



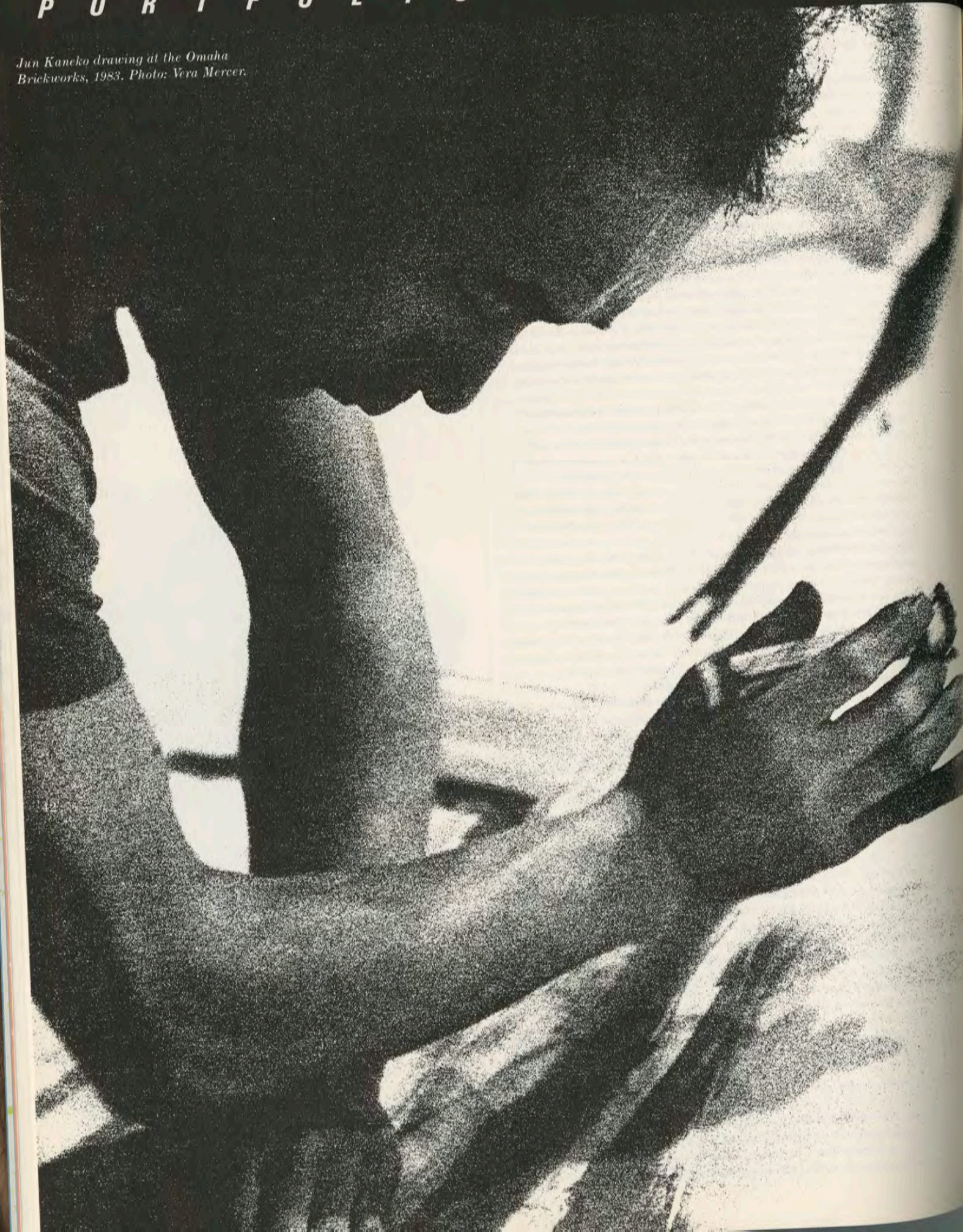
Lorne Falk. "Jun Kaneko Portfolio." American Ceramics 3, no. 3 (1984): 42-51.

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P O R T F O L I O

*Jun Kaneko drawing at the Omaha
Brickworks, 1983. Photo: Vera Mercer.*



Jun Kaneko

Lorne Falk

I have to admit to being stumped for a long while on what to say about Jun Kaneko's art, until I remembered how surprised I was each time I saw his new work. How can an artist—whose artistic production could be summarized simplistically as fifteen years of stripes—create such successful, engaging art with such consistency and apparently at odds with much that has currency in contemporary art? The clue, it seems to me now, lies in this element of surprise, and in my predicament of being tongue tied about what to say about it.

The viewer of art must not forget that perception and imagination are interchangeable, that art is more than meets the eye. In considering Kaneko's art specifically, the trap is to think that it is nothing more than a sophisticated, formal integration of color, texture, and form. Certainly it is all that, but to delve no further is to invest only in the qualities residing in the work and to neglect the state of mind awakened by it. An appropriate analogy would be to appreciate the work of a great composer by admiring the refinement of the notation in his score, while ignoring the music that is made by those notes. There is nothing so sterile about Kaneko's work as simply formal notation; to appreciate it fully is to admire what is in the work and to contemplate what arises because of it.

What is consistent in Kaneko's art is its tenacious inconsistency. The work confronts us with so many apparent contradictions of such interwoven complexity, it defies singular categorization. (Attempting to do so recently, a curator at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts wrongly labeled Kaneko's work "Minimalist."¹) Everything is in flux, from the mediums and materials Kaneko employs to the compositional style and subject matter. Here are some examples: Early in 1981, Kaneko exhibited his work at the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, Canada. The exhibit included ceramic and mixed-media sculptures, a series of collaged drawings (lithography and painted acrylic), a large painting that was actually a spontaneous combination of several smaller paintings, and a number of ceramic plates that included his spiral, double-plate pieces and a more recent series of simple oval plates in which pattern and color predominate.

Immediately following the exhibition, Kaneko traveled to Seattle to work for several days at a glass workshop. He interacted freely and comfortably with a dozen glass artists, collaborating on the production of large, cone-shaped glass sculptures. In the midst of this activity, Kaneko worked simultaneously on a number of drawings. In one memorable moment, he dumped his box of pencils, pastels, oil sticks, and crayons onto a drawing, mashed them into the paper with his foot, and then took a blow torch to the

disheveled surface to melt it into its final form. Dissatisfied, he held the drawing to the open portal of the blast furnace to produce a final transformation.

A few months later, at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston, Kaneko exhibited his stately, rigidly formal sculpture, *Parallel Sounds*, which he had produced that summer at a commercial tile factory, Otsuka Ceramics, in Japan.

Parallel Sounds consists of three diamond-shaped, monochromatic sculptures (red, blue, and yellow), each measuring 84 by 156 by 72 inches, constructed from perfectly straight, seven-foot ceramic bars stacked on top of one another. In marked contrast to much of his earlier work, *Parallel Sounds* was a tour de force of minimalist sculpture.

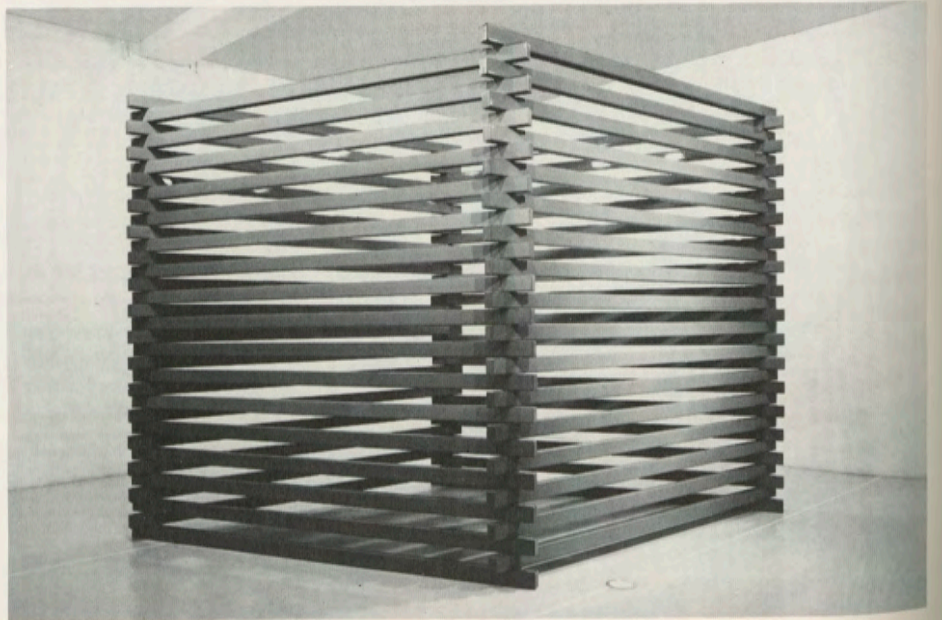
In 1982, again at the Walter Phillips Gallery, Kaneko, Tony Hepburn, and Faye Munroe occupied the gallery as their studio for three weeks. Kaneko first constructed a pool of water across the gallery's main entrance, contained in a structure of sheet plastic and wood; proceeded to make a large series of drawings with oil sticks that responded to the mountain environment surrounding Banff; and then followed with a number of whimsical, mixed-media sculptures and postcard collages. Finally, he painted and altered Hepburn's work, after the two artists had agreed to switch studios.²

These events and the works they involve suggest that one has to move quickly and with great flexibility to keep pace with Kaneko's art. He will always respond to an opportunity to work in a new forum, as he is challenged, rather than intimidated, by different mediums and materials. And he inevitably rises to the occasion, as he did a few years ago, for example, when he designed and produced vests and tote bags at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia. Kaneko's work is too mobile to have it labeled as any one thing. One has to be able to move from ceramic to fabric, from the deliberate and refined to the spontaneous and chaotic, from the examination of function to perceptual illusion. That Kaneko moves through this alchemical maze with such intensity and apparent ease is surprising. It is all the more surprising that we do, too.

There is, however, another important feature that is consistent in Kaneko's work, that makes sense of all this diversity: the pervasive use of pattern (stripes and sometimes dots) and color. These elements have been present in his work from the very beginning, which suggests that Kaneko has found something in them that is as sustaining and as provocative as his restless exploration of mediums and styles. On one level, he has come to understand the limitless potential of pattern and color to alter and enhance the formal aspects of his work: surface, line, shape, and space. On another level, they have become the metaphoric vehicles for his subject matter,



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(Opposite page) Sanbon-Ashi (1971), 30" (81.3 cm) high. Galleries of the Claremont Colleges, Scripps College, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Marer Collection. Photo: Schenck & Schenck Photography.

Parallel Sound (1981), 7' x 12' x 6' (2.1 x 3.6 x 1.8 m), made at Otsuka Ceramics, Shigaraki, Japan, who supplied all materials, techniques, and labor. Photo: Shigeo Anzai.

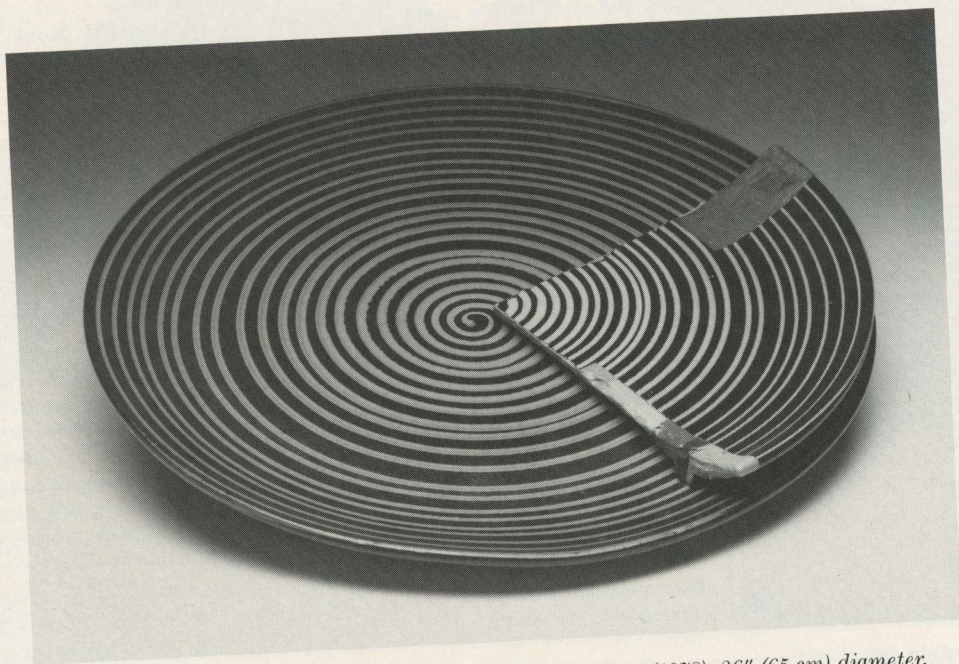
abstraction. And although Kaneko is certainly not interested in trends, in staking his claim to a region of art, he does share the desire of many contemporary artists to create work that is rooted in the everyday and the common. Kaneko alluded to this during a studio visit in 1980: "The problem with art history and criticism is that it lacks the smell of human beings." This is why the ceramic plates are potentially his greatest achievement. In them he has managed to reach a level of expression and feeling to which we all aspire, yet they are contained within a form that is ubiquitous and familiar to all. Kaneko's art is a series of surprises; we are always seeing things in it we take for granted in other contexts. This is not art arising from socially influenced interpretation, it is Kaneko's imaginative interpretation of experience. It is most successful when it achieves the sublime—when, psychologically, it seems to have the capacity for moral ideas, when common frustrations and desires, transcending all politics, are evoked. In doing so, Kaneko's art reveals a compassion and a consideration for other human beings, especially the human desire to achieve or experience something greater. The mechanisms for these experiences are embodied in the concept of effective surprise, which the English psychologist Jerome Bruner articulated in two essays on experience and creativity. He suggests:

What is characteristic of a great work of art is that its metaphoric artifice, its juxtapositions, have not only surprise value but also illuminating honesty. . . . Effective surprises seem to have the quality of obviousness about them when they occur, producing a shock of recognition following which there is no longer astonishment. . . . The triumph of effective surprise is that it takes one beyond common ways of experiencing the world.⁶

Bruner's comments not only describe aptly the power of Jun Kaneko's art, but also strike at its heart, because the nature of effective surprise in the content of his work is rooted in its deep humanity and upward aspiration.

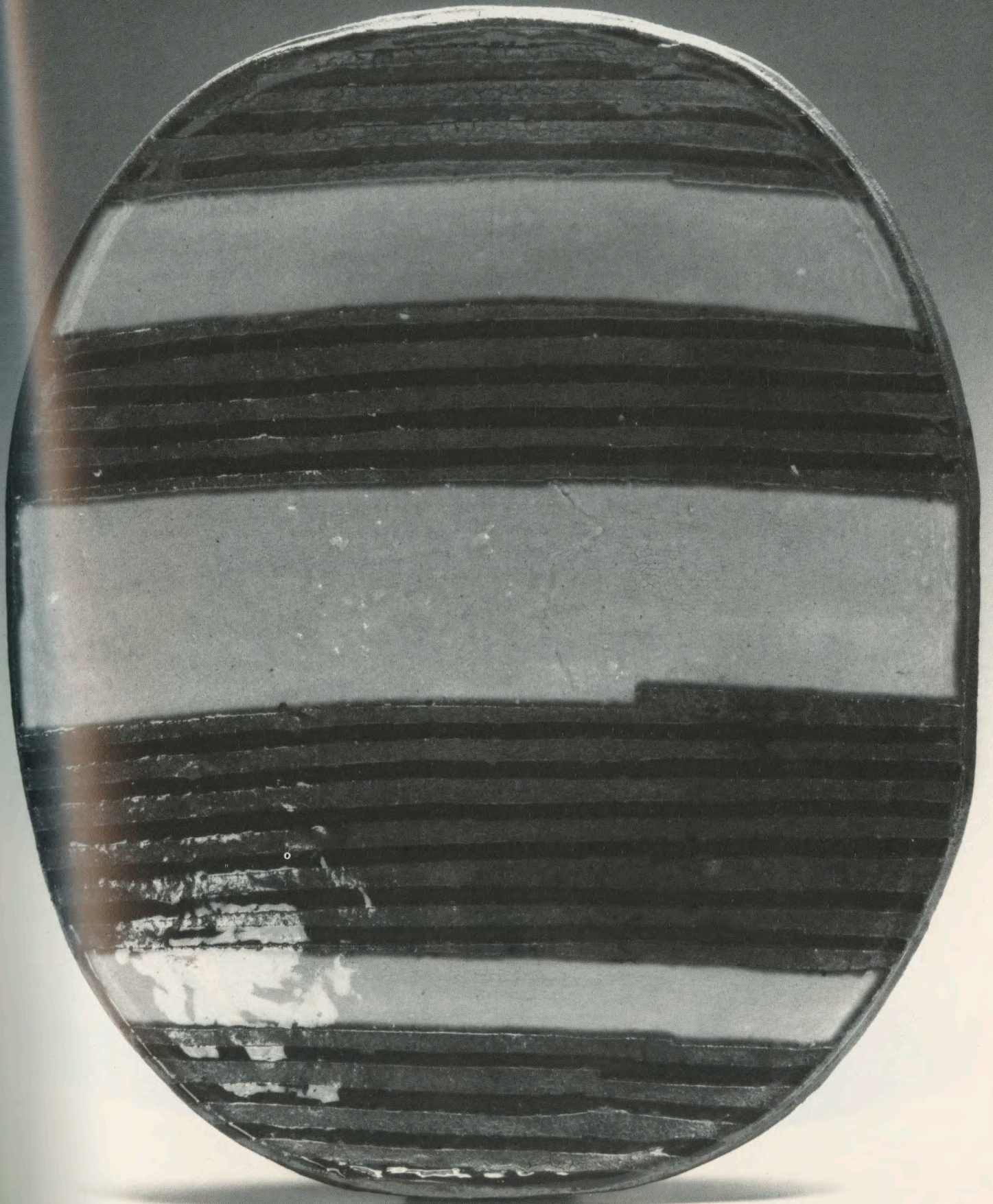
1. This was the only reference to Kaneko's work in the title panel for the exhibition, "Directions in Contemporary American Ceramics," organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and exhibited during the 1984 NCECA conference (February 25–June 3, 1984).
2. "Convergent Territories—The Gallery as Artist's Studio," Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Canada (October 19–November 7, 1982).
3. "Jun Kaneko: Parallel Sounds," Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (September 4–October 18, 1981), extract from the brochure catalogue for this exhibition.
4. Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 7.
5. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 48.
6. Jerome Bruner, *On Knowing—Essays for the Left Hand* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 14, 18, 22.

Lorne Falk is curator of the Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre School of Fine Arts, Banff, Canada. All photographs courtesy Ree Schonlau Gallery, Omaha. In addition to Ree Schonlau Gallery, Jun Kaneko's work has been the subject of recent exhibitions at Helen Drutt Gallery, Philadelphia; Greenberg Gallery, St. Louis; Heath Gallery, Atlanta; Klein Gallery, Chicago; Morgan Gallery, Kansas City; Takagi Gallery, Japan; and Quay Gallery, San Francisco.



*Double Plate (1978), 26" (65 cm) diameter.
Collection Dr. Terrence Kolbeck. Photo: P.
Drickey.*

*Plate (1982), 23" (57.5 cm) long. Collection
Dr. Joseph Hoagbin, Omaha. Photo: P.
Drickey.*





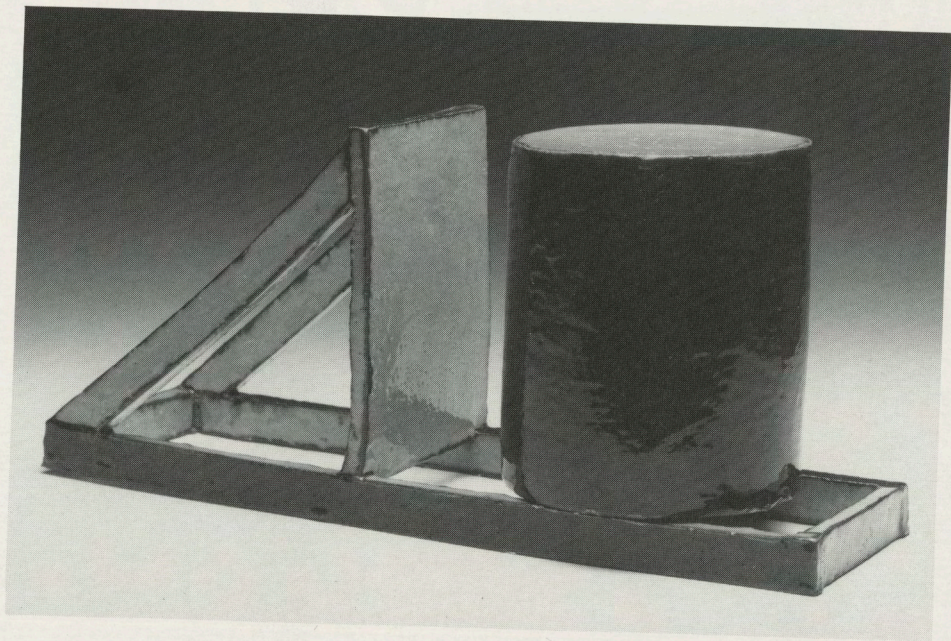


Plate (1983), 24" (60 cm) long. Photo: P. Drickey.

Untitled (1984), 21" (52.5 cm) long. Photo: P. Drickey.