

## Gerry Williams Interview 2001

**Jun Kaneko** is known by many for his large, hand-built ceramic forms, featuring bold glazes and dramatic patterns. A form often used by him is a rounded monolithic object he calls "dango", derived from the Japanese word for dumpling. These abstract forms are made with large amounts of clay slowly built by hand using the slab technique. Kaneko builds them in groups of six to ten at one time, drying each for many months before firing. Jun Kaneko has said: "I'm a believer in doing things. If my intuition tells me to do something, I don't ask questions beyond that, I just do it. If I don't get the answer right away, I'm not worried. That is the way I work." Jun Kaneko is known around the world for his paintings as well as his ceramic installations. An exhibition of his work was held at the Art Center in Margate at St. Paul's School, Concord, New Hampshire in October 1999. It was the first show there in a series entitled "Under the Influences: Examining Compelling Forces in the Creative Process" originated by Karen Burgess Smith, director of The Art Center. The following archival interview was conducted with Jun Kaneko while he was in New Hampshire for his exhibition. – Gerry Williams

### **Gerry Williams: What prompted you to think of leaving Japan?**

Jun Kaneko: The school system in Japan in 1961 was very strict and competitive and I didn't really believe it was necessary for my art. But I didn't know what to do. So I talked to Mr. Ogawa, my painting teacher. I said, "I know I definitely need some kind of help, but I would never go to art school in Japan." He replied, "Well, I could teach you but that's not good either. One person gives a limited point of view. So it's better to go someplace to something more if you're ready to go." I said, "I'm ready to go but I don't know what to do." He said, "Have you ever thought of going out of Japan?" I said, "Yeah, I have thought about it, but I don't know how to do it. I have no friends, my family doesn't know anybody, and I have no information."

My painting teacher said, "I know a guy in California named Jerry Rothman. When Rothman was in Japan as a designer for a chinaware company in the 1950s I took care of him a lot. So I could at least ask him to come and pick you up at the airport and perhaps find you a place to live and occasionally check in on you." I said, "That's great." So I decided to come to California. I had barely finished high school in Japan because I didn't often go to classes. I had a very bad grade as far as academics went. I was on the bottom. If I didn't take extra tests I would never have graduated. They said, "We want you to graduate so we will give you one more chance. You had better study and come back for this test." I said OK but didn't really study. Two days before the test I went through the whole book. I was lucky. I just

barely made it and graduated from high school. But I definitely knew that I didn't want to continue going to any school in Japan.

**GW: Did Rothman pick you up at the Los Angeles airport when you arrived?**

JK: Yeah, Jerry came to pick me up at the airport and drove me to Fred Marer's house that same day. I didn't speak any English but Jerry spoke a little broken Japanese. "We're going to see this old couple," he said. "You stay here. I'll be back." Then he just dropped me off and disappeared. I didn't know what was going on.

It was mid afternoon and I thought Jerry would be coming back in a few hours. It was six or seven o'clock and night was coming on. The old couple pointed to the dinner table, so I went to eat dinner. Then a couple of hours later, they pointed to a bed, so I figure I'm staying here. So I stayed. Jerry came the next day and explained: "Well, you stay here for a while."

**GW: What was Fred Marer like?**

JK: Fred was the head of the math department in the Los Angeles City College, a great collector, and a truly interesting and intellectual guy. He was always interested in politics and art and his curiosity was great in everything, you know. He was a Russian immigrant so he didn't really have much money.

**GW: Was he collecting then?**

JK: Oh yeah. I couldn't believe it. That's the reason I started ceramics. He and Mary lived in a three-bedroom apartment. As soon as you opened the door you walked right into the living room and there were plates all over the floor. You really had to watch where you're going, otherwise you would step on them. There were plates by Voulkos, Kenny Price, Billy Al Bengston and Henry Takemoto. Just amazing stuff. Everything jammed into the bookshelves, the walls, shelves, and tables. Forget it. Just jammed, already. I think he started collecting ceramics seriously in 1956-57. I think that's when Voulkos came to Otis Institute of Art in Los Angeles from Montana. Marer liked these guys so he went to help them load kilns, took them coffee, because these guys were too broke, they didn't have anything. He brought them coffee and sat down and argued. Fred really liked to argue. Not a real argument but just to discuss things he was curious about. That's how he acquired a lot of the pieces, as he was a personal friend of the artists. At that time, nobody charged anything for their work. It's hard to tell whether or not he felt this was an important time. I don't think anyone knew, including Voulkos. It just happened. So regardless of what piece he gets from this group, it can't be too bad, you know. (Laughs)

He was just in the middle of the best movement in ceramics and whatever he took he couldn't go wrong.

Fred and Mary really took care of me. I was there about a month and a half house-sitting while they were on vacation. I really had a chance to look at

their ceramics, and also to live with the pieces. When they returned they asked me if I wanted to do something with clay. Fred knew everybody. He took me to Scripps College where Paul Soldner was teaching. I didn't know what was going on, but I started to do ceramics, just for a week, a few things like raku pieces. I really liked it, so next year I decided to take some courses at Chouinard Institute of Art in Los Angeles.

## **EARLY YEARS**

JK: I was born on July 13, 1942 in Nagoya, Japan. Both my parents were dentists, and they are still living and practicing dentistry part-time.

### **GW: What was your childhood like?**

JK: I lived in Nagoya until I was about two-and-one-half years old. During World War II our house got a direct hit in the bombing. Obviously no one was in the house, that's why we are alive now. My parents thought the war was getting too close and dangerous, so they made a decision that they would stay in the city but send me to the mountains where it was safer. My paternal grandparents lived there. My parents also came about three years later.

### **GW: What did your grandfather do?**

IK: My grandfather was a Christian minister. In fact, my family had been Christians for six generations. That's pretty unusual in Japan. About three hundred years ago it was a prohibited religion, and lots of people were executed for being Christian. An amazing number of my relatives and family had been Christian. My uncle was a minister too. But my grandfather was a very active minister, in charge of activities in the whole western half of Japan. He also lived in China for twelve years, as well as in Korea. He was able to speak Chinese, Korean, English, Greek and Latin. Pretty unusual for his age.

### **GW: Was he a role model for you?**

JK: It's funny, but I don't remember much about what I did when I lived with my grandparents. I remember he read books all the time. It was a pretty awkward scene: it was the end of the war and here was this guy sitting under a tree reading books. He didn't talk much. In Japan, at lunch or dinner time while you are eating, it's considered bad manners to talk. Especially for people who grew up with a sort of ideal such as Samurai. It happened that both my grandfather and grandmother came from Samurai families.

### **GW: Do you consider the Samurai legacy still alive in you?**

JK: I'm not sure about that, but I'm pretty sure in some way to find their influence on me from when I lived with them. I never said anything at the dinner table. It wasn't cheerful. It was really strict, just eat. It didn't fit a five-year-old kid's behavior. Maybe that's why I don't remember too much about it.

### **GW: What did you do when you left the mountains?**

JK: My parents came to the mountain and we stayed there a couple of years. That's where I started elementary school. Soon, however, my parents decided to return to Nagoya, so we went back but not exactly to the same location as where their house had been because it was completely burned down. I changed school three times, which wasn't too easy for a young kid. My parents finally picked a school that was an hour and a half away by train and bus. We used to get up at 5:30 in the morning, and had to change trains three times. It was rush hour, too. In Japan they push you onto the train car. My brother and I used to go in between peoples' legs because we were small. Everybody knew us and sort of protected us. In some way it was a long distance to go but I think we had a great, unusual experience.

**GW: Did you go to the high school in that area?**

JK: There was a four-year high school in the area. I didn't like the rigid system of the school. Plus I wasn't really the kind of person who enjoyed academic studies and gathering information and memorizing things. That wasn't enough for me. I always had a hard time.

**GW: Were you interested in the arts at the time?**

JK: Not particularly, but around that time I went to see an art show by myself. Nobody took me. There was definitely a strong influence at play from my mother who was an amateur painter. She had been painting since she was perhaps eighteen (she's eighty years old now). When I was in high school she painted at night after work.

**GW: Did she pass on this interest to you?**

JK: It is not anything noticeable because she didn't say anything about it, but I'm sure it had some effect on me. I think it's a sort of funny accidental thing. I didn't like school and hated the academic stuff, but felt like I wanted to do something. I didn't want to do nothing and just be on the street. I felt trapped by the situation. Then one day I picked up my pencil and started to draw. Nobody knew about that. I just kept on drawing. My drawings were pretty realistic: what I saw I tried to draw. Three months later my mother found a whole pile of drawings in my room. She said: "Are these your drawings?" I said, "Yeah." She said: "Do you mind if I take this to show it to my friend?" I told her to go ahead. Even though she was a dentist she was really interested in art, and had many artists who needed dental work. She didn't charge them and fixed a lot of their teeth for free. So she took my drawings to several people and asked their professional opinions, whether they saw any possibilities in the drawings or whether it was just a lot of mother's sentiment.

One guy said: "I see something definitely in here that could be developed." You know, those drawings were pretty immature because it was the beginning. When I look at those drawings now (we have saved some) I feel I'm lucky to come this far because I really don't see anything special in those early drawings and paintings. But my mother said, "Do you want to go

and take classes from a painting teacher?" I said I would try. I was already suspicious about anything having to do with classes or any kind of a system. I said I would try if she could find me a private teacher, since I really didn't like group activities.

She checked and one guy said OK, although it turned out he had never had a student before. His wife was a painter, too, holding children's classes, so there were kids around all the time in his studio. His name was Satoshi Ogawa.

**GW: What did he teach you?**

JK: He told me, "It's complete freedom, you have to find what you have to do. You may not even know what is around for you." He took me to painting shows to give me some idea about the variety of things to do. Then I'd draw, and he told me his opinion, he liked this or that part of my painting, because of its activity and scenery and stuff, or he didn't like another section because... and he gave me his opinion. After that he pretty much let me do whatever I wanted. He said, "You can come any time you want. I consider you part of my family. I was never interested in teaching any one before."

**GW: Were your parents sympathetic to your direction by ths time?**

JK: My mother was basically supportive all the time, but both my mother and father didn't say much. My father was never against what I did, he never questioned it, but I think he had a hard time understanding what I was doing because he had a strong worry about mv future. As far as the visual arts were concerned, he had minimum understanding. He likes music but can't figure out visual arts and what they mean. But he let me do whatever I wanted to do. So that was good enough for me.

**GW: When you came to America did you sign up for ceramics'**

JK: After working briefly with Paul Soldner at Scripps College, I decided to take courses at Chouinard. Ralph Bacerra was teaching at Chouinard. Before that, Susan Peterson had taught there, as well as Vivika and Otto Heino. Bacerra had been a student of Vivik and Otto and took over the department from them.

I still couldn't speak any English, so I didn't know what Ralph Bacerra was saying. The studio was in a very small space and I needed a big space. So I sneaked lots of pieces into different places. The studio was in a very small space and f needed a big space. So I sneaked lots of pieces into different places, and Ralph wasn't very happy about that. He gave me hell all the time for it. Then at Christmas time they completely shut down the studio, since it was a private school and they could not afford the expense, I wanted to get into the studio to work.

**GW: Did you climb through the window?**

JK: I did. I sneaked into the clay mixing room which was not in the regular clay studio an only six feet long. I worked there all Christmas vacation, and was sure Ralph would find out. He did, and was mad at me. I figured I

shouldn't cause that much trouble and make him unhappy, so I just quit. While I was at Chouinard for that year and a half I did etching painting, as well as ceramics, working full time day and night. They were curious about me but let me be.

I had perhaps two hundred or three hundred dollars a month to cover my expenses. But you know in the sixties that was very little money, especially if you have to buy lots of art materials. Many times I skipped food and bought art material instead. My family couldn't send much money. Fred Marer knew about this, so he came to check me out regularly. He definitely helped support many artists. I came to his house frequently, and he spent time focusing on my work. He didn't have any kids so he almost took me in as a son. I guess I just happened to be interested in art and ceramics so he felt pretty close to me.

**GW: What was your work like then?**

JK: The first pieces I made at Paul Soldner's place were sort of vessel forms. When I started at Chouinard, some of my pieces were a mixture of vessel forms and plates. But these pieces were three or four feet high, with very little openings but a strong gesture of the vessel.

Quickly I moved away from that, too. I don't know why. I can't find a reason. I'm pretty sure at that time I was looking at a lot of works by Voulkos, Mason, Price, and Takamoto.

What I liked most in their work was their sculptural orientation. I guess that's why I started doing more abstract forms.

**GW: Did you work with Voulkos?**

JK: Yes, I went to his place in Berkeley for about six months, before Montana in 1966. Again this was arranged by Fred Marer. Fred took my portfolio to show Pete and Pete said "OK, you can come." I wasn't interested in any credit. I just wanted to work around him.

**GW: What did he give you?**

JK: He said, "Well, if you don't need credit, you don't have to enroll in school. That just costs money. But I want you to do lab assistant work, like mixing clay and glazes and firing kilns." I said, "That's no problem." He said, "Take as much space as you want." So I went there and started to work. Toward the end of each day I went around the department and got the scrap clay. This was the clay a hundred students went through. As ceramic majors, they didn't care. It would go into the trash can and I put it in the mixer. I mixed like one ton of clay every day. Then I fired the kiln. It was great because I wasn't experienced at firing. I had done it for only a year and a half. I didn't know much. Pete said, "You have to fire beginner's work." That was great practice. I was firing three or four kilns every day.

**GW: Did you fire the big kiln?**

JK: Yeah, you know that big kiln. They had just built five new kilns. I was the one who fired that kiln. Nobody wanted to touch them, they were all scared.

I filled up all five kilns and started them at the same time. Nobody had seen all the kilns go like that. Then all the kilns started heating up at the same time. (Laughs) I burned the telephone wires coming into the whole building. The next day I came and the kiln room was a mess. Everybody was there chiseling into the concrete ceiling, trying to get the conduit pipe out. I said, "What's going on?" They said, "Some one has burned the telephone wire." (Laughing) Oh yeah!

**GW: Did Voulkos give you critiques?**

JK: No. It was a very interesting tradition there. Voulkos never gave me critiques, never said anything really. But sometimes he'd say, "Well, you know I'm doing casting tonight, and if you want to come, you can watch." That kind of thing. I was really lucky. Usually there were no students around in his studio. He had lots of friends around at that time, but I never saw any students. He always invited me because he knew I was there to watch how he did things. But no critique.

**GW: What was John Mason like?**

JK: John Mason was very quiet. He was quieter then than he is now. We used to go to their place for dinner, but he never said much. I couldn't figure it out. But he had beautiful pieces. That was good enough for me, just looking at the pieces. I couldn't talk much anyway because my English wasn't good enough. Mason and Voulkos are definitely the two biggest influences in my ceramic work. It was their ideas that I liked.

**GW: What did they give you that was important?**

JK: Just their ideas on work ethic, and their way of looking at materials. There are so many ways of looking at materials and handling them. Looking at their work was just amazing. Other things such as techniques really weren't in my interest. If you want to do something you develop your own technique anyway. Technique is almost like an idea, and everyone needs to define a technique in order to make it your personal technique. I just like their ideas, their point of view in looking at clay as a material and then coming up with some answer for their work. That's always amazing.

**GW: What graduate school did you attend?**

JK: I went to Claremont graduate school with Paul Soldner. I had already built my studio, about 1,600 square feet of inside space, and had a kiln outside. I was working there but I was still young and felt I could not really be independent yet. I needed some people around me. So I talked to Fred Marer and said to him, "Here's a problem. I don't want to go to undergraduate school because I've done what they're doing now. But I don't have any credits, so no school would look at my application." Fred said, "Well, that may be true but it can't hurt so why don't you just try?" I said, "Where?" He said, "Well, maybe Claremont," because Paul knew what I was doing. Fred talked to him. Paul said, "OK, I'll at least help push the reviewing committee." Because there were five guys to make decisions. Nobody liked

the idea of my coming, so it didn't go. I said, 'That's OK, that's what I expected.'

Two years later they called me back. Paul had continued talking to everyone and they finally agreed to accept me as a graduate student on a trial basis for one year. If I did OK in one year, they would accept me in the second year as a regular graduate student. I said, "Fine." They told me, "We want to see some real work, so bring it over."

My studio was only about twenty miles from Claremont. But what they said was really funny. At the time I had a two-person show with Pete Voulkos in a Los Angeles gallery. All my best work was in that show. So I asked, "Can you either wait for the show to end, or go see that show?" "Pete Voulkos? You have a show with Pete Voulkos?" they replied. Then there was no argument about my portfolio. That's how I got into graduate school.

**GW: After that did you work at the Archie Bray Foundation in Montana for a while?**

JK: I was at the Archie Bray in 1967 when David Shaner was there. I was among the first group of people who came under a summer working grant from the NEA. Archie Bray picked about six people to come and work for two months. It was great for me. I had just started ceramics and anything was great. Shaner was a very quiet and really nice person.

I didn't have much of a chance to become acquainted with him and his family because I lived downtown and only went to the studio to work. It was funny. I had to start looking for a place to live in Helena. I saw a sign that said "Apartment For Rent," so I went in but they said, "Sorry, just rented." I saw another sign and went in but was told the same thing, "Sorry, just rented." I didn't know. I was young and never had that kind of experience.

In Japan it's nothing but Japanese everywhere. (Laughs)

I drove around and couldn't find any place to rent. Two days later I saw the same sign up. So I said to David, "Shaner, you know what? It's really funny, I can't find a place to live in Helena. I go in and they say, 'Sorry, I just rented,' and I'm driving around the next day and see the sign is still up.

What's going on?"

I didn't even think of it as prejudice. Shaner knew right away, so he said, "OK, let me try to find a place." He picks up the phone, and bang, you know what? One shot and he got me a space. He didn't tell me anything and I didn't realize it because I was so young and naive. I didn't know what was going on.

I started to work at the Bray. One day I became curious about what's going on outside the city a bit and drove around outside, just cruising around to see the countryside. All of a sudden someone threw a big rock at my pickup. I said, "What's going on? I'd better get out of here." Later I asked David, "There's something funny going on here, but I can't figure it out." He told me then that it was prejudice against Orientals and that someone probably

saw me as Chinese. He said people here have strong feelings about the Chinese because of mining people. He told me, "You'd better watch out where you go."

After two months I graduated from Claremont in 1971 and right after that got a job in New Hampshire.

I had gone to Japan to work at Goro Suzuki's studio. I still remember when I received the first call from New Hampshire in Japan. I told them I couldn't come to teach right away because I was in the middle of making things. They said they would wait. By the time I had returned to Los Angeles it was May, and they almost didn't have any choice, but they wanted to hire me anyway with a three-year contract. I said, "Listen, I can't do it because I didn't get even half the support you promised me. It's too bad but if I can't do what I believe, I just can't stay."

Nevertheless, I accepted the position and stayed for one year. I built a pretty big kiln, and another one outside right next to the sculpture department. I had a great time with the people, with the students and with the people outside the school, but the problem was with the administration. It was unfortunate but sometimes that's the way things go.

**GW: What were your other teaching positions?**

JK: New Hampshire was my first job, and I was really discouraged. I said, "If this is what teaching is all about, forget it, I will never teach." I decided to go back to my California studio and do my work.

I was almost packed and ready to leave when Norm Schulman, who was teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, called me. "Listen," he said, "do you want to come here and teach?" I said, "No, I'm sorry." (Laughs) "I got beaten so badly I don't like teaching any more." He said, "Do you know anything about Rhode Island School of Design?" I said I didn't know anything about it. He said, "OK, I'm not going to push you, but I want to see you, so why don't you come down for a couple of days and stay at my place and have a good time." That sounded fine. I had only met Norm once and we had gotten along pretty well. I went down and he showed me the school. It was a great school. Wayne Higby was teaching there before he went on to Alfred. I told Norm, "Maybe I'll try it for a couple of years, but I'm not going to stay here too long. If that's OK, I might try it." He asked, "What made you change your mind?" I said, "You know, Norm, when I saw your art library and museum I changed my mind because this school has to be damned serious about art education to have this kind of library and museum. But," I said, "there are a few conditions. You've got to come up with some studio space for me, because nobody in the department had a studio at the school at that time.

All the kilns are too small for me. I need to take one kiln down and then I want to make it bigger. If you buy the material I will build it." I said, "These two requirements must be met, otherwise I can't take it." He said, "Give me

one hour." He went and talked to the president and came back and told me, "Deal's done." So I moved to Rhode Island. I decided to stay there for two years.

**GW: What did you do when you left Rhode Island School of Design?**

JK: I went back to Japan and built a studio there. Later I returned to the U.S. and went to work for six months in New York City at a place called "Clay Studio" with Rose Slivka and Susan Peterson. While there I received a call from Richard DeVore in Cranbrook, Michigan inviting me to do a lecture there. Cranbrook had called me two years before asking if I would be interested in teaching there. I had just built a studio and hadn't even started to do my work. I said, "That's impossible." So I figured they had found somebody already.

It wasn't the case.

So I went to Cranbrook to give the lecture. I thought it was just a slide presentation and lecture, but I found out they were secretly interviewing me. I said to the printmaker, Conner Everts, "Listen, what's going on here? I can't believe all the teachers sitting right in front of me. And just about all the students and even the president are here." He smiled and said, "You've just been interviewed." I told him, "Listen, I told you I'm not interested in teaching because I just built a studio in Japan." I returned to New York, but he called me every day. "I'm telling you this is really a great place and it would be a great experience for you. So what can you do? The worst that happens is that you try it and it doesn't work out you just go home."

I gave up after one week and said, "I have to come out and look the department over." So I spent one week checking everything out, crawling around in the materials and equipment. It was really a disaster. Eighty-five percent of the equipment wasn't functioning. The kiln wasn't working. The students loaded only the top half of the kiln because they said they couldn't get to temperature at the bottom. I said, "Are you kidding? Nobody is teaching you how to fix that problem?"

I came up with a precise budget. They needed to rebuild the kiln room because water had started leaking through the roof. The whole kiln room was like ice. I made a proposal and it was a lot of money, close to a million dollars to fix things. I knew they weren't going to come up with that. The president called me three days later. He said, "You know I can't do it in one shot, but can we do it in two years?" So I said, "Let me figure this out, give me one day." I told him if he did it over two years, this is first and this is second. Then he did it, and came up with the budget. I said it would take two years of serious fixing and that I would probably stay on for another two years to really do something with the new equipment. I would be there a minimum of four years, but after that, who knows. I was there for seven years, before moving to Omaha, Nebraska.

**OMAHA, NEBRASKA**

**GW: When did you come to Omaha, Nebraska?**

JK: While I was in Cranbrook I did a project in Omaha in 1982 and needed to go back and forth for over eight months time. I was teaching and commuting and trying to finish this ceramic project. It was my first large scale project in ceramics. It was a dango, like a big dumpling.

I got to know a lot of people while I was doing the project there. A guy who owned a pretty good sized property in downtown Omaha said, 'Well, you look like a pretty interesting guy, so if you ever think of moving to Omaha, I have lots of space I could show you. You could take as much space as you want.'

The building he showed me was 168,000 square feet in size and six stories high. It was an old factory building right downtown in Omaha, where Bemis used to be housed. I looked at it, and since I had already been at Cranbrook for seven years, I was seriously thinking about moving on to some other place and doing my work. This offer came and I looked at the space.

The guy said, "If you send me a drawing for your living space and studio, I'll build it according to your drawing. I sent him a drawing of a space about 7500 sq. ft. and asked, "How much do you think it's going to cost for this?" He said, "About \$550 a month." I said, "That's fine, that's great." So I moved there and then after three years I knew that Omaha worked for me. Omaha is not a big city, only about 700,000 people. You can still move around without huge traffic problems. The people are nice. The city is relatively safe and everybody is hardworking.

**GW: Do you miss being in a more cosmopolitan center with museums and all?**

JK: Not that much. I never really liked living in a big place. I enjoy going there for a visit and I know it's a different thing living there, but compared to my needs in the studio and my whole life style, the idea of having a museum right next to me is not an important issue. One thing I do miss not living in a great city is the food. I'm a food freak. I love good food.

After three years of leasing this space, and knowing I had a five-year lease, I said to myself, "If Omaha works this well, I'd better get my own building." So I started looking around. Then the building next door came on the market. It was a 40,000 square feet building with four stories. But it was in really bad shape. All the windows were busted, and the three huge skylights were damaged with water leaking all through the building and causing damage. But the price was right. Fixing it up was an enormous cost, but I liked the location, the interior space, and the size of it. I decided to buy it.

**GW: What did it cost?**

JK: It cost me \$130,000, and everyone thought I was crazy and paying too much. That was eleven years ago. Now you can't buy any building for that price, even with busted windows and water damage. I said, "Listen, I like the way the building is. Space-wise it's perfect. The first floor is on the side

of the hill so I can drive in on the first floor. I can drive onto the second floor as well. I'm going to use the top floor for storage of finished pieces. That's where I can keep the big pieces, where I could see them for feedback. The second floor has a high fourteen-foot ceiling with windows all around, it could be the studio, glazing area and kiln space. The third floor is only nine feet high but it doesn't matter because it will be a living space. There will be two assistants' apartments and my apartment."

After working in that building for seven years, I decided to purchase another building across the street which was a semi-truck repair garage with a one-story, barrel-vaulted roof, about 10,000 square feet. At that time, I was doing the big project at Mission Clay in Fremont, California, making those eleven-foot pieces. I couldn't find any space in my existing building to store this work when the project was completed. I wanted to keep these pieces and not sell them. This new building would be perfect for that. So now I store the large pieces in there, as well as about two hundred tons of clay. Last year I purchased the building next to that garage, which was the rest of that half block across from my studio, another 50,000 square feet. So it all worked out OK, and it's very convenient for making art work.

**GW: What is the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art?**

JK: The Bemis Center for Contemporary Art was started by Ree Schonlau in 1981. In those early days it was called Alternative Worksite. It started out as a program that put artists to work at industrial sites so they could realize larger scale work and the excitement of working within an industry. Artists, teachers and students would come for the summer to work at an old brickyard. The program was well-liked and since there were many buildings available at reasonable prices in urban Omaha, they thought they would like to see the program operate year around.

In 1985 the non-profit opened up fourteen studios, a gallery, and a large ceramic sculpture facility in the old Bemis Bag Company warehouse which they rented from Mercer Management Company. After several years in that building, the board members and Ree thought about buying a building to relocate the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts into a home that they owned. So they purchased a one hundred-year-old six story building in 1988, right down the street, for the artists' residence program and galleries. But the American economy went downhill just then and they couldn't successfully undertake fundraising. But they developed three floors and got the program going in the new space in 1995.

Their basic interest now is to give visual artists a place to work and support their creativity, it is open to anyone via competition. You send your portfolio and a jury of five judges selects recipients. There are two application deadlines per year, and each time they get about 350 applicants, from which they pick thirty-five people to support. Fifty-percent of the artists are from abroad. Each artist receives studio space and living space and a monthly

stipend, with two assistants to help them, with the possibility of a show. High quality exhibitions are going on all the time in the gallery spaces there.

**GW: So you have three buildings of your own now?**

JK: No, I actually have four. (Laughs) A few months ago I bought another building three blocks away. I want to move all the storage material out of the beautiful clear span building and make a museum out of it.

**GW: What will the museum contain?**

JK: Seventy percent of it will be my work. My hope is to accumulate a major number of my works and secure them in one location instead of letting them go to different places.

Then I will have works by other people I admire, and not only art works but objects that have influenced me. Or there may be scheduled shows curated by someone else. There are a lot of people not getting enough opportunities to do shows, in ceramics as well as in other visual arts. I want to use it for this purpose, at least while I'm alive.

**GW: Are you planning it as a non-profit organization?**

JK: Yes, I applied for non-profit status and got it right away. I have to work on its structure and that's a lot of work in addition to what I'm doing now. I'm about to hire someone to help with the fundraising.

## **STUDIO PRODUCTION**

**GW: How many people do you have working in your own studio now?**

JK: Right now there are five people in the studio. Three clay assistants and two in the office. The clay assistants basically do everything for me in keeping the studio going. That means maintenance of the studio, cleaning up, inventory, and working on the objects. They do the preliminary work, and I finish it. But it depends on how long the assistant has worked with me. If someone stays five years, then I'll say, "OK, I want to make this kind of shape," and he will do all the preparations and start building it up. Then I'll come back to do the final fix on the shape. At the beginning they work side by side with me, so I can watch all the time, but eventually they do build it themselves and I finish it.

**GW: What kind of kilns do you have?**

JK: I have three up-draft kilns, two of which are car kilns. The biggest car space is six feet wide and eight feet deep, and I can load a piece eight feet tall. It's pretty big, and I'm talking only about loading size. If the piece is larger than eight feet tall, I need to go somewhere else for firing. I've made only a few pieces that don't fit into this kiln.

Right now I'm firing most of my work at cone 7, except for the work I did in Europe a few years ago at the European Ceramic Work Centre, which were all cone 04 firings with low fire glazes. I'm still interested in low fire and am making lots of tests to see what I can do with it. So I'm getting ready for it.

**CW: How do you sell your work?**

JK: I have a series of galleries, perhaps nine in all. I have a very strict contract agreement with each gallery. If they want to give a discount to a client that's their business, but not from my commission. The basic philosophy between the galleries and me is that I'm completely responsible for everything I do in my studio, which is to create and supply high quality pieces when they need it, or do a show. But the minute it leaves my door everything is their responsibility, including ship-ping, insurance, promotion, etc.

A basic difference from other artists' agreements is that I tax all of my galleries 2 ½ % to contribute to Bemis out of all my sales. The fact is that while the artist may be able to exist without the gallery, the gallery could not exist without the artist. So it's better to support some up-and-coming artist, even though by a little bit. If everyone had this idea, it would change things quite a bit. Bemis supports artists' creative activity. It is a non-profit foundation.

So I ask the gallery to give a contribution, if they don't sign that paper, I don't sign the gallery/artist agreement. We have to share some basic idea of art, and not just business.

The gallery relationship relies on the personal understanding. If I have a good understanding with a person in the gallery, some business problem such as being unable to sell or pay for it in one shot becomes a minor problem. When I look for a gallery, I look for a good gallery plus a person with whom I can develop a good relationship.

**GW: Do your big pieces such as the dangos go into private or public spaces?**

JK: Most go to private spaces and some go to museums and public spaces. There is plenty of open space in the West and Southwest. Here in the East it's sometimes a problem. Yesterday a man called from New York and said 'This is a disaster. I really like the piece but I can't put it in my house.' (Laughter)

## **AESTHETICS**

**GW: Tell me about your attitude toward scale.**

JK: When you start making objects in any material you start developing an attitude about scale because you can't deny it. That was the case with me. When I started, the idea of scale wasn't in my mind at all. But I started making relatively large pieces for a beginner.

Four months after I began ceramics I was making three or four-foot-tall pieces. I think these ideas came from being in Southern California in the early 1960s and from looking at the pieces of John Mason and Peter Voulkos. I received a strong impact and also wanted to do something large. But nothing beyond that. I mean, just the physicality of looking at those things and saying, "Wow, this is amazing" was enough for me to start. Then it took probably ten years for me to realize the serious nature of the choice of scale.

With some pieces, large size doesn't necessarily work, while with some pieces small size doesn't work either. As a piece, it has to work on its own level and fall into place to make sense. The issue of scale is definitely part of the object, but to make each piece, either large or small, fall into the spot that makes complete sense, is the work of the artist's creative imagination and ability.

I know people think I am a large-scale object maker, but in what I have done over the years perhaps only ten percent of all my work is large scale. People get drawn into all the large pieces and that's all they want to talk about. It's not only what I do, but it's what people want to talk about. Perhaps it means that my small pieces don't have enough power, which is interesting. Actually, I'm interested in small-scale pieces now and perhaps will focus on that for a while.

If you put a large piece outside next to a large tree or big building, it looks small. In this sense, scale depends on what's next to it. If everything in the world was the same size we wouldn't have to talk about the scale issue. Scale happens because we start comparing and developing our internal feeling about what is large and what is small. Show the big guy, then show the child. It's the visual comparison which creates interesting emotional reaction. The visual artist who deals with scale should take advantage of these things. If I put everything big in the room, it doesn't look really big, unless you have something to help you like a wall or height of ceiling. It's like the music line: if you have the same kind of sound for a long time, that sound becomes something else, but if you have a combination of different tones and spacing of silence between, it makes it more dramatic. We are always faced with the scale of the object and its relation to its surroundings.

**GW: Does intimacy interest you at all?**

JK; Oh, yeah, that's a huge issue in my work. To make a small piece is to be concerned with environment, not with the object itself. In my understanding, intimacy includes lots of things in certain situations with its environment. Some small pieces have a fantastic power. I have some traditional Japanese tea bowls from the Momoyama period which, even though of a small size, have a strong enough visual power to pull the viewer into the piece. Then there is no issue of scale. Scale happens when we look at it: the thing is there, the viewer here, with space between. This allows us to compare. You stand there, the piece is there. But what happens if the piece pulls you into it? The situation changes.

I call this visual power the spiritual scale. If you took a commercial cup and put it beside a great Japanese tea bowl, the cup probably wouldn't pull you into it. But with the Japanese tea bowl, it may be possible. You are in it and you start walking around, seeing it in different ways; you'll see the mountains, you'll feel the breeze. Conventionally if one compared the tea

bowl to a large tree, it hardly exists. Yet by erasing such comparisons in your mind, it sucks you right into its spiritual scale.

When talking about visual power, I'm not talking about the value of a piece, everything made in the Momoyama period is not great. Actually very few pieces speak to me. Lots of things outside Momoyama also speak to me, and it doesn't have to be just ceramics.

Walking on the beach, looking at millions of small stones, we pick one that we like best. We can't explain why it has to be that one that we picked. The choices we make are pretty mysterious. It doesn't have to have any value other than your intuitive choice. As artists, we must rely on the intuitive choice, but once you start worrying about history or other people's opinions, you start to lose the freedom of a creative mind. Everything in the art world basically relies on intuitive value, and that makes you see something else. Sometimes it may happen that you are drawn in by your intuition, and the whole situation changes regardless of whether it is a piece of stone or a ceramic piece or a piece of steel. This is an interesting challenge, and I think about it in regards to scale.

When I make a big piece I learn how to make a smaller piece much better, and when I make a smaller piece it goes the other way and I learn how to make a bigger piece better.

Without having this kind of concern I don't think I could develop this concept. I'm really watching all the time, trying to learn from small things and then large things, and going back and forth. It's an exciting and endless thing, too. If I had to choose between large or small, and get really serious in my life direction, I probably would choose small.

**GW: When do you choose to use color, and what colors do you choose?**

JK: Describing color is probably the most difficult thing for me to do. My color choices and my taste for color is intuitive. I can't tell you why I use certain colors over and over. Or why I work with a very limited combination of colors. But I do. Ceramics doesn't have the choices of colors that regular painting has. You mix a stain into a slip, paint it on, and fire it.

There is very little change. To change a color hue in ceramics, you have to make a big conscious effort. So I use basic colors: turquoise, yellowish orange, blue, pink, reddish brown, black and white. Then with maybe seven colors of the same hue, I just try to play with that. I put one color next to a different one so it will start reacting with the first color. Then this color doesn't look like it did by itself. What I try to do is build experience from intuitive decisions, especially in ceramics. Until you fire it, the real color isn't there. Regardless of how many years we are doing it, we are still just making a guess.

**GW: Do you use certain colors for certain forms?**

JK: Pre-deciding on a choice of color for a certain form is something I don't do. I'm pretty open, and again it's what I see at the moment. If I have a biscuit-fired piece in front of me, I may stare at it for three or four hours, thinking of what I should do. If the piece is over four or five feet tall, the drying process takes three or four months, and allows me to look at it and think about color. That's why I like to have the pieces in the studio, so I can intentionally look at the form while it is drying. But I have a pretty good idea of what I'm going to do for each shape. Even the dango shapes, whether skinny and tall or short and fat, look similar in shape but have completely different characteristics. So it's a very natural, every day sort of conversation between me and the piece before it comes to the final idea of how it should be handled.

The smaller pieces are more difficult, especially if I want to play with the parts. I have hundreds of them. I say, "OK, this combination is interesting, and I have five or six ideas right away. But I'm not sure, not really confident enough to make one choice out of the five I just keep it there and put a little note on it, and then keep coming back and sometimes change the colors completely. Sooner or later I see the combination of colors and how to do it and what is the best out of five. Then I just do it.

**GW: Currently you seem to be giving almost equal importance to two-dimensional painting. Why?**

JK: Painting is a different exercise because the material allows you to change immediately anytime you want, especially when you are working with acrylic, which dries almost immediately. If you don't like it, take it off. If you want to add color you can put that color directly on it. The challenge from painting is continuous.

When I'm doing clay work, let's say building a piece, when I'm finished I may see a great way of painting it. But the technique won't let me do it. I have to let it dry, then biscuit-fire it, and then I can paint it. It's a mechanical break we can't skip.

I like the immediacy of painting but at the same time it's much harder because it could keep on going without a break. It challenges me all the time. When I'm painting, often times I get up in the morning, not even having coffee, and go straight into the painting studio to look at it. If I see some way to improve it, I start doing it right away. This would never happen in ceramics. I like that difference between painting and ceramics. The bottom line of this basic difference is that it gives me another way of thinking and doing things.

Right now I'm searching for a characteristic approach to painting. It's probably an abstract search. I'm doing a lot with drip painting now, a take-off on the way glaze moves.

Some paintings have a close tie to my ceramic ideas. Some ceramic pieces take advantage of the way glaze melts down and moves on the surface. I

like the idea of things moving down on the surface. I first started using squeegee bottles on my ceramics. I wanted to add one color dripping on a black background. Or two or more multiple or overlap drips.

Most of the time I just do a black splash onto white and let it drip naturally. I like that combination of natural and mechanical. Then in the background I use a very spontaneous brush mark behind the drips. I paint first with brushes, rarely just use dripping first. If I have a spontaneous drawing and then drip it, the whole thing changes.

**GW: I have heard you refer to a Spanish painter named Antoni Tapies. Why do you like his work?**

JK: For some reason I have liked his paintings since I was seventeen years of age, and they are still among my favorite paintings. His work is abstract, usually very clear and not loaded with information, and minimum in size, with Zen influences.

It's hard to say what Zen is because I believe it is a way of living. It's not even a philosophy. Not having the environment that allows you to live that way, the only way to get close enough is an intellectual approach, or a philosophical understanding of it. I know in my mind that Zen is a way of living, and one must completely devote one's life to it. To come a little closer is to read books and have an intellectual understanding, even though the intellectual understanding, I realize, is completely different from its reality. But I'm still interested in it. I can't help it. The next thing to do is to go to the temple and look at the old gardens made by Zen priests, which was the visual expression of their life and beliefs. Go sit there for a couple of hours and look. Whatever I get out of it, is probably the closest I can get to it. The other day a person asked me a question about the exhibition downstairs [in St. Paul's School]. I almost said, "Why don't you just go look at it?" (Laughs)

When we look at the exhibition it's almost impossible just to leave all our knowledge and past information at the doorway, and then walk into it completely empty, to absorb it with-out being influenced by the information we already have. This is really the most important and pure experience one could have from visual experiences, though it is very difficult once we know some information. Sure it influences us. We can't help it. That's the way we are.

**GW: Are there conflicts that arise when you live in two cultures, as with Japan and America, and have you tried to resolve them?**

JK: This was never a problem with me. I wasn't even conscious of crossing over two different cultures, because what I am is definitely resolved from spending my childhood in Japan, as well as spending most of the time, after twenty-one years of age, in this country.

It is the mixture of information and influences, and the freedom of doing things. All of that really formed my life and became as one. I agree that if I

had lived in Japan without coming here I no doubt would have been doing things completely different. If I came here in 1963 and didn't return to Japan but stayed here, I'm pretty sure I would be different now, too.

So the mixture of these past experiences with or without choices is really an important part of who I am now. But it is impossible to dissect and analyze which part is important and which wasn't, or which is a strong influence from Japan and which is a strong influence from America. What we are about is not the information but the accumulation of experiences that makes us who we are. Certain experiences make me think, so that my thinking process is always one step behind the experiences. That clearly shows the way I make my pieces, too.

**GW: How do you feel about yourself now?**

JK: I feel I'm very lucky that I became what I am now and I had no control over it. You know, it's really accidental. I didn't plan to have Jerry Rothman take me to Fred Marer's house. Fred didn't plan anything either. He didn't know we would be that close. It just happened that way, and because Jerry took me to Fred's house and because I saw so many ceramic pieces at Fred's house, that's why I became seriously interested in doing ceramics.

Otherwise I would probably be doing painting.

**GW: Would you change anything if you had a chance?**

JK: If I could add one more thing it would be architecture. While I don't like the reality of being an architect, with all the accompanying client and political negotiations, I like the idea of architecture. I practice architecture in my pieces, working out with space and volume. When I do the renovation of my buildings, space is already existing so I don't have much freedom there. Still, I start thinking, "What if I knocked a hole here, how would the light bounce around, or if I built a wall there and then changed the direction of light so this room might glow a little more." It's endless.

**GW: How would you like people to remember you?**

JK: It might sound awkward, but my reason for doing my work is curiosity. It is a pure personal curiosity of searching myself and then searching for directions. Nothing more than that. The exhibitions and all the rest are secondary. Sure, it helps if I show and get financial support which I need in order to keep on doing what I want to do. Perhaps I survived because I didn't have a show with a gallery for about fourteen years. I try to stay as pure as possible about my first important thing, which is to be true and honest to myself, to search myself and to express what I feel. If I get something out of it and then do better work, then I believe I'll be really happy.

If people say my work is great, then I get support. On the other hand, people can say it's shit, then I don't care. (Laughs) Because in the beginning that happened to me: nobody said much to me. I didn't like the galleries, but the gallery came to me. I didn't even have much to me. I didn't even

have a show. Nowadays when young people go to art school they have a class on how to make a portfolio. I keep telling them, "Why worry about making a portfolio? No matter how hard you try good portfolio, it's the work that counts. You have to have good seed to grow a healthy plant. Let's worry about foundation and fundamental stuff. You have to center yourself first and then center the clay. All the rest will follow.