

KATHY  
BUTTERLY

# LOTS OF LITTLE LOVE AFFAIRS

by Elaine Levin



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1 *Forever 21*, 5½ in. (14 cm) in height, clay, glaze, 2012. 2 *Green Electric*, 5½ in. (13.5 cm) in height, clay, glaze, 2012. 3 *Jelly Maker*, 5½ in. (14 cm) in height, clay, glaze, 2012. 4 *Ckhaatrhyie*, 4⅞ in. (12 cm) in height, clay, glaze, 2012. 5 *Line Dance*, 4½ in. (12 cm) in height, clay, glaze, 2012. 6 *Mirror Mirror*, 4¾ in. (12 cm) in height, clay, glaze, 2012.





7 Installation view, main gallery. Courtesy of Shoshana Wayne Gallery. 8 *Cool Spot*, 5½ in. (14 cm) in length, clay, glaze, 2012.

The fifteen coffee-cup-sized objects in “Lots of Little Love Affairs,” which was recently on view at Shoshana Wayne Gallery ([www.shoshanawayne.com](http://www.shoshanawayne.com)) in Santa Monica, California, sit demurely on waist-high, large, white tables, as though chatting amiably with each other. The gallery’s white expanse calls attention to their diminutive size, encouraging close inspection of their adornments and intriguing, enticing colors.

Butterly’s objects bear a tenuous, yet plausible relationship to the cup’s long and distinguished tradition in ceramics. Ancient Asian pottery vessels, made without handles and molded to be held comfortably by encircling hands, served ritual and domestic needs. The cup has been interpreted in various ways ever since. Yet the form, for all its simplicity, has continuously attracted ceramists. Contemporary interpretations flirt with or deny function while moving toward sculpture.

Butterly manipulates her small, cast or larger handbuilt cylinders, assembling parts and attachments. She describes her process as “constructing interiors and exteriors as the piece develops . . . adding, taking away, layering color, and layering/constructing as needed.” The resulting warped, folded, and tilted forms project a sort of three-dimensional abstraction; the satiny, folded, and overlapping contours of *First* make it appear as if the vessel is hugging itself. Incorporating ideas from tradition, post modernism, and her life experiences, Butterly takes the vessel into a deconstructed, transformative expression.

She situates each form on a unique round or square base with three or four legs or lets them rest on a funky, asymmetrical saucer. A variety of adornments and straps or bands draw the eye to idiosyncratic areas of each object; drapery-like tassels, a string of porcelain dots, or a scallop-patterned circle are placed alluringly just above a base or under a rim. Contrasting with these delicate embellishments are areas of bright, harshly colored, deeply cracked patches unexpectedly decorating or dripping below edges. A graceful,

skinny, orange line draws attention to the pregnant aubergine swelling on *Green Electric* as it pulls the eye around the form. Black bands appear to support the exterior curves in *Forever 21*, with similar pink bands on the interior, as though bracing each area from collapsing completely. Two thin straps running from top to bottom on the rear of *Ckhaatrhyie* seem to be keeping the form’s trio of belly-like bulges from sinking earthward. The unusual title combines the artist’s name with that of her father, honoring his death in 2011.

Butterly’s curious, mysterious interiors contrast with the vivid prettiness of most exteriors. Seen from the side, the upper half of *Jelly*





*Maker* is slightly twisted and tilted forward. Seen from the front, the vessel's interior is a highly visible, pastel pink, throat-like cavity that looks as though it is a response to a dentist's request to "open wide." A provocative red area, deep into the recess, could be the manifestation of a sore throat. Indeed, the artist references many unspecific body parts; in the interior of *Mirror Mirror*, the alarmingly glossy, scarlet bulges look similar to the guts exposed during surgery on a television hospital drama.

The clay vessel has often implied human anatomy since the parts of a vase are frequently referred to as a neck, shoulder, and belly. Butterly expands on this concept by evoking elements from contemporary ceramic imagery. Her academic studies with Pop Art ceramist Robert Arneson at the University of California, Davis would perhaps account for sexual, sensuous, and anatomical suggestions, such as the sly, yellow tongue extruding midway on *Mirror Mirror* above an indentation suggesting buttocks. Butterly's provocative appendages and multi-layered projections recall Ken Price's minimalist sculptures of the 1960s. His brilliantly colored egg-shaped forms contrasted with strange, worm-like extrusions. Slightly off kilter, with erratic handles, *Cool Spot* has the jaunty look of a George Ohr vessel, recalling his Art Nouveau vine-contoured handles. Indeed, the rhythmic indentations of *Koi* recall Ohr's many pinched and twisted forms. Extensive use of a crackle glaze, seen in Butterly's interiors, goes back in time to 18th-century Chinese ceramic surfaces and, in more recent history, to Glen Lukens' signature glazes of the 1940s. In order to achieve the desired surfaces, Butterly's vessels are fired 15 to 20 times; one in this exhibit required 40 firings to satisfy her concept. In contemporary ceramics, Ron Nagle and Ken Price pioneered the technology of using multiple firings to achieve a highly developed surface. Butterly uses the same strategy to achieve highly individual results.

Although the ceramists referenced here to contextualize Butterly's work are male, some of her work has a decidedly feminine context. *Dress Up 2* suggests female apparel with a satin-like fold of scarlet emerging mid-way on the vessel and a string of tiny porcelain pearls adorning the base and rim. The frilly, clothing-like layers associated with beautifying a woman's square-dance costume gives movement to *Line Dance*. Regardless of gender, Butterly's vessels exude a serious playfulness along with fun-house-like distortions and a human awkwardness. These sculptures defy their small, intimate scale in their ability to create a palpable tension between the alluring and the slightly grotesque, infusing the work with a lively and captivating ambience.

*Kathy Butterly is the 2012 winner of the Smithsonian American Art Museum Contemporary Artist Award, which "recognizes an artist younger than 50 who has produced a significant body of work and consistently demonstrates exceptional creativity."*

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9 *Dress Up 2*, 5 1/8 in. (13 cm) in height, clay, glaze, 2012. 10 *First*, 6 in. (15 cm) in length, clay, glaze, 2012. 11 *Koi*, 5 1/8 in. (13 cm) in length, clay, glaze, 2012.