

REVIEWS

Kathy Butterly

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

ARTFORUM

As an artist whose medium is clay, Kathy Butterly works between two histories: the tradition of pots—of objects that may well be refined but as vessels must also be useful—and the tradition of art, of useless objects that are nevertheless valuable to us because of the meanings embedded in them by the complexities of their appearance. This basic binary seems to have led Butterly to other ones. As a student, she majored in painting, but she was pushed into ceramics, she has said, by an encounter with the California sculptor Viola Frey: “She took twenty-five pounds of clay, whumped it down on the wheel, and started throwing what was going to be the base of one of her fifteen-foot-tall sculptures.” This conversion experience was clearly an experience of power—Butterly’s own word for Frey is “macho”—yet she herself mostly works small: *High Life* (all works cited, 2013), the largest piece in her recent show, is something over eight inches high, while *Dare* is only four. The question becomes how Butterly plants the sense of power she got from Frey in these little things, plainly fragile given their size and their brittle, breakable medium.

One way is color, which in Butterly’s hands is intense. *Wanderer*—an object shaped something like a molar, though a molar set on a low, square-legged pedestal recalling Asian furniture and tableware—has a white-enamel surface, one face of which serves as the ground for drippy areas of dark blues and greens, with patches of bright white and yellow, another for a blotch of red crossed by a rough arc of deepest black. From an aperture on the work’s top, a band of a different white, marked by a scratchy, textured craquelure, runs down toward the base like drool. The tooth reading is supported by the frequency in these works of a pink that suggests flesh, and probably an internal flesh, since the pink’s glossy sheen connotes wetness. These formal and chromatic allusions to the body are another source of the work’s power, particularly because they’re deliberately inelegant: Butterly’s version of the human figure, which her work brings to mind constantly if indirectly, is far from anyone’s ideal, classical or contemporary. Instead, she is interested in the ungainly and awkward, the visceral, messy, and erotic. In this respect, her squat and vivid sculptures remind me of the cigarette-butt figures and animate palette of the painter Carroll Dunham, and seem to me just as effective; and the comparison casts Butterly as one of those artists whose work implicitly undermines the historical primacy of painting, making a claim for the equality of no less ancient “domestic” arts based on such media as fabric and clay.

Of course, works in clay don’t *have* to refer to the vessel form;

Frey made figurative sculpture, as did Robert Arneson, the ceramic artist with whom Butterly eventually studied. But though occasional works in Butterly’s show, such as *Glacier*, are sealed shut, they more often have an opening that relates them to the pot or the cup. Some use a shape like a deli’s paper coffee-cup, a smooth, slightly tapered cylinder with an open top, but Butterly makes no cups as such: These stumpy forms are always squeezed, crumpled, bent over, and while their openings survive this mistreatment, they may become slits, orifices, cracks, expressive mouths, or metaphoric faces—nothing functional. Other works, such as *Chatter*, sprout thin handles to either side, suggesting

figures with arms akimbo. The thinness of the handles makes them look delicate and breakable, a quality that turns out to be its own kind of power—the power of something you’re a little afraid to touch—and this dualism restates another steady tension in these works, between the sensual flow and flex of their surfaces (Butterly recalls George Ohr in the suppleness of her handling of clay) and their assertive, even aggressive presence. In a key work here, with a bulging pink body, tonguelike appendages, and a frilled green neck culminating in a yawning mouth, Butterly seems to have had in mind the Venus flytrap; she titled it *Carnivorous*, and the title is right.

—David Frankel
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Kathy Butterly,
Wanderer, 2013,
clay, glaze, 6½ x
6½ x 6¼”.

