



Dwarfed by his giant head sculptures, the ceramic artist Jun Kaneko inspects his works in a beehive kiln at Mission Clay in Pittsburg, Kan.

Takashi Hatakeyama

MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Giants Of the Heartland

Jun Kaneko makes some of the largest ceramic sculptures ever seen. And he does it in a Kansas sewer-pipe plant.

FOR the past couple of years Jun Kaneko, the ceramic artist, has been driving every month from his studio in Omaha, five hours south to a sewer-pipe factory here, called Mission Clay. There, in a pair of beehive kilns from the turn of the last century, he has been making what must be some of the largest ceramic sculptures made, maybe the largest ever made.

They're Easter Island-like heads, the size of baby rhinos. Or they're abstract, in hollow shapes like lozenges or lima beans or dumplings — he calls them "Dangos," which is Japanese for dumplings. Or, in one case, a little like a ship's billowing sail, each one weighing thousands of pounds and rising up to 13 feet.

The kilns evoke Celtic ruins, like the ones Irish monks lived in 1,000 years ago: circular, nearly 20 feet tall. They have come, some of them over time, to sprout vines and bushes — nature's whiskers — a sight as odd as that of Mr. Kaneko: stringy-haired; muscular; a gentle, 64-year-old, soft-spoken Japanese-born artist in artsy black clothes, who looks a little like a dumpling himself, smack in the middle of prairie country. There, at a muddy old brick factory, he makes art among men in hard hats hauling sewer pipes on forklifts.

One blustery morning in December, while the two of us headed back north from the plant, past endless rolling farmland, he related the following story, more or less apropos of nothing:

In September 1959, when he was 17, the strongest typhoon ever to hit Japan struck Nagoya, where his

family lived. It was the middle of the night, and thousands of people, caught in their sleep, died within minutes.

"Did you ever hear of a tatami mat?" he asked. "Well, they float."

I needed a second to grasp the point. The water rose so quickly that people sleeping on the mats found themselves crushed against their own ceilings and drowned. Below sea level, the Kanekos' neighborhood consisted mostly of old wood houses, which collapsed, but the Kanekos' modest house happened to be concrete, and the family was able to scramble to a small room on the second floor before the water overtook the first one. "There were fish swimming in the living room," Mr. Kaneko remembered.

The water rose to just below the second-floor windowsill. "And for some reason I decided to stick my hand out the window, into the water," he continued. "Suddenly — it was pitch black so I couldn't see anything — somebody grabbed my hand."

He pulled. His father, finding a body dragged inside, rushed to the window, stuck his own hand out, and another drowning body latched onto him. "We kept sticking out our hands and pulling them in," Mr. Kaneko said. Altogether they fished 36 strangers from death, later fashioning a raft from debris to go get supplies, and eventually boarding everyone in the house for two months.

He paused. "Maybe that helped me come to the

Continued on Page 26



Michael Nagle for The New York Times
 David Byrne in his studio in Manhattan.

Indie Rock's Patron Saint Inspires A New Flock

By WILL HERMES

WEARING a striped sports jacket and very sharp blue suede shoes, David Byrne stepped into an elevator at 32 East 57th Street in Manhattan last October. He was on his way to the Pace/MacGill Gallery for the opening of his art show "Furnishing the Self — Upholstering the Soul."

Mr. Byrne was alone and running a bit late; the reception had begun a half-hour ago. "Anybody up there?" he asked cheerily.

Of course there was. There was a healthy crowd: a mix of what looked like well-heeled uptowners, scruffy Brooklyn bohemians and clean-scrubbed Asian art students. But those who still saw Mr. Byrne as the singer from Talking Heads, who came to catch a glimpse of a real live rock star, were surely surprised by the modesty of the event. And anyone might have been surprised by the artwork itself: simple, whimsical studies of chairs, either drawn with ink on paper, embroidered on framed furniture upholstery or constructed from odd materials, including a steel file cabinet, old encyclopedias and uncooked macaroni.

Yet the show (which has closed, but is documented at davidbyrne.com) was consistent with the idiosyncratic tone of Mr. Byrne's whole post-Talking Heads career, which has balanced playfulness and erudition with a dollop of disorientation. He has been an author and photographer (the book "Strange Rituals"), a film director (the documentary "Ilé Aiyé" and the feature film "True Stories"), a television host (the sadly defunct PBS performance series "Sessions at West 54th"), a PowerPoint programmer (the DVD/book "E.E.E.I. (Envisioning Emotional Epistemological Information)," which

Continued on Page 19

INSIDE

24

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

In the land of Microsoft and Starbucks, sculpture parks come extra grande.

9

ELUSIVE 'ATLAS'

The long, long list of names who have tried to film Ayn Rand's tome is growing again.



7
THEATER
9
FILM
19
MUSIC

24
ART
27
DANCE
28
TELEVISION

ART

Jun Kaneko, right, and his assistants cap off the building of his 10-foot-tall head sculptures. These works have become an obsession over the last decade.



Photographs by Takashi Hatakeyama

Giants of the Heartland, From a Pipe Plant

Continued From Page 1

United States, because after that I wasn't afraid of too much." But of course he didn't just come to the United States. He ended up in the wide-open middle of the Midwest, as far away from the ocean as possible.

A few days earlier, on a clear blue afternoon, Mr. Kaneko, his wife, Ree Schonlau; and I crunched through broken wood and glass in the huge light-flooded upper floor of a defunct Plymouth dealership with magnificent wraparound views of downtown Omaha. Ms. Schonlau, a cheerful Pied Piper with a mop of hair and a habit of calling everyone "dear," founded the nonprofit Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts here around 25 years ago. Since then it has helped revive downtown and made her a local hero.

Mr. Kaneko and she are classic opposites, introvert and extrovert. Bemis first brought Mr. Kaneko to work at the Omaha Brickworks in the early '80s. Recently they bought this dealership as storage for his art, which they've been accumulating. There are now plans for a nonprofit center for creative studies, called Kaneko, which will house 2,000 of his sculptures along with works by other artists. They also have bought a former heating and cooling supplier's warehouse across the street from the dealership. That makes seven big buildings around town that they own, including his studio.

I asked how much room this adds up to, and they needed to stop and calculate.

"About 165,000 square feet," Ms. Schonlau said.

That's 12 times the size of the Metropolitan Museum's Great Hall, or 6 times as large as all the galleries at the Whitney. Space is clearly another reason Mr. Kaneko settled in Omaha, not Manhattan or San Francisco.

A rare sixth-generation Japanese Christian, descended from missionaries with samurai roots (the combination is another rarity), he moved from Nagoya to Los Angeles to study painting in 1963, with little money, few contacts and barely a word of English. It took him hours to decipher the labels in the supermarket.

Now — it's a good example of how art careers flourish outside New York — he has a dozen dealers around the country, pressing him for new work. Between gallery shows (he is committed to six different ones every year), museum exhibitions (on average three, he says) and public commissions (for convention centers, airports, subway stations), he keeps four full-time assistants busy. Ms. Schonlau and her two daughters help oversee the finances, which have become formidable. Mr. Kaneko says he pays no attention to that side of things. The sculptures



he's making in Pittsburg, which will cost him hundreds of thousands of dollars, have no prospective buyer.

By the time he arrived in California in the early '60s, a revolution in ceramics had already begun. Inspired by the Abstract Expressionists, artists like Peter Voulkos, Kenneth Price, Billy Al Bengston, Henry Takemoto, Jerry Rothman and Paul Soldner were making complex sculptures, rejecting traditional ceramic craft and function, pushing toward abstraction and a new ambition of scale.

Using the Omaha Brickworks' beehive kilns in the '80s Mr. Kaneko began making his first "Dangos": hollow-cast sculptures, then up to eight feet high, shaped into soft triangles standing on point or lumpy mounds, gaily glazed with stripes, spirals or dots. Through trial and error, he developed his own techniques for glazes, a subtle variety of colors that kept painting, his first love, integral to his sculptures. By the early '90s, at the invitation of Bryan Vansell, the manager of Mission Clay, he was experimenting with 11-foot-tall Dangos at the company's site in Fremont, Calif.

For Mission Clay this represented an enlightened way to use idle kilns. For Mr. Kaneko it represented a three-year immersion. He brought along three assistants from Omaha, set up a tent village at the factory with showers and he even hired a cook.

The first huge Dangos developed cracks:

months of work down the drain. Then things got worse. A virus left Mr. Kaneko unable to walk without tumbling over. Half his face was palsied, and he became so sensitive to sound that he couldn't bear to hear a door close. To glaze the sculptures he taped the palsied eyelid open, so that he could keep his depth perception, and clung on to a tall ladder for dear life.

But, as he said, there was danger and there was danger.

We toured the studio, which occupies a former industrial building at the Old Market. In a drying room two giant heads nestled under a wood and plastic canopy, like lovers at a wedding altar. Bunches of fired pink, white and gray Dangos, not yet glazed, lined the walls, incubating like the creatures in "Aliens." Immaculate shelves for colored glazes rose before neatly stacked bags of clay, dozens of them. Mr. Kaneko said there were 200 more tons of clay in a building across the street. Upstairs a painting studio the size of a hockey rink had a suite of half-finished striped paintings on the walls, intended for a convention center.

"I like the idea of ambient space, the challenge of it," he said. "People going through a plaza or a convention center may not be conscious of my pieces and may not be interested in art, — but in the end they are experiencing it. And each public project has its own needs, its own 'ma,'" he said, ma meaning "spirit," a Shinto idea, which applies, he said, also to the spaces around, and in between, the sculptures.

THE drive to Pittsburg was through rain and mist, along slumbering fields. Mr. Kaneko said he enjoys the solitude and never turns on the radio. We gradually fell into conversation about his collaboration with Mission Clay. "The common denominator is our work ethic," he said. "There was a lot of suspicion that an artist is somebody who cuts off his ear and attacks the secretary, but then they realized that we have the same interests. A lot of my work involves planning, strategy, management. With ceramics you have to be prepared because after a piece is fired, it's too late to change."

This led him to talk about industrial ceramics, the Space Shuttle, the temperature at which sewer pipes are fired in a kiln and the delicacy of glazes. I stared at flocks of Canada goose gliding over barren trees and past tiny patches of snow clinging to the sides of creeks and to the shoulder of the highway. After several hours we pulled into downtown Fort Scott ("Birthplace of Gordon Parks" the road sign advertises), a hillside grid of cement and brick buildings partly duded up as an Old West town, where we settled into plates of greasy enchiladas at a Mexican restaurant under a riot of paper flags and Christmas wreaths.

I mentioned that back in his studio Mr. Kaneko had caressed a couple of the striped, half-finished heads as if he were petting them.

ONLINE: FROM INCUBATION TO BIRTH

Michael Kimmelmann discusses the artist Jun Kaneko's latest project: nytimes.com/design

Smooth and rounded with flat, impassive features, or sometimes without any features at all, his heads have become an obsession over the last decade. "I made 10 of them, which sat in the studio where I looked at them for about five years. Then I started to pair them because the pairs created conversations."

How does he decide which get stripes or dots? "I don't know how it happens, but over the months they will speak to me: 'I want a polka dot.' Or whatever." The critic Arthur Danto has compared the results to colorful kimonos on sumo wrestlers: joyful patterns lightening hulking forms.

We reached the plant, past several forlorn malls, and hopped through a muddy parking lot where wood palettes were stacked with huge ceramic pipes. Inside, the place was quiet, dark and mostly empty. Numbered pairs of barnlike doors designated different drying rooms, the first of which was Mr. Kaneko's. Dozens of his Dangos, bisque-fired, huddled like dinosaur eggs. Some were cracked; he said he was hoping to salvage these by incorporating the cracks as decorative elements, an approach he related to the Zen concept of Sabi, the embracing of flaws.

Wandering through the plant I unlatched a pair of double doors to a different drying room and was stopped short. In the dim light was a Greek temple: rows of standing sewer pipes, 13 feet high, each nearly 4 feet wide, belled at the top like Doric columns, stretching toward infinity.

Down a long corridor opening to the outdoors, the rounded kilns sat in rows like eggs in an egg carton: a village of beehive huts. In the first of them Mr. Kaneko and his assistants had shoehorned several 13-foot-high Dangos, closely packed together. In the second kiln immense heads, wrapped in plastic, faced off nose to nose.

I heard what sounded like church bells. Outside, several plant workers were unloading another kiln, checking for cracks in sewer pipes by gently tapping them with hammers. Their clanks mixed with the hum of engines and with a few passing train whistles.

Tom Harter, the plant manager, happened by. A rangy, bespectacled man with a hangdog



expression, he told me about the factory (which he said had fallen on hard times in the '70s, when plastic temporarily displaced ceramic) and about his regard for Mr. Kaneko. "A lot of people have concepts and creativity, but to combine them with management ability is exceptional," he said.

Back in the drying room, with a Japanese brush in hand, Mr. Kaneko was dragging over a ladder to begin glazing the surface of a nine-foot Dango, top to bottom. The process was hypnotic, the room silent and still save for the slight buzz of a heater. Gradually the sculpture gained a velvety, matte coat.

That evening in the plain, furnished cottage he rents for himself and his assistants (shag carpeting, overhead lights, ceiling fans), he made baked catfish in parchment, with pasta and asparagus. It seemed about the most ambitious dinner somebody could devise with ingredients from the local Wal-Mart.

The cottage was intimate, warmed by food and conversation, far away from the big empty spaces he keeps populating with his brightly colored sculptures, as if he felt compelled to fill a void. "Scale has its own power," he said. "An unsuccessful big piece can still cause people to say 'Wow!' And although that's the last thing I want, just to make people say 'Wow,' I do expect you to look at big things differently. Small pieces you can turn around in your hand, you can look down at. Big pieces you have to look up at. It's the difference between looking at a flower or up at a tall tree or at a mountain."

He thought for a moment: "I like pieces that I have to look up to."



Right, Mr. Kaneko entering one of two beehive kilns at the Mission Clay factory in Pittsburg. Below, 13-foot-tall Dangos are prepared for drying. The sculptures will dry for a year before they are bisque-fired to harden the clay.

