Art in America

Hirsch, Faye, "Kathy Butterly: In the Studio" *Art in America*, December 2015.

KATHY BUTTERLY

CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Kathy Butterly: The Weight of Color," at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica, Nov. 7–Dec. 23.

Interview by Faye Hirsch
Studio photography by Grant Delin

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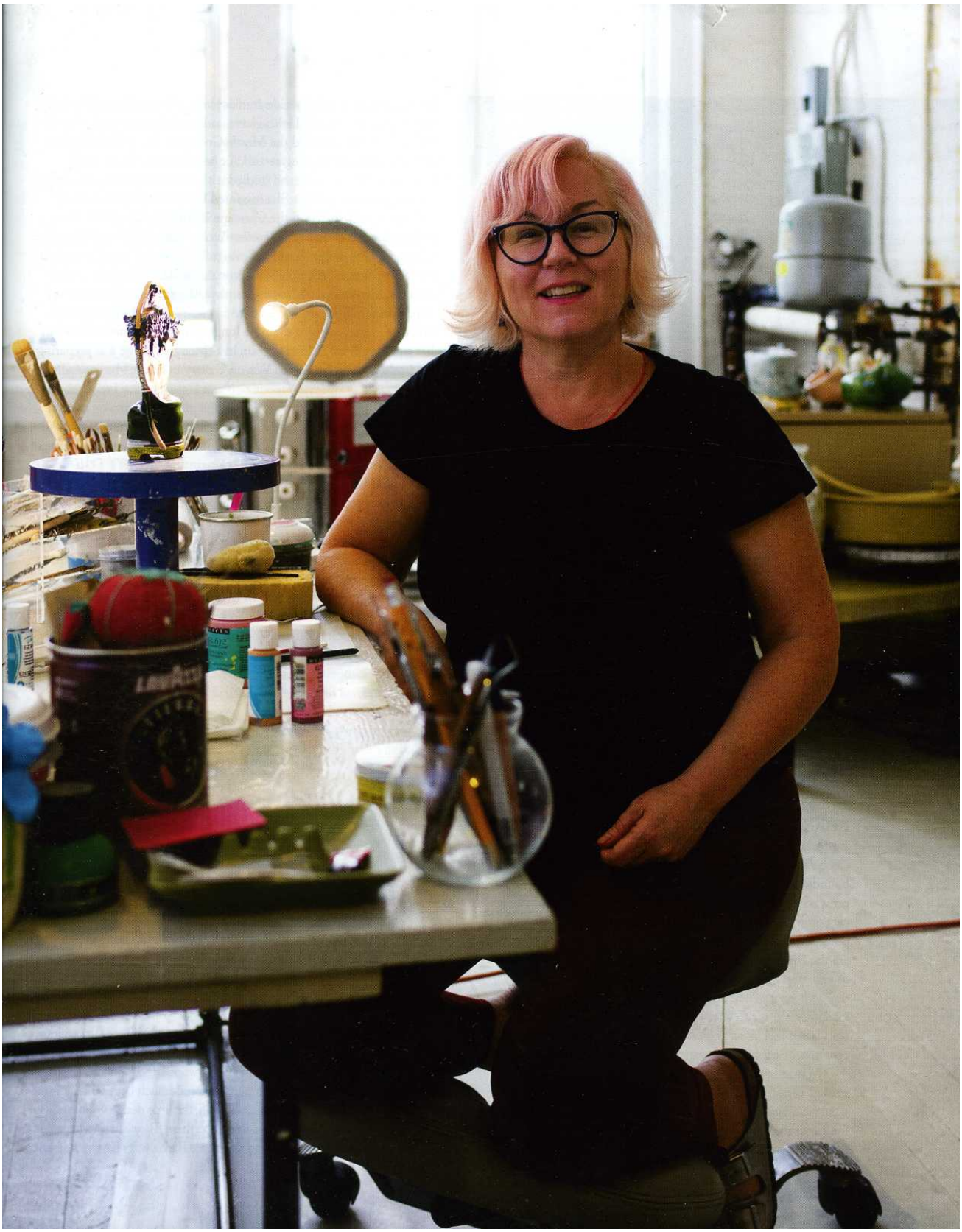
IN THE STUDIO



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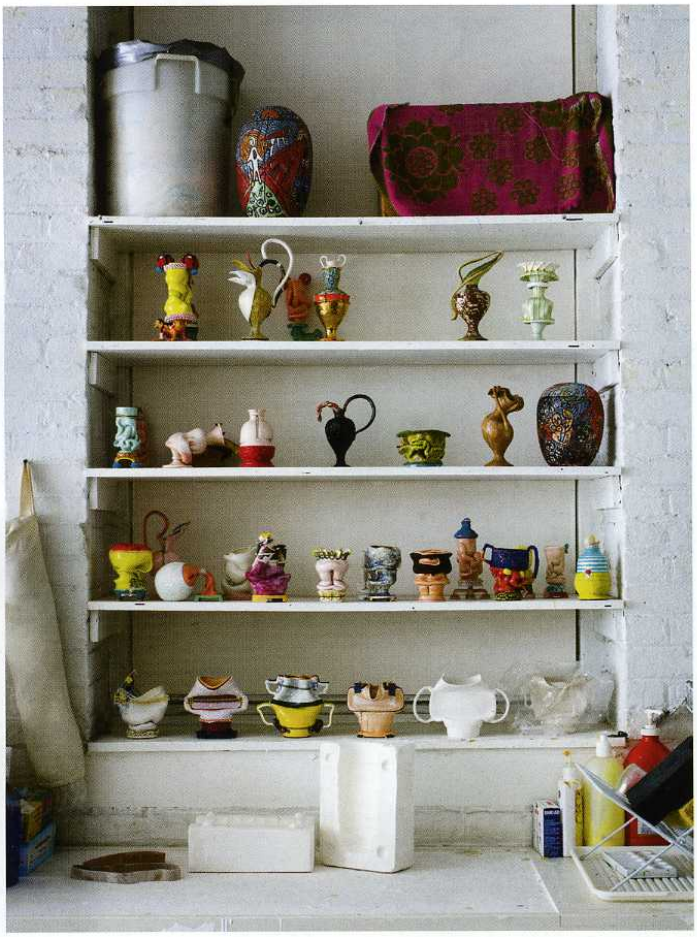


CHANCES ARE THAT you have noticed a piece by Kathy Butterly in one group show or another during her now two-decade career. Though her medium is ceramics, she defies disciplinary boundaries; her objects, despite their small size, exert an undeniable presence in exhibitions with much bigger compatriots, whether in clay or in other materials. Building on organic shapes, mainly in porcelain, Butterly layers numerous glazes in repeated firings to create the chromatic wildness that is among the most striking features of her style. She works slowly and produces only a dozen or so objects a year, so her solo exhibitions are always much anticipated by an almost cultish following. Ranged in rows on plinths, her abstract vessels can feel like a gathering of eccentrics, each with its own vivid costume, bearing and personality.

Married to the painter Tom Burckhardt, Butterly lives in a storied 14th Street building in Manhattan that was the site of a vivid avant-garde scene beginning in the 1960s. It housed studios for artists like Claes Oldenburg and Larry Rivers; other tenants included Yayoi Kusama and Allen Ginsberg. Today Butterly and Burckhardt have side-by-side studios there. Hers is tidy and bright, with large cabinets filled with glazes and small drawers with sample firings. Butterly attended the Moore College of Art in Philadelphia for her undergraduate degree and, for her MFA, the University of California, Davis, where she studied with Robert Arneson, among other well-known artists. She mounted her first solo exhibition in 1993, and participated in the Carnegie International in 2004. Butterly had a solo show at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum, Skidmore College, in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., in 2005, and another at the Yerba Buena Center in San Francisco in 2007. She is the recipient of numerous awards, most recently a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in 2014, which she used in part to acquire an impressive hoard of glazes, many of them no longer produced. I met with her in her studio in May 2015 and again in September, as she was preparing for a solo show at Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Santa Monica.

FAYE HIRSCH You have said that you decide the shapes of your ceramic vessels right away. And that it's really the glazing that creates a situation analogous to painting.

KATHY BUTTERLY My works are three-dimensional paintings in which I have many angles to consider. They start off with a main body in porcelain—that's my "canvas." Then I add color and fire them, over and over again. Every time I fire a piece, I take it out and evaluate it. This dictates the next move. But my process is also like collage, in that I add low-fire clay as I'm going along. The bases are all in that low-fire clay, as are the small additions, like the frills in *Frill Seeker* [2015]. If something doesn't work I just knock it off and start again.

In the last few bodies of work, I have focused on the mouth of the piece—its opening. After 9/11, the works were all about the head, because my own head was so overwhelmed with information and fear. When I was having kids, the pieces were all about the belly.

Frill Seeker took me around 10 months to make. When I finished the form I thought, "Eh, been there, done that." It didn't seem that exciting to me—but there was something to it. I wanted the tendrils to hold color. I wanted to have so much glaze at the bottom that the piece would be like some bioluminescent fish that advertises itself through color and light. That didn't work, but I liked the tendril forms. So I added this frilly lavender stuff on the outside, and then white, and that still wasn't right. I painted on this orange, and I underfired it, so it could become as viscous and gooey as it wanted to be. It was like plastic. When I did that, I knew the piece was done.

HIRSCH It looks almost like a female character with a bad choice of outfit.

BUTTERLY Yeah! But she's flaunting it.

HIRSCH What about the tiny line of beads at the bottoms of some of these? Here the beads are round; on other pieces, they might be cubes.

BUTTERLY It's a way for me to pull you in. You get sucked into the work in a different way—in the way I do. Because I'm sitting here forever, and my world is that tiny. When I work, I focus on a four-inch area—but it's my universe. Each piece becomes much larger than it is in reality. And because the works are so small, the little details count for a lot. There has to be a reason for them to be there. They can provide color, or a way to bring your eye around the piece. They always have a function.

HIRSCH I find a paradox in the scale of your ambition and the drama of your process versus the actual size of the piece.

BUTTERLY Sometimes I have to get in there with a pin.

HIRSCH It reminds me of the work that a miniaturist would have done in Persia or medieval Europe.

BUTTERLY I love the refinement of Indian miniatures. I focus on the necklaces of Renaissance portrait busts. There's a painting in the Louvre by Antonello da Messina showing Christ with the crown of thorns. He has a rope around his neck and you can almost see the blood pulsing in his veins. And there's just a little bit of perspiration. The painting breathes in these details.

HIRSCH Given that you love painting so much, why do you choose to work in porcelain?

BUTTERLY Porcelain has a big personality, a very strong will. You have to make an agreement with the material; it is both luscious and unforgiving. I like that about porcelain. If it cracks, I have to go with the result: we're working together.

HIRSCH And porcelain is strong enough that you can fire it repeatedly?

BUTTERLY Yes—and I do. That's the other thing about clay: there are a lot of rules, but you can break them. Typically, you make your form, fire it once, put a glaze on it, fire it again, and it's done. But I can't do that, so I've figured out how to just keep going. I've never really had a major breakage. The pieces start looking tired, but I like that—it's part of their personalities. If I want to bring them back, give them a facelift, I simply add more glaze and it shines them up again. I've been doing this for long enough that I know how to use these factors to my advantage—well, not advantage, but to make the work speak more intensely. They're fired so many times that they have a history.

HIRSCH Have you always made small vessels?

BUTTERLY When I first started working with clay, I worked huge—like 10 feet tall.

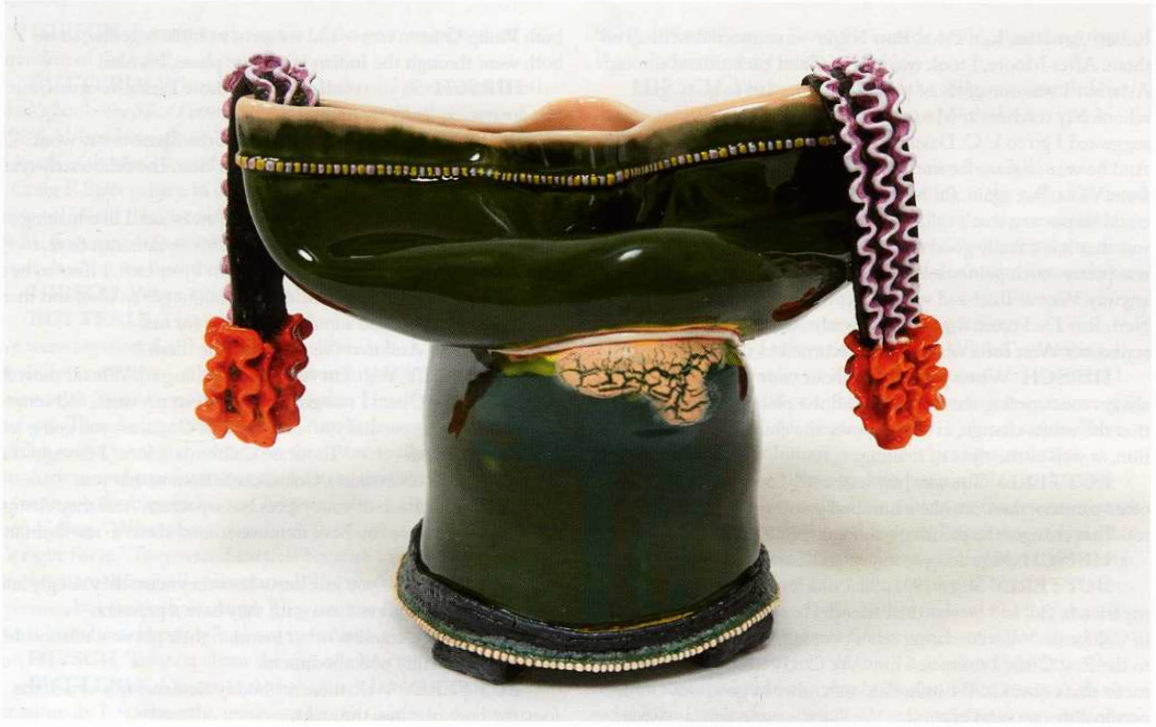
HIRSCH How did you come to the medium in the first place?

BUTTERLY I started off as a painter. I took my first ceramics class as an undergrad at Moore College, because I wanted to make a cylinder to hold my paintbrushes. That's what I thought clay was—utilitarian. So I took the class, and at first I didn't like it. Then Viola Frey came on a visit to Moore.

HIRSCH I'm a huge fan of her work.

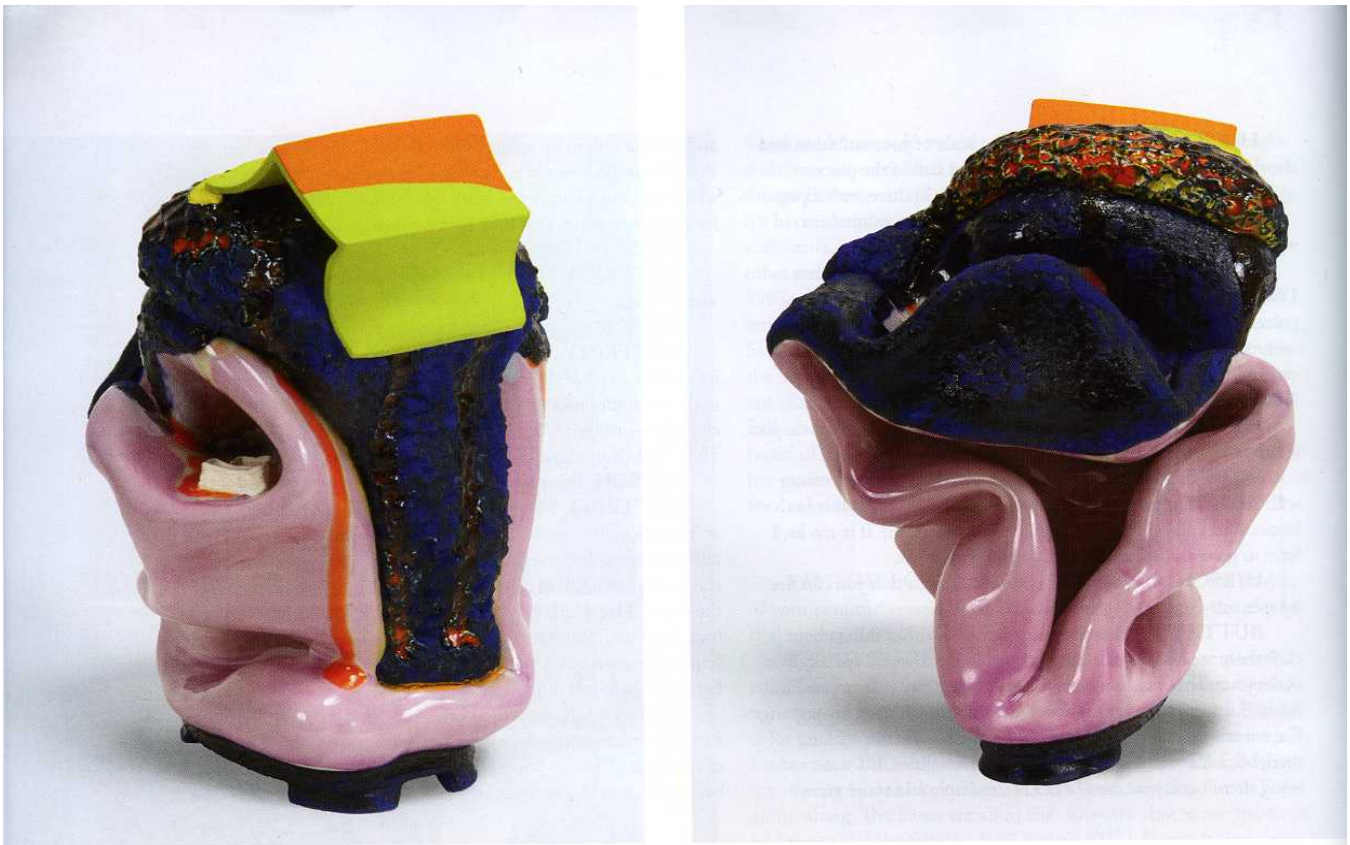
BUTTERLY Me, too. She was so brilliant. She had a show at Moore's gallery, and there were these large figures—10, 15 feet tall—towering over everything. She gave a demonstration in which she took a big hunk of clay, 25 pounds, and whopped it down on the wheel. Her whole body started swaying as she threw a giant base. And then she started talking. She was political, strong-willed, feminist—awesome. I wanted to be really powerful like her. A lightbulb went off: "Oh, *ceramics*!"

After that I worked 24 hours a day. I hid in the building so I could work nonstop. Elsa Longhauser [now executive director of the Santa Monica Museum of Art] was the curator at Moore back then, and she brought in a lot of West Coast artists: Viola,



Frill Seeker, 2015, clay and glaze, 4½ by 4¾ by 4 inches.

All artwork images courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, and Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Santa Monica.



Four views of *Jersey Poe*, 2013, clay and glaze, 6 by 5¾ by 5 inches.

Robert Arneson, Ken Price, Ron Nagle—I connected with all of them. After Moore, I took two years off and backpacked through Asia, but I was one of those people who needed to go to grad school. My teachers at Moore, Ken Vavrek and Jack Thompson, suggested I go to U.C. Davis to study with Arneson, which I did. And he was so great for me, providing a different perspective from Viola. But again, for him, ceramics was art, not pottery. It could be pottery, that's valid, but it didn't have to be. The point was that it is a really good medium for expression. Otherwise, it was pretty much painters at Davis, but that's my comfort zone anyway. Wayne Thiebaud was there, and the sculptor Manuel Neri. Roy De Forest, Squeak Carnwath. After grad school I stayed out West for a while, then I returned to the East Coast.

HIRSCH When people talk about your work, they are always constructing narratives around the pieces. Which means that the works change, in a sense, over the course of interpretation, as well as the time of making.

BUTTERLY The way [my husband] Tom works, or many other painters, there are like a hundred paintings under the one on top. That changes the painting's content. Same thing here.

HIRSCH How long have you and Tom been together?

BUTTERLY Since 1991, '92. I didn't go to Skowhegan but my friends did, and he was their friend. He came out to meet them in California. We were dating other people. When I came back to the East Coast I contacted him. We liked each other's art—I mean that's obvious. We influence each other in good ways. Our personalities are kind of similar. We like the same artists—we are both Philip Guston fans—and we went to India together, so we both went through the Indian miniature phase. It's nice.

HIRSCH So you studied with all those figurative artists, but you are not explicitly figurative.

BUTTERLY There's the essence of the figure in my work.

HIRSCH The link to late Guston is clear. The deliberately crude quality.

BUTTERLY I fully embrace being awkward. I like making work that might make you blush because it's so intimate. Sure, I could hire assistants—I'm often asked. But I just can't. I have to be a part of every process. In one little area, I might get an idea, and that wouldn't happen if I had someone working for me.

HIRSCH And that Guston pink, the "flesh."

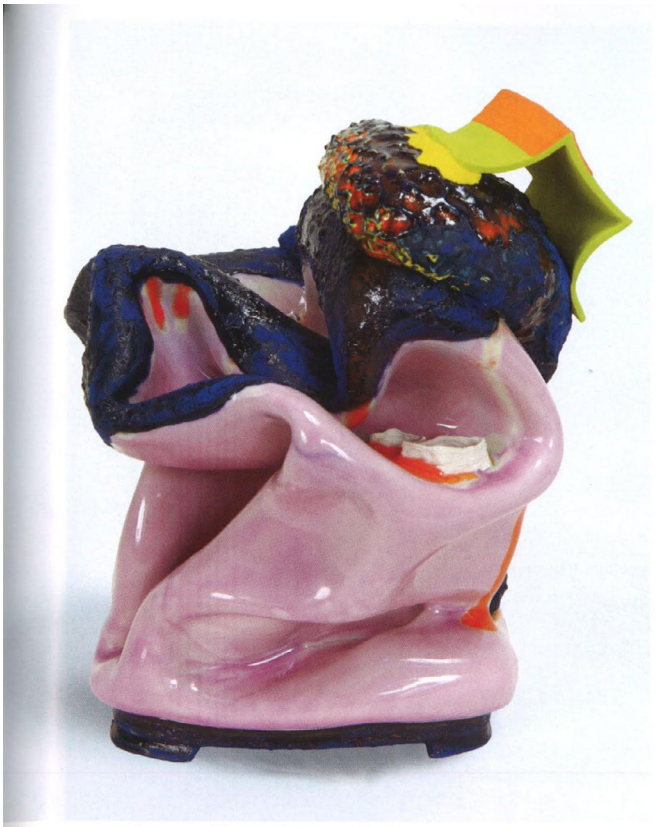
BUTTERLY Yeah. I'm very pro-pink [*laughs*]. When I moved back to the East Coast, I was giving a talk about my work, and somebody said, "Well, now that you're on the East Coast, are you going to start changing your colors? Those are California colors." I thought that was the weirdest observation. Colors come from within you.

HIRSCH Each of your pieces has a posture. And they change, in a funny way, since you have to move around them to see them in all their complexity.

BUTTERLY If you just knew how they start: they're ugly and lumpy, and then I refine them until they have a presence.

HIRSCH Ceramists often mention their physical relationship to clay, to its quality of embodiment.

BUTTERLY Well, there are bodily elements to a vessel: the foot, the body, the lips, the arms.



HIRSCH But artists also speak of the process itself as an extension of the hand.

BUTTERLY When I was in grad school, I discovered Garth Clark's book *The Mad Potter of Biloxi: The Art and Life of George E. Ohr* [1989]. When I saw those images, I started weeping—I connected so much with him. Recently there was a rare show of Ohr's work at Craig F. Starr gallery, in uptown Manhattan. It included these unglazed pieces that the artist considered his best work. You can see his fingerprints in them! That gives me chills. It's what's so great about clay. You see how the mind is working through the hand.

HIRSCH When did you start scaling down?

BUTTERLY I had a boyfriend when I was an undergrad. We were together for five years. Just three days after I got to Davis, he committed suicide. I had been making these really large pieces with insignia motifs from Marsden Hartley carved into the surfaces. Then I also started making tiny little ones, with wounds. I didn't know what they were, but they were really heartfelt. It was Arneson who pointed out their strengths to me. I asked him to come see the big works, and he pointed to a tiny piece that I'd been hiding. "What about that one? That's what you're all about. It's right there." They were heartfelt because my heart was broken. That's where this small scale started. The works are not about that anymore, but that's their origin. They are the right scale because this is how I can better talk about my world.

HIRSCH They are about the size of a heart.

BUTTERLY I know, isn't that crazy? I do work larger occasionally, but when the pieces go larger, they're about something different—more about the outside world, something that I'm *in* rather than my internal thinking.

HIRSCH You have said one of the things you loved about the West Coast artists is that they have a political side to their work. Is that the case with you?

BUTTERLY Each of my pieces takes from half a year to a year to make. Over that period, I'm listening to the radio. I'm aware of what's going on in the world, and that gets in there somehow. There was a piece I made years ago called *Chads*, referring to the flawed ballots in the 2000 election. But I don't want my works to be overt. I want them to be mysterious.

HIRSCH Your titles are always so appealing.

BUTTERLY I have a title idea wall. While I'm working, if I'm listening to the radio, or if something comes into my head, I just write down a word or a phrase and then tack it up. Some of my titles are political. *Middleclassiness* [2015], for example. These issues are serious, but humor is a good way to get at them.

HIRSCH Do you worry when you put them in the kiln?

BUTTERLY Not really. I can anticipate the process, though I always hope that a mistake will happen. I don't want the piece to blow up or anything like that, but I want something to go wrong. Because that's when I get a problem to solve. If I know what I'm going to make beforehand, why bother making it? Here's a piece I thought was done about two firings ago. I got this really gloppy pink on top and I thought "Ah, that's it, it's done." And then I realized that the inside was very hollow, and the piece was about weight. So I poured in a crazy orange to weigh it down. And then

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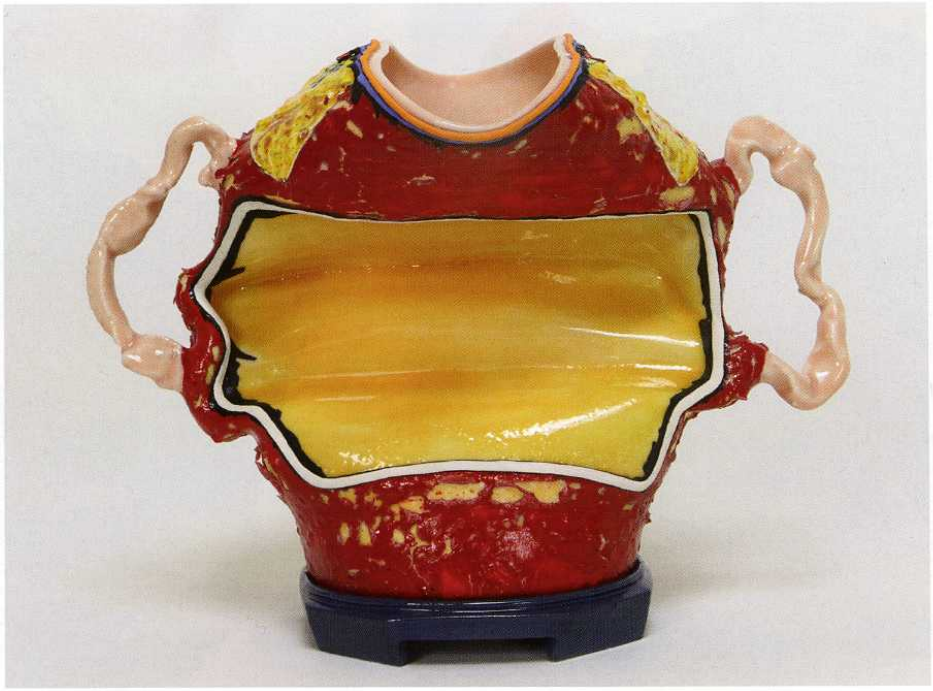

Tough Patty, 2015, clay and glaze, 4½ by 5⅞ by 4⅛ inches.

it was just wrong. So I added beads to give it a visual weight at the bottom. Adding that orangey-red threw everything off. I needed to calm it down, maybe by adding a baby blue—just something gentle on top to make you focus more. You see? I thought it was done, and then I realized it was only half done and there was a lot to get through. That's why they take so long.

HIRSCH Do you know when the glazes are going to crack?

BUTTERLY I do. I manipulate that. But you don't really know what the colors are going to look like until they're fired. It's different from painting, because there's that chemistry—the melting and fusing—and the glazes reacting with each other. It's exciting.

Right now my interest is in the weight of color. It wasn't that way a few years ago; then, my interest was a little bit more in trompe l'oeil. Lately I've been collecting glazes—hoarding color—because I worry that the manufacturers will stop making the glazes. I'm obsessed with color.

Opposite, *Dress Up 2*, 2012, clay and glaze, 5⅛ by 3½ by 3½ inches.

HIRSCH When you say the "weight of color," you mean literally that some colors are light, some colors are heavy?

BUTTERLY Visually some are light, some are translucent, some are transparent. But in ceramic they also can be physically heavy or light, because there will be a big chunk of glaze that actually has weight to it. This is hard for me to explain, but I'm insanely excited about it. I'm using pigment as a building material. Usually you build with clay, but I'm building with glaze. I need to know it's solid color. Glaze becomes the physical weight of color.

HIRSCH So you *are* speaking quite literally.

BUTTERLY Literally, physically and psychologically. Colors do different things to your head. Yellow, for instance, is probably the most intense color in terms of range of emotion. It can make you feel sick, it can make you feel happy. It changes from one piece to another.

HIRSCH Yeah, definitely. I think the yellow is kind of serious in *Tough Patty* [2015].

BUTTERLY In that work there's a pop-abstract line, kind of like in a comic strip. But comic books can be pretty heavy-duty, with political content and such. *Tough Patty* plays with the idea of a superhero.

HIRSCH There's a spiky line on the inside of the piece, giving it an almost fretful quality. Outside there's this solid emblem, but inside there is a worried or electric kind of energy.

BUTTERLY Yeah. And that happened in reaction to the glaze. Do you see how the glaze is peeling? I wanted to throw myself off, so I made the form, and I made the whole form pink on the inside and yellow on the outside, except for the pink handles. I put a layer of dust on the piece, and then I put the right glaze on—a dry red glaze. I knew that something would happen. The dust acts as a resist, so with each firing, the red began pulling away. And because it's been fired so many times, when it pulls away, sometimes it starts falling in on itself and doubling up. It's doing its own thing, and I'm just allowing that.

HIRSCH The dents and the bends in the bodies of your pieces make it feel as though the outside world is buffeting them about.

BUTTERLY These are very tough little objects. They're putting up with a lot, and sometimes they look like they're smiling through it, putting up a stoic front. And they really do literally go through a lot—all those firings. They say, "I'm pretty, but I don't need your help. I'm doing this on my own." ○

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