Kathy Butterly (b. 1963, Amityville, New York) has exhibited widely in the US and internationally. In 2019, Butterly was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis. Recently, Butterly’s work was featured in group exhibitions at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, and the Anderson Collection at Stanford University. Her work is currently on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the exhibition Shapes from Out of Nowhere: Ceramics from the Robert A. Ellison Jr. Collection. Butterly’s works are in the permanent collections of institutions including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Brooklyn Museum of Art; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Detroit Institute of Arts; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Modern Museum of Modern Art, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art; Portland Museum of Art, Maine; and the de Young Museum, San Francisco among others. In addition Butterly has been the recipient of numerous awards and grants including a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant (2017), a Guggenheim Fellowship Award (2014), a Smithsonian American Art Museum’s Contemporary Artist Award (2012), a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2011), and a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant (2009). Butterly received her BFA at Moore College of Art and Design and an MFA at University of California, Davis. She lives and works in New York City.

Kathy Butterly: Out of one, many / Headscapes is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Lisa Melandri, Executive Director. The exhibition is generously supported by David Charak II, Girlfriend Fund, Todd Riveland, Anonymous, Carlin Shapiro and Peter Frey, Elizabeth Levine, and the Maxine and Stuart Frankel Charitable Foundation.


Artist’s Suggested Reading and Listening List

Selected by Kathy Butterly to share insights into her art and ideas.

Reading
Amy Siliman: Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings, Charlotte Houtte, Francois Lancien-Guilbert, Benjamin Thorel, editors. After Eight Books, 2020
Bijoux in the Dark, John Vau (poetry). Letter Machine Editions, 2018
Ninth Street Women, Mary Gabriel. Back Bay Books, 2019
Peter Soul: Professional Artist Correspondence, 1945-1976, Dan Nadel, editor. Bad Dimension Press, 2020
SPLASH STATE, Todd Colby (poetry). The Song Cave, 2014

Music
By the Way, I Forgive You, Brandi Carlile
Low Years: The Music of Ornette Coleman (Live), Miguel Zenon
Pet Sounds, Beach Boys
Sea Change: Morning Phase, Beck
Swirling, Sun Ra Arkestra
“Opening” and String Quartet No. 3, “Mishima.”
Philip Glass

Podcasts
Sound & Vision, Brian Alfred

Music
Splash State

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Splash State
The process begins with a commercially made, store-bought vessel such as a vase or glass, which is then cast to create a mold into which porcelain clay is poured to create a replica. While the clay is wet she manipulates it by smushing, smoothing, and carving—a process that also involves sponging and blow-drying. The resulting form then becomes what Butterly calls a “troschach test,” where she looks for its potential and attempts to bring out its personality. Butterly has described the experience as intimate, almost akin to a caress.

When the artist is satisfied with the form, she fires the work and begins the glazing process. Choosing from the clay and asserting her own hand, claiming that the uncertainty of the results is what drives her to create.

Influences
Butterly began her artistic practice at Moore College of Art and Design, setting out to study interior design not realizing that pursuing a life as a fine artist was an option. She shifted to painting briefly before meeting the ceramic artist Viola Frey and being exposed to clay as an art medium. For Butterly, ceramics was the perfect bridge between sculpture and painting, almost like three-dimensional painting. In her graduate studies at University of California, Davis she was making largescale, sometimes eight-foot-tall ceramics that she carved into like automatic drawing or a stream of consciousness. The works told stories and contained narratives, which “began to feel wrong,” according to the artist, and with the encouragement of pioneering Funk artist Robert Arneson, Butterly felt empowered to follow her intuition to shift her focus to small-scale vessels. Butterly’s decision to work small was reaffirmed after seeing the book The Mad Potter of Biloxi: The Art and Life of George E. Ohr (1990). Ohr was a turn of the century artist, known for his delicate, thin pots whose bodies crumpled, warped, and collapsed under his hand.

It was also at this time that Butterly experienced a tremendous loss—her boyfriend of five years committed suicide. The artist’s sculptures became stand-ins for herself, or self-portraits of her emotional state at the time. Out of this personal loss and trauma came the beginnings of her ceramic career. Over the nearly thirty years Butterly has chosen to work small, believing that at this scale she can most effectively convey her intentions. In some ways, making modestly-sized ceramics is a feminist pursuit or a form of protest against the masculine impulse to go big. Rather than shrouding her meaning and purpose, her works whisper through their subtle details, textures, and lines. The artist gives us an extraordinary amount of detail to look at in a contained space, inviting us to lean in and stay awhile. The power of working small is in creating lasting intimate experiences with each work and its unique personality.

Tities
Spring (1996) is the first cup form in the series derived from a pint glass. The work was made shortly after the artist and her husband Tom Burckhardt were married, and represents new beginnings: the start of a new series, the spring of their relationship. The piece incorporates vibrant greens and yellows, as well as coarse mustard-like seed forms.

Cenote was made in 2004 in the aftermath of the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center. At the time, Butterly was living in downtown New York with her husband and two young children. They hunkered down in the apartment and Butterly’s works reflected the protection and enclosure that she was seeking. The forms she was making then were closed off, heavy.