

Interview for a publication by Bentley Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona with Jun Kaneko

Q: You started out as a painter. How important is that aspect to your art-making now?

JUN KANEKO: It's definitely an important part of me. Painting in three-dimensions is different from a two-dimensional space because I'm constantly thinking about the other side of the sculpture, thinking in 360 degrees-obviously the painting has to go with the shape I am dealing with.

Q: So your painting decisions always flow from the shape of the object?

JUN KANEKO: When painting on a three-dimensional piece, I always work from the reflection of the form. I've never made a piece the other way, to think of painting and then create the form.

Q: What led you from canvas to three dimensions?

JUN KANEKO: Well, that was pretty much an accident. Thirty-five years ago, I came from Japan to Los Angeles to study painting. I ran into a pioneer collector of contemporary ceramics named Fred Marer. He was very passionate about collecting and about communicating with the artists. I met Fred the same day I arrived in LA and ended up house-sitting his apartment for three months, and all I did for those three months was look at their collection. So that's how I started to do ceramics. It wasn't planned at all, just a very lucky accident. The funny thing is that usually artists start with Art 101 and never interact with the top-level people until much later in their career. When Fred returned from his trip to Europe, he took me around and I met almost all of the top level contemporary ceramists before I even started. All of this had a very strong impact on me, but you have to realize that I didn't understand or speak any English, so there was no verbal communication. What I saw was what I got. Later I came to know that it was a very special group of people.

Q: Your work ranges from small to monumental. Did you start off working fairly large?

JUN KANEKO: I guess it was large scale for a beginner, because a few months after I started, I was making pieces maybe five feet tall. I didn't have any concept of scale for these pieces, I just found them. I think that has lots to do with what I saw in LA, because Peter Voulkos and John Mason were working large, and I just thought that was the way things go, how it was done. It took me ten or twelve years to realize the issue of scale is a very critical thing.

Q: And you continue to work in a wide range of sizes?

JUN KANEKO: Regardless of what we do, artists are confronted with the issue of scale. Either we notice it or we ignore it, but scale is there in anything you make in three dimensions. It's better to realize that issue and try to make something out of it. It helps me to understand a small piece much better by doing large scale pieces, and the other way around. How we feel about scale is a very conceptual thing. Put a small piece right next to a very large thing and small looks smaller and large looks larger. It's a gut level reaction that drives our sense of scale, at least for most of us. If you get the tape measure and one piece is two feet and another is two hundred feet, that's a different understanding, a mechanical or mathematical kind of understanding. Even artists instinctively and intuitively spot the difference; they don't figure it out on paper.

Q: Are there particular mechanical problems you run into with the larger pieces?

JUN KANEKO: Sure, ceramics as a material has a lot of difficult mechanical problems. When you use a particular material, you have to follow that material's rules, and ceramics has more limitations and demands than most. For instance, the material shrinks ten percent from when you're making it to the end of firing. It's exactly the same shape but maybe ten percent smaller. This is one of the beautiful things about ceramics, but it's a pain in the neck. If it moves that much, it had better move evenly all

the time all over the piece, or else you create stresses and the piece will crack and fall apart. The bigger the piece, the harder it is to control that shrinkage and movement. That's why a lot of ceramics people make larger work in sections. If you do it in sections, like bricks, it isn't so difficult. But it's not all technical-I keep reminding myself it doesn't matter how hard or how easy it is, the end product is what counts. If it's good, it's good. Maybe it takes two minutes to put one line on paper, and it's great. I can spend days on another drawing and it's just a piece of junk.

Q: What led you to the dango shape?

JUN KANEKO: The dango is a Japanese dumpling and anything rounded can be called dango. When you start doing ceramics, the first thing you learn is how to wedge the clay. The teachers say, "This is the way you make the clay, and air bubbles have to be out of the clay or it will blow up." This is what almost every teacher tells you, even though it's not really true [laughs]. So I would wedge the clay, and end up with a round shape. I always liked that shape, but I was too young to have the guts to leave it alone. I thought art was something you had to think about and work hard at and make something different, right? So after four or five years, I finally decided to fire it. But even then I'd poke a hole here and there in the clay before I fired it. Then the next step was just to leave it alone and fire it without the hole. This thinking process took me six or seven years of continually seeing this form, and finally I built up my courage to do it. I looked at it and said, "Wow, this is okay."

Q: Are the conceptual and intuitive issues the same in ceramics as painting on canvas?

JUN KANEKO: Unfortunately ceramics as a material doesn't allow a painter to be as spontaneous as he could be using oil or acrylic on canvas. Ceramics is painting blind, and then you have to fire it to see the actual results because the glaze changes color in firing. Light gray changes to intense blue, dirty yellow becomes bright yellow, things like that, so when you're painting, no matter how experienced you are, you're still making guesses. You have to shift all the colors in your mind from what's on the piece to what it will be. This is a really tough thing to do. What you see is not what

you're getting. Besides that, when you see it out of the kiln, you can't change it. You say, oh shit, I want to change it just a little bit and you can't. So this is a huge difference between canvas and ceramics. That's why I still like to work on canvas-it sharpens my intuitive reactions to what I'm doing and allows me the freedom to be spontaneous and change what I've done, and what I see is what I've got. That's great, but at the same time it drives you nuts to have complete freedom.

Q: What artist do you most admire? Who inspires you?

JUN KANEKO: As a painter, I have always admired Tapies. He has been my hero since I was 17 years old, so he's one of my lifetime inspirations. He's probably my favorite. Another painter probably nobody knows is Kumagai. He died about fifteen years ago at 93 years old, and spent his last thirty-three years without setting foot outside his small house in Tokyo. Once you limit yourself to a small space, you notice every detail of your territory. Each little stone, little bug, every little thing is more intensified, and you notice these things and his painting is about that. He started to paint like one stone, or a couple of plants, and it's fantastic-not a realistic kind of painting, but more of an emotional painting of his world. Because I move around and my studio's big and I cover so much territory, I often miss the opportunity of very interesting intimate situations.