

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Kathy Butterly and the Aesthetic Challenge of “No Two Alike”

By John Yau
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Here is a partial list of the shows devoted to ceramic sculpture that anyone living in Manhattan could have seen during the last year: *Ken Price: Sculpture* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (June 18–September 22, 2013), which I reviewed for *Hyperallergic Weekend*; *Joanne Greenbaum: Sculpture* at Kerry Schuss (May 2–June 2, 2013); *Betty Woodman: Windows, Carpets and Other Paintings* at Salon 94 Freemans (May 7–June 15); *Alice Mackler: Sculpture, Painting, Drawing* at Kerry Schuss (June 9–July 26, 2013); *Arlene Schechet: Slip* at Sikkema Jenkins (October 10–November 16, 2013); *Mary Frank, Elemental Expressionism: Sculpture 1969–1985 & Recent Work* at DC Moore (November 14–December 21, 2013), for which I wrote the catalogue essay; *Lynda Benglis* at Cheim and Read (January 16–February 15, 2014).

Current exhibitions include: *Jiha Moon: Foreign Love Too* at Ryan Lee (February 1–March 15); *Norbert Prangenberg: The Last Works* at Garth Greenan (February 27–April 5, 2014), for which I also wrote the catalogue essay; and *Kathy Butterly: Enter* at Tibor de Nagy (February 27–April 19, 2014).

I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that ceramics are finally beginning to get some serious attention in New York. There is still a very long way to go, but the city does seem to be waking up to ceramics as an art form. Whether this change is momentary or part of a larger paradigm shift remains to be seen. As I see it, the stakes are high. For in the debate between art and craft, between de-skilled conceptualism and a skill set, ceramics has always been slighted. For some thinkers, a pair of dirty hands can be equated with a weak mind.

When Ken Price was asked if ceramics were art or craft, he said, “yes.” His take-no-prisoner’s response challenges the deeply entrenched attitude that the mind (conceptual art) is superior to the body (everything that isn’t conceptual art). In a domain of art making that appears to be dominated by women, is it any wonder that not a single New York museum (the Ken Price retrospective, organized by Stephanie Barron, originated at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art) has attempted to address what is going on in ceramic sculpture? One reason for this glaring absence might simply be that there is no curator in New York who is interested in ceramic sculpture or who is qualified to assemble a historical survey of what has been going on in ceramics on the East Coast since the beginning of this century.

Kathy Butterly’s current show, *Enter*, at Tibor de Nagy confirms what I first thought when I reviewed her previous solo show, *Panty Hose and Morandi*, at the same gallery for the Brooklyn Rail: “Kathy Butterly is an American original whose closest forbearer is George Ohr (1857–1918), ‘The Mad Potter of Biloxi.’ The formal traits she shares with Ohr include a penchant for crumpled shapes, twisted and pinched openings, and making (as Ohr was understandably proud to point out) ‘no two alike.’ Working within the confines of the fired clay vessel, Butterly has transformed this long established, historical convention into something altogether fresh and new, melding innovation to imagination so precisely that it is impossible to separate them.” To this earlier observation, I would now add: For this and many other reasons, Butterly is deserving of an in-depth museum survey.

Consider the intersection at which Butterly has chosen to work, and you get a sense of her ambition and genius. While maintaining a modest scale, she continually reinvents the fired clay vessel (cup or vase) in ways that exceed anything anyone else has done in the medium. From the unique base to the distinct body (creased, collapsing, convoluted and twisted), to the diverse surface, which can run from smooth to craqueled, often in the same piece, to the saturated color (sunshine yellow, fleshy pink, Veronese green and fire engine red), to minute details (yellow lozenges the size of an elf’s pat of butter), everything (including the spills and stains) in a Butterly sculpture attains its own particular identity.

In “Scout” (2013), which is less than 4 x 6 x 4 inches, the artist evokes patent leather handbags or soft teapots that might have been used by Alice and the Mad Hatter, not to mention cartoons, female anatomy, some unidentifiable deflatable or unspecified calamity. I don’t think it is too much of a stretch to imagine “Scout” as an unstretched painting lying in a heap, about to be packed up.



Scout, 2013, clay, glaze, 3 7/8 x 5 3/4 x 3 7/8 inches

In a hierarchical domain that has – for decades now – celebrated citations, copies, reproductions of reproductions, put-downs and parodies (or what I have elsewhere called “caboose art”) while heaping praise on the large (the bigger the better) and often shiny products of outsourced or mechanical processes, Butterly is more than an anomaly. She embodies a challenge that large parts of the art world have rigorously avoided reckoning with for obvious reasons. For one thing, she does everything wrong, and she does it with panache. She doesn’t accept that creativity and imagination are dead. She doesn’t align herself with provisionalism, casualism, the indexical or the archive. She hasn’t branded herself with a style or made variations of something successful. She hasn’t joined a club.

For all the attention that her work has received, this is what gets ignored or glossed over: without being nostalgic for the expressionist, heroic, cynical, jaded, vulnerable or victimized “I,” Butterly proves that the death of the author is dead in the water. In contrast to many to her contemporaries, Butterly doesn’t set up her studio in the necropolis to practice an institutionally approved form of necrophilia,

Instead, she packs more conflicting states (humor, awkwardness, self-mockery and tenderness and wildly inventive flights (including sexual fantasy) into one of her flamboyant collapses than many of the big boys can do with withered imaginations but legions of hired help.

Kathy Butterly isn't the first or only artist who elected not fit into a trend or to make no two works alike. Thomas Nozkowski and Catherine Murphy also come to mind. And, like these older artists, Butterly focuses on something that is by now uniquely hers, the collapsed or toppled form. All the sculptures in her current exhibition are crumpled, twisted, folded, pinched or bent over. Sinking into themselves, always without regret, they seem to be succumbing gracefully to the inevitable, like a ballerina at the end of a tragic solo.

Butterly's commemorations of misshapeness contradict a basic assumption in ceramics and, by extension, art, which is it is possible to make a perfect or ideal form, achieve a timeless beauty. The postmodern converse of this ideal, that one can make a perfect corpse (or copy), is well known. Butterly doesn't buy into these models, with their roots in Plato (the ideal) and Aristotle (classification). Rather, she seems to believe that change is central to experience. In shaping her vessels, she folds, bends and twists the clay, recognizing that anxiety, worry and vulnerability are inherent to existence. Unable to escape time and the constant, multiple pressures it applies, she transforms those forces into contours and forms that are simultaneously goofy and shy, fantastic and disenchanting, gaudy and thwarted, sexy and monstrous.

Kathy Butterly: *Enter continues at Tibor de Nagy Gallery (724 Fifth Avenue, Midtown, Manhattan) through April 12.*