceramics being, as Yanagi Soetsu wrote, "simple," "austere," "unconscious," and "honest."<sup>19</sup> Instead, Price's objects are visually complex, extravagantly colored, consciously produced, and dishonest about their materiality. The *Eggs*' visual ambiguity is uncharacteristic of most ceramics, as pottery forms generally present their potential functional roles immediately. Simultaneously, Price pokes fun at pottery practices by using the nature's archetypal vessel, the egg, as the basis of his iconoclastic series.

The *Eggs* resolutely eschew any fidelity to the conventional processes of ceramic practices that Voulkos had exploited. The expressive artifacts of process that Voulkos and the Abstract Expressionists used as primary veins of content became irrelevant to Price's aesthetic. Folk pottery as well oftentimes bore artifacts of the maker's hand, for example with throwing

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<sup>18</sup> Leider, Philip and Lucy Lippard. *Robert Irwin, Kenneth Price*. Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1966.

<sup>19</sup> Mimura, 212.

lines and gestural decoration. Instead, Price de-emphasized process and emphasized surface finishes. Price essentially took Voulkos' irreverence for pottery traditions a step further by melding a disregard for conventional ceramic processes with the slick, impersonal, non-authorial, and luscious qualities typical of the "Finish Fetish" school of the Los Angeles avant-garde. Instead of focusing on the traditions and processes of pottery, Price centered his explorations purely on issues of surface, form, color, and the object's encounter. However, Price's *Eggs* avoid being categorized purely as "Fetish Finish" due to his exploitation of perverse and ominous biomorphic elements that are uncharacteristic of other "Fetish Finish" artists' work.

Price successfully pushed ceramics beyond its steadfast reliance upon traditional craft foundations. His innovations in this traditionally conservative realm, through the exploitation of then contemporary artistic strategies, allowed him to compete with and become recognized as a major figure of the 1960s sculpture avant-garde. In Maurice Tuchman's anthological survey exhibition of 1960s sculpture, *American Sculpture of the 60s*, Price was one of eighty featured sculptors who were chosen for their unique contributions to the field of sculpture and to evince the fertile diversity of American sculpture during this period.<sup>20</sup> Price's *Eggs* exemplify multiple emergent trends of 1960s art through their appropriation of common materials and industrial processes, and the overturning of the aesthetic division between sculpture and painting. In addition, his work reflects the increased interest and sensitivity to scale, color, materiality, and the implications of viewing and perceiving sculpture that were being explored by many artists in the avant-garde, including Claes Oldenburg and Donald Judd. Despite his affiliation with these broader trends in 1960s sculpture, Lucy Lippard proclaimed that at the time "no one else, on the

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<sup>20</sup> Tuchman, Maurice. *American Sculpture of the Sixties*. Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967.

East or West coast, [was] working like Kenneth Price.”<sup>21</sup> The confounding work that resulted from Price’s unique combination of the “Finish Fetish” style and abstract biomorphism was an exception during the 1960s.

Price’s *Eggs* epitomize the personal idiom that he developed with the Ferus group during the 1960s. This unique sculptural idiom would remain dominant throughout his career and lead to the solidification of his role as a key protagonist in 20<sup>th</sup> century ceramic art and as a major figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century American sculpture. Right until his death in 2012, Price maintained his progressive exploration of clay’s possibilities for aesthetic expression and continued developing his remarkably distinctive sculptural language. It is thanks to the dedicated labor and innovations of individuals like Ken Price that we have such a fertile field of ceramics today.

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<sup>21</sup> Leider, Philip and Lucy Lippard. *Robert Irwin, Kenneth Price*. Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1966, 30.

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