

Ken Price

On The Beach

I have always thought of Ken Price as the Glenn Gould of object-makers. Price is less theatrically reclusive than the pianist, of course, but he is similarly predisposed to step away from the spotlight, similarly driven by meticulous eccentricities and beguiled, as Gould was, by the full, intimate grandeur of his practice. Also, he is similarly predisposed to present the world with work that, for all its glamour, bears with it a frisson of discomfort and disorientation, which, for all its mastery, seems to evoke an unknown and slightly alien master. Early on, John Coplans described Price's 'eggs' as invoking 'a strange interplay between the joyful and the ominous. His colour is physically brilliant, almost gaudy, set off against an imagery which would seem to be least congenial to it – that is dark murky, very elemental, and primordial.' Lucy Lippard even detected 'an ambivalent sense of vulnerable hostility' in Price's work (or maybe in Price himself) that I, for one, have never detected, preferring to characterise the 'Price effect' as a serendipitous conflation of 'Yuck!' and 'Wow!' – Yuck first, of course, then, after a pause, the Wow!

There are other resonances, as well, between Price and Gould, the most persuasive of which is the ease with which Gould is described as a musical 'object-maker', and Price as a physical musician. There is also the odd fact that the pianist and the object-maker, each of whom makes works that are virtually site-less, each derives his creative energy from a particular landscape and climate. Where Gould drew sustenance from the bleak tundra of Canada's frozen North, Price's vision is easily sited in the domain of the surfer and the surf, in the soup, slime, mud, and stone of California's beaches, in the crinkled cliffs, coves and tidal pools that define America's western coast. Price's life and work began on this primal, absolute boundary between nature and culture.

You stand on those beaches as if at the edge of the world. On one side, the liquid wasteland of the eternal Pacific retreats out to the horizon and beyond that to the Orient. On the other side, the human infestation of artifacts and architecture spreads inland, gradually losing the ambience of the edge. But when you live adjacent to the ocean, as absolute as this division might seem, the cleavage is never quite so clean. The gentle wavelets easing into Huntington Beach and the swaths that the advancing waves leave in the sand are echoed in the gestural surfaces of the stucco architecture that lines the beach. The egg begets the cup; the abalone shell prefigures the plate. The sleek, streamlined elegance of the amphibians and crustaceans that populate the channels and the tidal pools is echoed, beneath exquisite layers of translucent lacquer, in the lowriders that cruise the boulevards. The atmosphere itself is not a space but a living thing, a particulate ambience within which everything blurs and glows. Palm trees shimmer in the sun shot mist.

Price's work exists at this interface and in this atmosphere. His eggs break out with amphibian tendrils and glow like South Central lowriders. The walls and slabs of his miniature architectural structures are broken after firing so they resemble buildings in the aftermath of a quake, or the broken, archeological strata of Sunset Cliffs. Rocks of clay sport sleek mysterious architectural interventions. Piles of scale-less, vaguely ovoid shapes that resemble nothing so much as cougar droppings, glow like dappled semi-precious stones, smooth with fractal intricacy. Vessels that represent the end point of clay's journey from the liquid thing contained to the hard cup that contains it, are adorned with images of snails, frogs, sea warts, turtles, and other amphibians that acknowledge the vessel's provenance – its source in primal soup where the surfer's ride begins and ends. Designer cups transcend their function and infer their cultural destiny as architecture (which, Price shrewdly reminds us, is only another kind of vessel); they morph into modernist objects that for all their elegance and chromatic élan are hardly cups at all.

Everything is at once blurred, tiny and exquisite, like a *memento mori*. Everything is in transit from soup to cup, from cup to architecture, from architecture back to rough desert, from blob, offal and excrement to 'objects of virtue,' and, in all those instances when the objects do not derive their scale from their use or their implied source, they seem in transit from bibelot to monument. As Price remarks, 'the two most powerful sizes are very small and very large. Small scale has both the connection of intimacy and the fantasy of heroic proportions, since pieces slightly under hand size are easy to visualise as being

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monumental. Part of the pleasure of working small is that the scale of the detail is also smaller, so little changes can sometime make a big difference.'

The process of Price's most recent work is a textbook demonstration of this principle. The shapes of Price's new pieces are best described as blobs, formed singly or collectively bunched. Most of these, if one excepts the shapes that allude to the spoor of beasts or to genitalia, have no perceptible scale. Whatever their size, these shapes resemble one another as a handful of sand resembles the Sahara. The smooth multi-coloured fractal surfaces of these objects manifest an analogous brand of self-similarity. To achieve this effect, Price models the pieces and fires them rough. He then applies about thirteen thin layers of colour in a predetermined sequence and sands the pieces until they are smooth, dappled, and correct. (This process, like most of Price's practice, begins at the beach where sanding down multi-coloured layers of epoxy was the first real innovation in surfboard décor.) For Price's recent work, he usually has to sand down about eight layers of paint into multi-coloured slickness before it looks right. If it doesn't look right, there are five more layers of colour to grind through. The finished objects, which are pretty much blobs, blobettes, bundles and waves, are alluring and actually kind of sexy, because people are self-similar with the world around them and because Price's objects morph all too easily into any size you want to imagine them. Consequently, the objects exist, as Price admits, on the line between bewitching and ludicrous. Price exercises his judgment and throws the ludicrous works away, but the beholder's knowledge of that line, the one between ridiculous and the sublime, is important to him. The beholder needs to know that gaudy decadence is just a step away or, for Price, it doesn't work.

This brings me to the final analogy I wish to draw between the careers of Ken Price and Glenn Gould; that being the specialised nature of their personal constituencies and their public vogue. Neither of them, for instance, has ever drawn much weight with academics, educators, theoreticians and philosophers because you can't teach much about them or predict much. You can only say, with full authority, that Price and Gould can do it, and you can't, and neither can anyone else.

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