Jun Kaneko @ Rena Bransten

Posted on 29 June 2012.

"Untitled Dangos", 2011-12, glazed ceramic, 23 x 20 x 11"; 73 x 33 x 22"; 25 x 17 x 11"

In a universe numbed by conflict and ideological posturing, the art of Jun Kaneko feels like a tonic. Renowned for the ceramic megaliths he calls *dangos*, and for his equally accomplished paintings, drawings, installations, glassworks and opera sets, Kaneko, like Matisse, seems drawn to the power of pattern.

Mixing weight and whimsy, Kaneko makes us genuflect and smile at the same time, which is not a trait many artists share. The legacy of high Modernism, to which he is heir, is all about seriousness, and Kaneko is nothing if not serious. Indeed, the fortitude and technical expertise required to build ceramic vessels that weigh several tons and measure up to 11 feet tall would be enough to siphon the joy out of any endeavor. Yet a sense of play runs through everything he does.

For insight into the artist, consider the word *dango*, which in Japanese means “dumpling”. It is not a tag most people would affix to objects that require forklifts to hoist. Other clues come from the iconography (polka dots, quavering grids, gauzy circles, resolute geometric blocks and crosshatched forms) that he’s used for decades. Looking at it, it’s easy to imagine Kaneko in communion with Mondrian, Jasper Johns, Yayoi Kusama, Ellsworth Kelly and a host of other masters. But in point of fact, Kaneko, like so many modernists, draws inspiration from sources that predate modernity.

The artist arrived in the U.S. from Japan in 1963 when he was 21, and he immediately fell in with a group of Southern California artists who were then revolutionizing clay: Peter Voulkos, Paul Soldner, Ken Price, John Mason—all of whom were quick to accept him as a peer. Their influence, as Kaneko’s early work attests, was profound; yet the artist, to this day, remains resolutely Japanese in outlook, imagery and process. Almost everything he paints, draws or sculpts can be traced to non-Western sources: the interlocking circular forms to Japanese rock gardens; the polka dots and stripes — and even the domed-shaped *dangos* themselves – to kimonos and other ceremonial artifacts; the hard-edged geometric shapes to Edo-period kettles; and the ragged, watery lines to woodcuts and textiles.

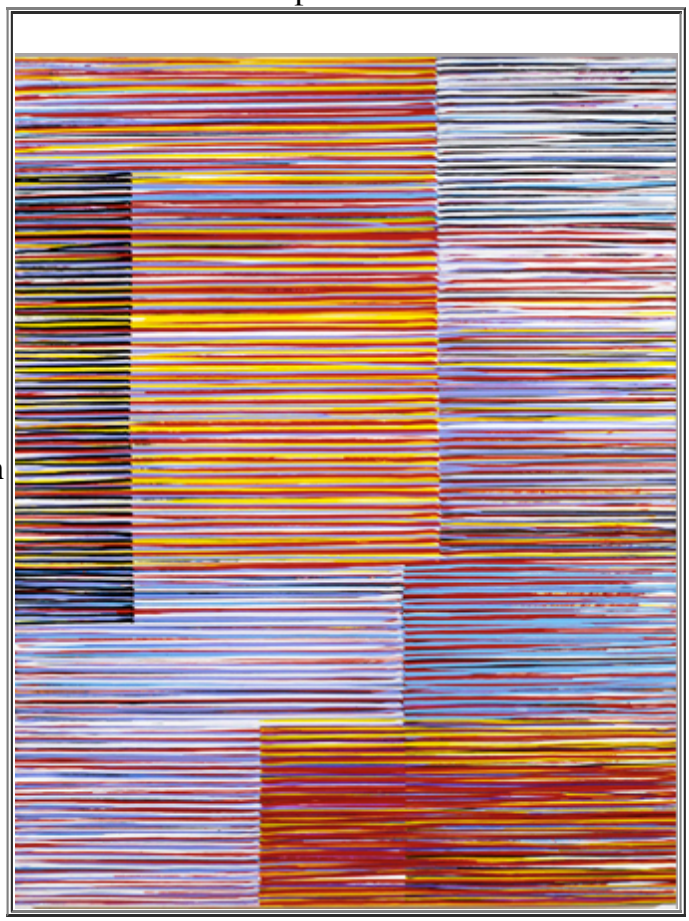
In the 12 *dangos* on view here, which range in

"Untitled Dango", 2012, glazed ceramic, 26 x 14 x 10"

height from two to six feet, these associations come together. In their rounded shapes we see masks, heads and stellae, and in their decoration, abstract patterns and forms that have been circulating in ancient and tribal art since the dawn of humanity. Their precise meaning may be elusive, but their power is undeniable. Part of it has to do with our ability to interact with the objects bodily. Another aspect is the artist's idiosyncratic juxtaposition of shapes: the placement of dripping circles at the vertices of triangles, for example, and the mash-ups of opposing colors (red against black, white against red) that create geometric volumes.

Whichever way Kaneko's lines, shapes and colors fall, it's obvious, from their impact, that they are the product of a meditative process.

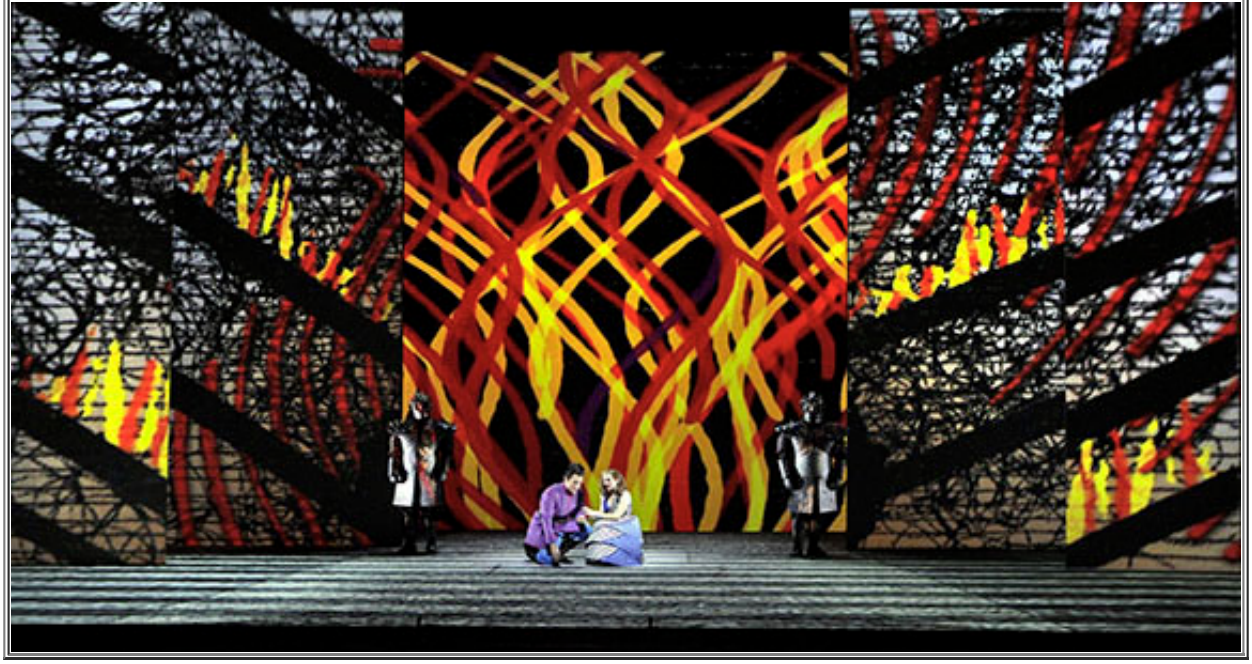
Kaneko often speaks of the Shinto concept of *Ma*. It means an awareness of form and negative space. As he told Susan Peterson, author of the definitive account of his work: "I sit in front of the piece, trying to catch what the shape is saying to me. I walk around the studio and try to make conversation with the works I've made. When I can hear what a form has to say, I start seeing marks and colors on the surface. Whether I am making a large or small piece in the end I hope…that it will give off enough visual energy to shake the air around it."



"Untitled Painting", 1999, acrylic on canvas, 66 x 84 x 2"

Painting and drawing receive the same consideration. Pivot to the left when you enter the gallery and you'll find a large, brightly colored painting composed of thin, wavy stripes. The work is divided into six rectangular fields in which distinctions between foreground and background dissolve with sustained viewing. The effect isn't Op exactly, but the perceptual dislocation afforded by this careful parsing of space and color defines, as well as anything, the intuitive, wide-open approach Kaneko employs. In a companion piece, a kind of diptych, in which thick black, gray, white and blue lines interleave hypnotically, the idea surfaces again with even greater subtlety.

In contrast: A long, narrow drawing on a nearby wall depicts a wave in the sparest terms, as a sloping pair of fringed black lines moving across the ocean floor – the floor being defined by a thin red line. It is as bereft of pictorial incident as the above paintings are effulgent. More reductive still, from the same water series, is a drawing defined by four horizontal lines of unequal length stretched across a white ground. A truncated hexagram, it's the apex of Japanese Minimalism.



"The Magic Flute", with sets and costumes by Jun Kaneko at SF Opera

The one thing we don't get from this exhibition is a demonstration of what Kaneko does in his large-scale installations. For that, check out the San Francisco Opera's production of *The Magic Flute*. Kaneko created the sets and costumes, along with two ceramic busts stationed on the sidewalk outside the San Francisco War Memorial and Performing Arts Center. His designs transform Mozart's loopy, politically tinged romantic fairy tale into an even loopier Asian-tinged slapstick comedy-cum-morality tale. The costumes, backdrops and sets carry all his signature shapes and forms, and the combined effects, which morph before your eyes at epic scale, border on hallucinatory.

Like the exhibition at Rena Bransten, Kaneko's *Flute* "gives off enough visual energy to shake the air."

–DAVID M. ROTH

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Jun Kaneko: "Selected Works" @ Rena Bransten through July 21, 2012.

Mozart: "The Magic Flute" @ San Francisco Opera, through July 8, 2012.

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