

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; 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, Ted Rowland, Anonymous, Carrie Shapiro and Peter Frey, Elizabeth Levine, and the Maxine and Stuart Frankel Charitable Foundation.

Related Programs

Artist Talk: Kathy Butterly

Saturday, September 4, 11:00 am

Workshop: Crafting Connections with Craft Alliance

Saturday, November 13, 11:00 am–5:00 pm



Test glazes in Kathy Butterly's studio. Photo courtesy the artist.

Artist's Suggested Reading and Listening List

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

Reading

- / Amy Sillman: Faux Pas: Selected Writings and Drawings*, Charlotte Houette, Francois Lancien-Guilbeteau, Benjamin Thorel, editors. After Eight Books, 2020
- / Bijoux in the Dark*, John Yau (poetry). Letter Machine Editions, 2018
- / Ninth Street Women*, Mary Gabriel. Back Bay Books, 2019
- / Peter Saul: 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
- / Law Years: The Music of Ornette Coleman (Live)*, Miguel Zenón
- / 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

Gallery Guide
Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis

September 3, 2021–
February 13, 2022



Kathy Butterly

Out of one, many / Headscapes

Kathy Butterly, an exhibition in two parts, presents over three decades of the artist's small-scale ceramic sculptures. In one gallery of the museum, *Out of one, many* offers a "micro-retrospective" of work derived from a pint glass mold, illustrating Butterly's genius for variation on a single, tiny form. *Headscapes*, on view in a separate gallery, consists of new and recent work, larger in size and imbued with concerns about the issues of our day. Taken together, the works evidence Butterly's singular aesthetic and technical mastery of the medium and reveal an evolution in her practice in scale and content.

Butterly describes herself as a painter who happens to work in clay. With thirty years of experience with porcelain and using hundreds of glazes, the artist has extraordinary command of form and color. Butterly works on a domestic and intimate scale, but her sculptures belie their size in meaning and complexity. She finds virtuosity and rigor in the small, always pushing the piece to the limits of its material possibilities.

Out of one, many

Out of one, many presents Butterly's "cup forms" from 1996 to 2018, including the first in the series, *Spring* (1996). A single form serves as a starting point: a pint glass. We are witness to an astounding range of transformation with all works derived from the same cast. Each piece has its own distinct personality, which the artist attempts to bring out during the process of making. For Butterly, each work is a persona—developing and becoming more itself as time goes on. The vessel form is inherently anthropomorphic, with parts of it described as a neck, handle, or body. Whereas Butterly explores female figuration and its stereotypes in these works, they are abstracted by the ceramics' bulges, contortions, exposed orifices, and lumpy midriffs. These abnormal bends and curves make the cups impossible to use—they resist the expected functionality of a vessel. Butterly has described these works as looking inward—to her persona as an artist, her concerns, thoughts, and feelings.



Kathy Butterly, *Yellow Build*, 2021. Porcelain, earthenware, glaze. 7 1/2 × 6 3/8 × 5 5/8 inches. © Kathy Butterly 2021. Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York. Photo: Alan Wiener.



Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis
3750 Washington Blvd
St. Louis, MO 63108
314.535.4660

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Audio Tour

Visit camstl.org/audio on a mobile device to hear directly from the artist and curator.



Kathy Butterly, *Like Butter*, 1997. Clay, glaze, 4 1/2 x 3 3/4 x 3 3/8 inches. © Kathy Butterly 2021. Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York. Photo: Alan Wiener.

Headscapes

Headscapes features recent work, made since 2019, and the premiere of ten new sculptures. Butterly's work always starts from a readymade cast—in this case, a spherical vase, similar to a fishbowl, serves as the base form. These works allude to the human head, and Butterly refers to them as “headscapes,” or “brain planets,” given their likeness in shape and size to a portrait bust. In some cases, the folds of the final forms even appear like grinning mouths. Butterly describes the blocks under each work as a podium, a place from which the work can metaphorically speak.

Whereas the cup forms look inward, these new works are about the world outside. She describes them as “journeys of the mind,” imbued with the anxieties of our current crises. *Blue* (2020) is self-referential in terms of the color of the glazes and speaks to an emotional state while slyly suggesting a longed-for “blue wave.” Made obsessively and tending toward maximalism, each headscape reflects our complex and uncertain world.

Process

Butterly lets no preconceived ideas guide her sculpting process, nor does she make sketches in advance. The artist emphasizes a balance between ceding control to the clay and asserting her own hand, claiming that the uncertainty of the results is what drives her to create.



Kathy Butterly, *Color Hoard-r*, 2013. Clay, glaze, 5 x 3 3/4 x 3 inches. © Kathy Butterly 2021. Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York. Photo: Alan Wiener.

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 “rorschach 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 around 5,000 store bought glazes in her studio, Butterly's color selections completely change the work and its presence. Some glazes are familiar to her—like family—and others are new and their final color unknown. With each firing, the artist assesses the results and reacts to the piece by adding color, texture, and other small clay elements such as a strand of beads. Each piece can be fired up to forty times and can take more than a year to complete. She is a saboteur of her own works, risking them through multiple firings and extreme temperatures. The layer upon layer of glazes can flake, crack, and become matte, almost succumbing to the 2,200-degree kiln environs. All along the process, no matter how unexpectedly the form might react to the glazes and firings, Butterly insists on working with it until it feels complete: “We're in a relationship and we must come to an agreement.”

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 large-scale, 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, wavered, 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 psychological state at the time. Out of this personal loss and trauma came the beginnings of her ceramic career. Over the past nearly thirty years Butterly has chosen to work small, believing that at this scale she can best 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 shouting their 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.

Titles

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.

Cenote was a shift in her work, in which there was a release and an opening up of the center of the form. The title refers to a natural water source, a sinkhole created through the collapse of bedrock to reveal a magical world underground.

I'm Not Sure I Trust Your Eggs came to Butterly partway through the process of creating the ceramic sculpture in 2010, as her titles often do. The artist regularly listens to public radio while in the studio, and on this occasion there was a spot on the state of food and the prevalence of GMOs. Butterly later noticed the drastic difference in color between commercial and farm egg yolks, leading her to mistrust mass-produced food products. That realization manifested not only in the title, but also in the mauve-like, natural tan eggshell color of her chosen glazes and the tiny egg forms at the bottom of the sculpture.

Her names come from world events and personal experiences, as in the case of *CKHAATRHYLIE* (2012), which Butterly began the day her father passed away. The form resembles two people hugging, intertwined, and the title therefore is a poetic combination of the first names of the artist and her father, Charlie.

Black and White and Red and Blue (2021) symbolizes the past year of turbulence: political strife, inequity amplified by the pandemic, and civil rights protests. The piece is underpainted in dense blue glaze, followed by a layer of red. Together the colors read as black. With a touch of white on the handles, the work incorporates all of the colors in its title, and all of the cultural associations of these contrasting colors.



Kathy Butterly, *Blue*, 2020. Clay, glaze, 6 1/8 x 6 x 6 1/4 inches. Pizzuti Collection, Columbus, OH. © Kathy Butterly 2021. Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York.