

Jun Kaneko: An Artist's Artist

By Victor M. Cassidy

In July and August, Jun Kaneko exhibited ceramic sculptures and paintings at Klein Art Works, Chicago. He showed three large "dangos," which are round-topped, free-standing two-sided clay works roughly six feet tall; three four-foot dangos; a smaller dango on a shelf; four ceramic wall pieces; four huge acrylic paintings; and two clay pedestal pieces.

The exhibition was a tour de force by an artist of international reputation. Kaneko can do whatever he wants with clay. His decorative patterns have great depth and subtlety. His art ranges from the dignified large dangos to smaller, less formal works to his stripe paintings, which are vibrating visual knockouts.

An Artist and An Industry

Kaneko is an artist's artist, mad about form, line, colors, marks, and patterns, but indifferent to narrative and theory. Many of his works are untitled and there is nothing literary about them. Some pieces seem almost identical at first glance, but embody subtle variations.

"The bottom line of being a visual artist is to make something visual," Kaneko states. Making art involves the "energy to make the object," which comes from a chain reaction of "intuitive sparks" inside the artist.

Craftsmanship helps "construct the ideas."

Curiosity is the mainspring of Kaneko's creativity. He sees something in his work, which piques his curiosity and leads him to experiment. This "creates new ideas and thus brings more questions and more curiosity to the original idea," he says. Technique "follows the idea." He views his inevitable mistakes as learning opportunities.

Kaneko claims that he does art business—galleries, shows, and commissions—under protest. But he is an industry now, producing 300 to 500 pieces per year, many at large scale. He has a 38,000 square foot studio in Omaha, Nebraska, and another in Nagura, Japan, that he built himself. He employs three full-time assistants, uses a programmable controller to fire his kiln, and makes detailed technical notes on everything he does in the studio.

Galleries all over the world show and sell Kaneko's work at prices that start in four figures and rise into six. He could be teaching somewhere today and maintaining a modest studio. Instead he lives on a grand scale, travels widely, and devotes many hours to administering his artistic enterprises.

Right Place, Right Time

Born in 1942 in Nagoya, Japan, Jun Kaneko was a rebellious, mediocre student, who began to draw compulsively because he was miserable in school. His parents recognized his talent, found him teachers, and got him a studio where he spent most of his time painting. When he was just 17, Jun

discovered Antonio Tápies, the Spanish painter, whose work has influenced him ever since.

In 1963, by pure luck, Kaneko stumbled into the ideal environment for a budding artist. After barely scraping through high school, he flew to Los Angeles, intending to study painting, even though he spoke no English. A family friend took Jun to stay with Fred Marer, a mathematics professor who had a huge collection of contemporary ceramics. Marer soon went away for three months, leaving Kaneko to sit his apartment. The young artist had nothing to do all day but examine hundreds of clay works and struggle to learn English from food labels in grocery stores.

When Marer returned, he took Jun to visit his artist friends—Peter Voulkos, Kenny Price, Billy Al Bengston, Harry Takemoto, John Mason, and others. Jun silently examined the work, but could not ask questions. He had no idea that he was meeting America's top ceramic artists at a time of great creative ferment.

These experiences led Jun to ceramics. He made vessels at first, then moved quickly into mixed plate and vessel forms of sculptural scale--several feet tall. He would acknowledge later that his background in painting kept him from thinking in three dimensions. He made two-sided clay pieces with one side becoming his favorite. After six or seven years, he learned to think "more about the whole piece," he says, "like 360 degrees around the piece." There was "a great distance" between the artist and his material when he was just starting out. He had "vague ideas," he says, but was not close enough to the clay to "rescue" them. Today, the artist's understanding of clay triggers his imagination. An "accumulation of experiences" has brought him closer to his material and made him more confident and effective.

In 1966, Kaneko became studio assistant to Peter Voulkos, who, along with John Mason, became key influences on his work and career. Kaneko admired the work ethics of these artists and "the way they looked at materials." Since the early 70s, Kaneko has lived as a successful artist, traveling widely, especially to Japan, where he sometimes lives for months at a time. He taught at the Rhode Island School of Design for several years and later at the Cranbrook Academy of Art.

Dangos

For almost 20 years, dangos have been the best-known forms that Kaneko makes. They originated when he was an art student, learning to wedge clay--rolling it into a ball and squeezing out air bubbles so it does not blow up in the kiln.

"I would wedge the clay," he says, "and end up with a round or oval shape. I always liked that shape, but I was too young to leave it alone. I thought art was something you have to think about and work hard at and make

something different." Eventually, he fired one of these shapes, which he nicknamed "dango" after the Japanese word for dumpling.

A "dango" is really anything round, the artist says, and it can exist at any scale. He once built 11 foot tall dangos, firing them in giant kilns used to make sewer pipe. Other dangos fit in the hand like potatoes. The dangos at Klein Art Works are more seed-shaped than completely round and lose much of their power in side view. Flared slightly inward where they touch the floor, they convey a sense of lightness and instability. Large dangos look best from a distance and can be seen as cool and reserved. But Kaneko says that he has a dango storage room in his studio that children may explore when they visit. "Most of the time, they run between the pieces and make cheerful noises," he states, which suggests that they find his sculptures welcoming. The dangos in Kaneko's show are decorated with two layers of colored glaze. Backgrounds are brushed or dripped in white, gray, or black. The second layer is simple, brightly-colored shapes—stripes, squares, and forms that could be clouds or waterfalls. One dango has a wide dark blue line spiraling around it on top of a blue-white background. Smaller dangos are more simply decorated.

Silent Conversations

Kaneko "almost always" has a need to decorate the surfaces of his works, he says. He has silent "conversations" with his unfinished clay forms. Once he can "hear what a form has to say," he starts to see "marks and colors on the surface." He connects painting with pattern making and believes that the spaces between the marks are "as important as the marks themselves." Painting dangos is "very complicated" with "drips in back and solid in front," Kaneko says. He paints "blind" because glaze changes color, sometimes radically, in the kiln. Light gray becomes intense blue, for example, and dirty yellow changes to intense yellow. Though experience has taught the artist how to adjust for this, he never feels completely in control. He cannot correct colors after a piece comes from the kiln.

The wall pieces in the show are flat slabs of clay, decorated and fired, measuring 30 by 22 inches. Kaneko paints marks or simple shapes on a dripped or brushed-in background, adding lines and small areas of color to balance the design of the piece. The wall works are lyrical and Tapes-like in composition.

There is much variety in the glaze. We see smooth transparent surfaces, crackle glaze, air bubbles, areas where the artist may have mixed sand into the glaze, and bare spots. "I apply glaze deliberately and keep everything as simple as possible," says the artist. "I've worked with five or ten glazes for 30 years and don't really know that much about the chemistry. My glazes are as thin as a sheet of paper when I apply them. The drips are thicker."

A Kaneko trademark is a small surface decoration, often rectangular, with copper tone or no glaze at the center and a red line around the perimeter. These are made during glazing, but encircled with a black line, which is transformed to copper red by charging the kiln with a smoky reduction atmosphere and briefly creating an oxygen shortage as the ceramic cools after firing. This is virtuoso technique and Kaneko will only say that the red-lined areas are "part of the composition," which he creates by "following my intuition."

Two clay pedestal pieces shaped like huge eggs are "new" to his work, the artist says. The first egg, placed in a dark bowl-like form, is preposterously decorated with polka dots and very amusing. The second egg has a rough clinker-like surface and could have been blown from a volcano. Its brown, slip glazed enclosure could be ancient architecture. We hope the artist makes more of these winning pieces.

"Amazing Difference"

Kaneko's intensely colored horizontal stripe paintings grab the viewer and do not let go. They are Op Art carried to the nth degree. The artist decorates canvas as he does clay and makes no attempt to create an illusion of depth or form. Other paintings have nervous, brushed-in backgrounds, intense colors, and fields of marks and shapes like the large dangos and wall pieces. There's an "amazing difference" between painting and ceramic sculpture, Kaneko says. Clay is stop-and-start work, with long waits between stages in the creative process as the clay dries. With painting, he can be spontaneous and not worry that colors will change in a kiln. Still, he finds it exhausting to paint and says that "it drives you nuts to have complete freedom."