

## *In the Flesh*

*So I found  
that hunger was a way  
of persons outside windows  
that entering takes away*  
—Emily Dickinson

From his first solo exhibition at Los Angeles's Ferus Gallery in 1960, Ken Price (1935–2012) brought a noir eccentricity to his lifelong exploration of pleasure and form. Everywhere, eroticism is smuggled in. Take his early ceramic cups from the 1960s, with their phallic and mammary forms, the sensuousness of their openings and handholds.<sup>1</sup> Or his voluptuous, biomorphic sculptures, which evoke endless libidinal descriptions of fleshiness, mounds, organs, cavities, and voids. (Critic Nick Stillman once wrote of the “baseness implicit in their shape.”<sup>2</sup>) And then the works on paper created throughout five decades, haunted and ecstatic, where the surreal features of alternate landscapes gush, erupt, writhe, and undulate. In so many of these scenes, looming shadows imply secrets and underbellies.

Alongside these suggestive works are the explicit ones. Over his career, Price made several hundred salacious images in various formats and media. Women bearing their breasts, opening their legs, or fellating an anonymous figure. These works have not been exhibited to the same degree as Price's sculptures and cool West Coast and desert landscapes; he preferred, for personal reasons, to keep them to himself.<sup>3</sup> This may be the result of an incident in 1969, when the LAPD Vice Squad seized and confiscated his linocut *The Iron Man* (1968)—a blunt, missionary scene that apes the format of popular cartoons—from the exhibition *Erotic Art '69* at David Stuart Gallery, with works by George Grosz, Mel Ramos, John Altoon and others. But the resonance among the forms in the suggestive and explicit works—the thick, boxy rendering of a vagina and a sculpture's slit, for example—is undeniable. It's a moot point, whether the erotica informed the abstractions or vice versa, but they are clearly interconnected, of the same aesthetic and sensual inquiry.

The works by Ken Price included in this exhibition are from the collection of the late Dagny Janss Corcoran, beloved bookseller and archivist, whose West Hollywood store Art Catalogues was a main haunt of the Los Angeles art scene from its founding in 1977. A close friend of Price, Janss Corcoran—whose father Edwin Janss Jr. was a collector and patron of Price's work from the time of his Ferus debut—quietly acquired and privately exhibited this suite of works on paper salon-style in her Los Angeles apartment until she passed in 2022. The works in this exhibition, dating from 1962 through 1989, can largely be counted among the more explicit examples of

Price's oeuvre. (There are also stoic black-and-white drawings; one of an unmade bed in an unsettled room, one of a skull poised perilously at the top of an umbral mountain, another of a truck and car pacing a treacherous mountain road—each of them signaling some kind of uncomfortable aftermath.) Among the images of fantastically proportioned and limber women are those containing unambiguously racist and appropriated themes—these works seem defiantly liberated in their poor taste. We see *calavera* imagery, women variously engaged with sombrero-wearing skeletons.

The erotic, like anything, is always dependent on context. Price himself has recounted an incident in fifth grade when he was reprimanded for drawing dirty pictures, and his parents got him off the hook by convincing the principle he was studying the figure. The period in which many of these works were produced is bookended by fraught legal rulings on the definition of pornography (remember Justice Potter Stewart's 1964 line, "I know it when I see it") and crackdowns on obscenity—David Stuart was subject to two trials spanning nineteen months for his exhibition—and the culture wars that took off in the late 1980s. Perhaps this is worth considering while reading Price's works in this vein—their brazen impulse to see what happens if you actually do the bad thing. His 1989 bubblegum-hued lithograph *DON'T THINK ABOUT HER WHEN YOU'RE TRYING TO DRIVE* illustrates, tongue-in-cheek, his relationship to his dirty thoughts (the directive of the title is for the ears of a driver careening off a cliff). "I pretty much make [erotic drawings] for my own amusement," Price told the writer Joan Simon in 1980. "They're private drawings and I don't care whether or not they're accepted. They represent a great freedom to me."<sup>4</sup> Private images promise freedom from consequences and judgment—freedom from the cliff.

More context: When Price made many of these works, he was living in Taos, New Mexico, where he explored his interest in Mexican folk pottery and roadside shrines. His 1978 exhibition "Happy's Curios" at LACMA featured shrines of functional ceramic objects with related tapestries and works on paper inspired by Mexican curios artisans; they feature appropriated motifs, palettes, and techniques alongside some of the same imagery that appears in his erotica.

The erotic, from the Greek Eros, implies want or lack; a desire for something the desiring one does not have—perhaps, a desire for something one *is* not. Most any erotic depiction then, if it indeed conveys the desires of the author, involves the representation of some one, some body, some condition, that is outside the one depicting it. One is always appropriating, projecting, and inventing in the creation of erotica, and this is why it is always slippery territory to share and promote it. The poet Anne Carson describes eros as a "dilemma of sensation, desire, or value."<sup>5</sup> Representation—and especially representation of bodies giving and receiving and taking—is a project that cannot rid itself of embedded dimensions of power.

On the other hand, one can't really make claims about the universality of erotic impulses. Likely nothing about the erotic is universal. That's what makes it endlessly fascinating, forever streaked with taboo.

Bringing together contributions by multiple artists alongside this specific collection of Ken Price's work, *In the Flesh* opens discussions around what Price's erotica tells us about the artist, ourselves, our current relationship to what should be publicly shared and what should remain private, and how our interpretation of these questions departs from various messy histories. Ranging from a 1914 drypoint by Egon Schiele to Glenn Ligon's 2004 painting *New Pussy Here #1*, on to Kara Walker's 2016 drawing *I'm Only Dancing* and a 2025 painting by Louise Bonnet, these works offer unguarded insight into human nature and all its perverse, absurd, lonely, offensive, cruel, tender, and vulnerable impulses.

—Annie Godfrey Larmon

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<sup>1</sup> Even his impetus to create cups related to pleasure: Price admitted he stopped making them once he gave up his vices of booze and coffee and therefore "lost any connection with the cup." See: Ken Price, "Ken Price with Douglas Dreishpoon," 2005 conversation with Douglas Dreishpoon, *Brooklyn Rail*, November 2018, <https://brooklynrail.org/2018/11/art/KEN-PRICE-with-Douglas-Dreishpoon/>.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Stillman, "Ken Price," *Artforum*, January 2007, <https://www.artforum.com/events/ken-price-4-201018/>.

<sup>3</sup> In the catalogue for Price's 2013 drawing survey at the Drawing Center in New York, curator Douglas Dreishpoon writes that Price was "adamant that the erotic drawings should be excluded from the present exhibition, so that, sometime in the future, they can be exhibited and published on their own." Dreishpoon, *Ken Price: Slow and Steady Wins the Race, Works on Paper 1962–2010* (The Drawing Center, 2013), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Ken Price, interview by Joan Simon, *Art in America*, January 1980, 102–03.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 9.