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Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Kathy Butterly's intimate ceramic sculptures take up residence at CAM



Kathy Butterly, *Super Bloom*, 2019. Clay, glaze, 6 1/4 x 9 1/2 x 10 inches.
Courtesy the artist and James Cohan, New York. Photo: Alan Wiener.

May 5, 2021 (St. Louis, MO) - The Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (CAM) presents *Kathy Butterly: Out of one, many / Headscapes*, an exhibition of ceramic sculpture by a masterly manipulator of small-scale forms, combining two major bodies of work from over the past three decades. *Out of one, many* displays Butterly's imaginative powers and technical brilliance applied to a single, five-inch tall, readymade form over many years, a micro-retrospective of her astonishing variations on a theme. *Headscapes* premieres a new series of sculptures, most created especially for CAM over the past two years, in which the artist explores the possibilities found working at a larger scale—more than double the size of the sculptures in the companion exhibition. These intimate works are on view as part of the Fall/Winter exhibitions at CAM, September 3, 2021 through February 20, 2022.

Alluring in vivid colors and fleshy forms, Butterly's ceramics stem from reflections on relationships, motherhood, and catastrophes—both personal and global. Butterly spends months creating her sculptures, which evolve like individual eccentric personalities. The works are like time capsules, with private and personal events of that time becoming part of the abstracted narrative. Hers is a painstaking process—more a negotiation—of firing porcelain, a medium that can be both luscious and unforgiving.

Butterly is a self-described saboteur of her own works, with each sculpture enduring repeated transformations until it has “suffered enough.” Finding virtuosity and rigor in the small, she pushes each piece to the limits of its material possibilities—a work may be subjected to as many as forty firings. Taking the forms to extreme temperatures allows the pieces to slump and cave, further adding to the sculpture's narrative. The layer upon layer of glazes sometimes flake, crack, and become matte, almost succumbing to the 1800-degree kiln environs. With each firing, the artist

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assesses the results and reacts to the piece by adding color, texture, or strategic clay elements, such as a line of delicate beads or “mossy” areas. After firing, clay is built up in an additive process, rather than carved out of it.

Out of one, many features Butterly’s “cup forms,” from 1996 to 2018. A single form serves as a starting point: the pint glass. Derived from the same readymade cast, the works are iterative, and viewers will be witness to an astounding range of manipulations of the individual pieces. The forms are both representational and completely imaginative. Most of these vessels explore female figuration and its stereotypes, though abstracted and defied with the ceramics’ bulges, contortions, and revealed orifices. While exquisite, they are also humorous, from the purposefully awkward and lumpy allusion to the female form to the descriptive titles.

In her new body of work, *Headscapes*, Butterly takes formal variation to a grander scale while entering a psychological realm of unease. A spherical, readymade vase, similar to a fishbowl, and another larger vase serve as the base forms in this series. While the smaller cup forms reference the body, these works allude to the human head. She refers to them as “headscapes,” or “brain planets,” given their likeness in shape and size to a portrait bust. In some cases, the fold of the final forms even create the appearance of a grinning mouth. Butterly sees this new series as increasingly abstract and describes them as “journeys of the mind,” imbued with the anxieties and concerns of our current crises. Intricate hand-carved pearls take on new meanings: they allow her to exert control (in direct opposition to the chance and chaos of glazes) and, perhaps more importantly, they function as worry beads.

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.

The exhibition is generously supported by Anonymous, David Charak, Ted Rowland, Carrie Shapiro, and Peter Frey.

Kathy Butterly: Out of one, many / Headscapes is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Lisa Melandri, Executive Director.

About the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

The Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis works to enrich lives and inspire curiosity, creativity, and learning through experiences with contemporary art. Focused on a dynamic array of changing exhibitions, the Museum reflects and contributes to the global cultural landscape while engaging thousands of visitors through a wide array of public programs. CAM nurtures the creative minds of our city’s youth through free, in-depth art education, making a long-lasting impact on the community. We are a site for discovery, a welcoming space, free and open to all.

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