

Beautiful and Grotesque

*Kathy Butterly's clay
sculptures feature
cartoonish body parts,
bumps, goo, and
elements of classic
Asian art*

BY ANN LANDI



Kathy Butterly at work.

At first blush, there would seem to be nothing remotely autobiographical about Kathy Butterly's exquisitely eccentric ceramic sculptures. They are small (seldom more than six or seven inches high), finished in sumptuous glazes and odd textures, and bristling with references to a range of objects and cultures—from Chinese teak bases to strands of pearls to cartoonish body parts. But then the artist explains the genesis of *Fall into Spring*, a work from her show at New York's Tibor de Nagy Gallery last fall. The piece is a blobby blue and coral sphere, insubstantially supported by a stemlike neck that seems to have toppled over its four-legged pedestal. It's one of a couple of efforts Butterly calls "heavy heads." She says they're about the "overload of information since 9/11. They're funny, they're so pathetic. But that's how I was feeling after the World Trade Center attack."

Standing in her light-filled East Village studio—part of a sprawling loft she shares with her husband, painter Tom Burckhardt, and their two young children—Butterly has more reason now to be feeling optimistic about the world. Twenty-five of her works were chosen for the 2004 Carnegie International, and Skidmore College's Tang Teaching Museum and Art

Gallery in Saratoga Springs, New York, is giving her a solo show in the fall. Her Tibor de Nagy show earned the kind of praise that has greeted all her exhibitions for the last decade. (The pieces sell for \$7,000.) Nonetheless, the little sculptures she's in the process of making are turning inward. Earlier works, which often took the form of vessels, were filled with allusions to the body, causing a previous dealer, Franklin Parrasch, to remark on the "bashful, flirty guise of an unself-consciously female voice." It's too soon for her to say exactly where her four or five sculptures-in-process are headed. Butterly claims they're "still about flesh, but they're going beyond bodies and are more about what's going on in my mind."

"It usually takes me about two years to fully develop an idea. Right now, they're losing the base and starting to support themselves," she explains, as if describing a litter of strange pets. She studies a handful of unfinished works lining one wall, most of which combine unexpected glazes and in-your-face color. "I want to have parts of them beautiful, of course, but something else grotesque." That grotesquerie might include greenish goo slopping over the edge of a base, knobby pink lumps wreathed in a ribbon of clay beads, or mossy growth lining the interior of a cuplike shape.

When her three-dimensional inspiration fails, Butterly turns to drawings and collage. These, too, incorporate the unexpected: for instance, a carefully articulated pedestal sprouting a shrublike shape decorated with the kind of button eyes you find on children's toys. "Everything out in my world is readily available for me to use," she says. "I like including history in the work, something

that is recognizable, and I love the history of ceramics. But truthfully, I'm more influenced by walking down the city streets."

It was never Butterly's intention to work in ceramics. Now a round-faced and youthful 40, with an unexpected bubbly laugh, the artist grew up in Bergen County, New Jersey, and attended Moore College of Art & Design in Philadelphia, where she studied "painting, sculpture, everything but ceramics because I hated ceramics." Then, one day around the beginning of Butterly's junior year, Viola Frey—a Bay Area sculptor who makes larger-than-life figures in boldly colored clay—arrived to do a demonstration. "I just couldn't be-

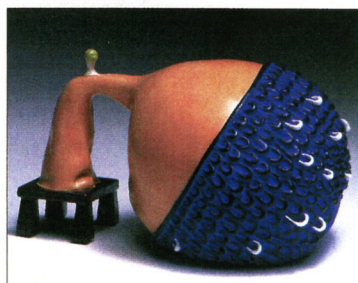
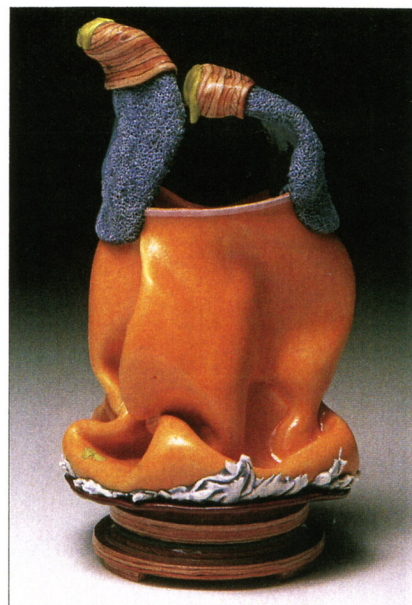
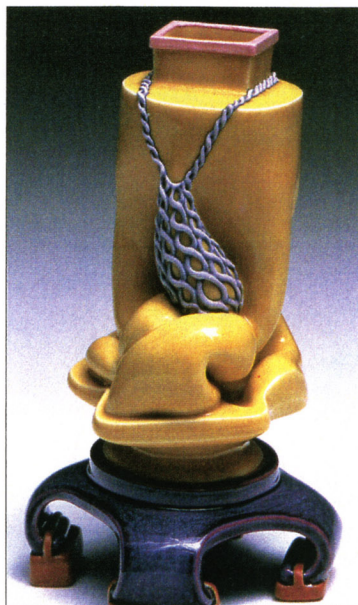
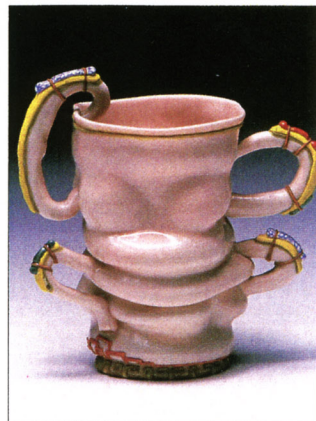
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lieve that this woman who's about my height could make these big macho things," Buttery recalls. "And after that, I was making ceramic sculptures."

After graduation, Buttery took two years to travel and work at what she calls "very funky jobs." One of these entailed making molds for brass lamps in a Philadelphia factory. Her journeys between jobs took her to Asia—South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, and Macao—and elements of Asian art still find their way into her works, where one can see references to bon-

your own instincts," she says. "I have a good bullshit detector, and that was reinforced by him, to trust that voice inside you and forget about superficial stuff."

These days, influences are more likely to come from her immediate surroundings. Burckhardt's studio adjoins hers, and she passes through it constantly. His works are bold "landscapes" combining digitized images with painted, often jazzy decorative elements. "His forms have become much more volumetric," Buttery says in reference to the crosscurrents that



Buttery's ceramics are small (none here is more than 8 inches tall); oddly shaped, and brightly colored. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT *Sumo*, 1996; *Tea Bagger*, 1999; *Trip*, 2002; *Rock, Paper, Scissor*, 2005; *Fall into Spring*, 2004; *Much'd*, 2003-5.

sai trees, scholars' rocks, and the aforementioned bases used to support Chinese or Japanese objets d'art.

Once the wanderlust subsided, Buttery enrolled at the University of California, Davis, where she came under the influence of another powerful artist in clay, Robert Arneson. Usually grouped with the California Funk artists, Arneson, who died in 1992, specialized in humorous self-portraiture that did a lot to put ceramics on the map as a respectable medium for "high" art. He was an inspirational teacher who went out of his way to lend a hand to promising students. After graduation, Buttery recalls, Arneson helped her outfit a barn he owned for her to use as a studio. "What I really got from him was to trust

run between the artists. "And mine have become much more graphic, more about a single plane." Her children, she says, have also had some input, referring to some of the cartoonish elements in her drawings. And who but a mother would make a cable-knit "sweater" out of clay to place over one of her sculptures? "I also find myself buying children's toys for esthetic reasons," she admits.

She's uncertain about where it's all heading. Though the works are small, they are labor- and thought-intensive. "One of my pieces took nine months, but I just love taking the time," she says. "They demand it. They're not one-liners—there's a lot of stuff going on."