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Critic's Choice Magic of Ken Price sculpture comes alive in Boyle Heights art gallery's first show



"Ken Price: A Career Survey, 1961-2008" installation view at Parrasch Heijnen Gallery in Los Angeles. (Parrasch Heijnen Gallery)

By **David Pagel**

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If you missed "Ken Price: A Retrospective" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2012, you missed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The magnificent survey was a joy to behold: Jampacked with masterpieces that Price made from 1959 to 2011, it made the case that Price was not only one of the most important artists to have come out of California but that he was one of the most important artists of the 20th century, period.

To get a taste of his genius, visit "Ken Price: A Career Survey, 1961-2008," the inaugural exhibition of Parrasch Heijnen Gallery. As thrilling to visit as the retrospective (which included about four times as many pieces), the Parrasch

Heijnen survey zeroes in on the way Price's pieces play so well with one another.

The LACMA retrospective did that by laying out the numerous bodies of work Price (1935-2012) made over a half century. It did that chronologically. Here, a mix-and-match strategy is embraced. It's brilliant.

Four hefty pedestals stand in the nicely proportioned main gallery. Each is about the size of a banquet table. Atop each rests four, five or seven modestly scaled ceramic sculptures.

On one exemplary pedestal, each of its five pieces was made in a different decade and represents a distinct body of work. Together, "S.D. Violet" 1967, "Untitled (Two Part Geometric)" 1974, "Untitled (Rock)" 1984, "Whisper" 1997 and "Deuce" 2004 demonstrate the range and focus of Price's oeuvre. No two look alike. The contrasts work wonders. A visual symphony unfolds. Similar time-defying magic happens on the other three pedestals.

Ablaze with more colors than can be found in the rainbow, the acrylic and lacquer surfaces of Price's pieces come in eye-popping combinations: Powdery pastels and tough metallic sheens share space with bright, shiny primaries, spunky secondary colors and to-hell-and-back tertiaries.

Their silhouettes and contours trace shapes and forms that are even wilder. Geometric perfection and cartoon goofiness rub shoulders. Sinuous curves, which are bulbous, swollen and sexy, cohabitate with craggy edges and jagged fragments, which recall geological formations.

A comical frog and a larger-than-life-size snail adorn a pair of functional cups. But most of Price's terrifically inventive works are abstract. Pods and blobs predominate, some suggesting sci-fi life forms and others resembling gelatinous masses that creep along, like slugs. Plump, 3-D drips could be the super-sized siblings of those in Jackson Pollock's paintings. Molten lava and melting ice cream also come to mind.

If Richard Diebenkorn had designed the surface of the earth, some of Price's sculptures look as if they were plucked from it. Others resemble tangles of snakes, piles of sausages or lumps of scat in a palette more gorgeous than nature's. Profound generosity lies at the heart of Price's art. That sentiment is enhanced by this compact survey. None of its works was in the 2012 retrospective. None is for sale. All have been borrowed from private collections. Don't miss this show. Then go again.

Parrasch Heijnen Gallery, 1326 S. Boyle Ave., Los Angeles, (323) 943-9373, through March 8. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.parrasch-heijnen.com