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# Beyond Sculptural Boundaries

*Article by Nancy M Servis*

TWO RECENT SHOWS IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA shed predictability that can plague some exhibitions. Though distinct in their scope and intent, both venues – one indoor and one outdoor – presented visual art, particularly ceramic sculpture, through a direct association to stage performance. Jun Kaneko at the Rena Bransten Gallery in San Francisco exhibited nine ceramic sculptures, two paintings and six drawings. Kaneko's exhibition was concurrent with the San Francisco Opera's premier of Mozart's, *The Magic Flute* for which Kaneko created the set designs, costumes and props. *Art in Nature* was the outdoor presentation of 17 ceramic sculptures by 12 Bay Area artists on the grounds of the California Shakespeare Theatre in the East Bay, curated by Berkeley native, John Toki. While distinctly different in purpose, through both exhibitions, the creators seized the opportunity to recalibrate engagement with art and form, while shifting the nature of the





viewing experience to broader associative ideas. Through Kaneko's seasoned and interwoven aesthetics and Toki's artistic resourcefulness, these exhibitions broadened sculptural thought through their inherent vitality and performance-driven mindset.

The six week show of Kaneko's work at the Rena Bransten Gallery opened a synergistic view into the *oeuvre* of one of America's most prolific artists. While Kaneko (born 1942, Japan) is perhaps most recognised for his elongated orb-like ceramic forms, his paintings, drawings and sculptures coalesced into one visual language. When asked how this exhibition evolved, particularly in its kinship with

the *Magic Flute* production, Co-director Trish Bransten explained that she strove to echo aesthetically what played out on the operatic stage, garnering the spirit of Kaneko's inter-related and dynamic vision. This

*Facing page, top: Head. One of the two six-foot tall ceramic heads installed in front of San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House. Photo by Nancy M Servis.*

*Facing page, below: Monostatos and Pamina. Act II in Mozart's The Magic Flute. 2012. Photo courtesy of The San Francisco Opera.*

*Above: Installation View with Untitled, Drawing, 2006 and Untitled, Dangos, 2009, 2011, 2011, 2012.*

*Photo courtesy of the Rena Bransten Gallery and the artist.*

*Below: Tamino Encircled by Animals. Mozart's The Magic Flute. 2012. Photo courtesy of The San Francisco Opera.*



large task of capturing his creative vitality and sensibly exhibiting his work, successfully unveiled his rich use of line, mark making, colour, pattern, form, spatial punctuation and even movement. Oversized ceramic sculptures, for which the artist is also known, were not a part of this display, although two of Kaneko's six-foot ceramic heads were installed outside the main entrance of San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House.

Kaneko's two and three-dimensional works along with the realisation of his operatic designs,<sup>1</sup> are derived from a lifetime of focused effort and broad multimedia inquiry. He arrived in Southern California from Japan in 1963 at the invitation of ceramics professor, Jerry Rothman. Primarily a painter, Kaneko gained footing in the ceramics culture inhabited by Peter Voulkos, John Mason, Ken Price, Paul Soldner and others. Though getting involved in clay was not his specific intent, it fostered a directive that was not limiting to the material. Over time, Kaneko successfully engaged the mediums of textile, glass, ceramics, drawing, painting, installation and public art with periodic inquiries into sound, thus preparing him for the expansive undertaking of operatic design. When recently asked how the forum of opera felt to the artist who also succeeded in other media, particularly sculpture, he replied, "Each media gives you different possibility. But as far as creative freedom goes, I

think it comes from the same place. There is no difference if you are doing stone, ceramics, or bronze or glass or painting. . ."<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition started with a comparatively large acrylic painting on canvas, *Untitled 1999* and, like Kaneko's *Magic Flute* set designs, also introduced the exhibition with streams of colour. Nearby were horizontal drawings of oil pastel and *sumi* ink on paper, or charcoal and oil pastel on rag paper where the unfolding movement of solitary line was featured. These two-dimensional works flowed toward five intermittent mid-sized *dangos* leading to an intimate gallery of four smaller *dangos* that were up to 25 inches in height and placed on pedestals. The term *dango* is a Japanese descriptor for dumpling, an idea that guides Kaneko's prolific output as sculptor. The fact that all of the artist's works were untitled forced direct observation of each piece, intensifying visual engagement. Their totality provided a robust artistic experience that is uncommon in gallery venues.

The works on view were of human scale or smaller, rendering them visually and physically approachable though no less intense in their focus and artistry. As I came to learn after attending a performance of the *Magic Flute* later that week, walking through this exhibition at the Rena Bransten Gallery was a tangible manifestation of what Kaneko created on the opera's grand stage. His digitally animated cascading colour drawings served as the backdrop for every scene, presenting to the audience as if watching an artist sketching in his studio.<sup>3</sup> Sibling

*Installation View of the Exhibition, Jun Kaneko. Rena Bransten Gallery. 7 June – 26 July, 2012. From left to right: Untitled, Drawing, 2006; Untitled, Painting, 1999 and Untitled, Dango, 2012. Photo courtesy of the Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco and the artist.*



actions were found throughout the Bransten show. Colour streamed from paintings and drips of glaze arced over Kaneko's rounded ceramic sculpture, as seen in the five-foot blue and white *Untitled, Dango*, 2008. Performers, some in costumes similar to Kaneko's familiar *dango* shape, populated the stage. Sculptural cousins, so-to-speak, were set throughout the second floor gallery. This visual consistency created a complete aesthetic environment and achieved what Kaneko describes as spirit scale into which the viewer enters while looking at his work. Kaneko recently explained, "To me, this power of sucking (the) viewer's attention into the object, that you forget about (it), you are not in the position of comparing anymore. You are in the piece. You are the piece itself. And when that happens, any piece regardless of what size becomes real powerful and that is what I call the spirit scale."<sup>4</sup> Due to the gallery's thoughtful presentation, coupled with Kaneko's artistic cohesiveness, the exhibition at the Rena Bransten Gallery was memorable as it featured an informed selection of the artist's extensive creative vision. The success of this exhibition was heightened by its parallel to the live performance of *The Magic Flute* and the enlivening creative diversity of the artist.

This interconnectedness among Kaneko's works pervades the Rena Bransten show. While each unique piece carries a rhizome-like connection to the others in terms of mark making, surface treatment, pattern and preferred colorations, it is the spaces in between the works that also contribute to the display's overall success. This idea of the open area between works is essential for the artist who refers to this prioritisation of uninhabited space as *ma*.<sup>5</sup> Viewers might sense this as a visual ebb and flow that is necessary for such works to attain their perceptual power. Kaneko considers this as focusing "more towards a visual art conceptually"<sup>6</sup> and it is through these spatial attachments that Kaneko's works emerged beyond the norm. Due to the visual affinity his art works possess, it is important to be open to these aesthetic conceptualisations. Whatever the preferred surface or media, Kaneko insightfully addressed ceramic, canvas and paper as one total arena of expression.

Through the exhibition *Jun Kaneko*, with its installation of drawings, paintings and ceramic sculpture, he insightfully questioned categorisations of art. The artist's development of image and form using the nuance of mark making with bold colours and pattern attests to Kaneko's extensive inquiry in media of all types, rendering small exhibitions as this aesthetically bountiful. Its undertaking, in conjunction with the San Francisco's premier of *The Magic Flute* featuring Jun Kaneko's

concepts and designs, provided a savoury but too rare an experience for the viewing public. If only such an exhibition could parallel operatic venues in the future.

#### ENDNOTES

1. *The Magic Flute* is Jun Kaneko's third opera. He also designed *Madama Butterfly* for the 2006 Orpheum Theatre in Omaha, Nebraska and *Fidelio* in 2008 for the Opera Company of Philadelphia.

2. Interview with the artist, 14 June, 2012.

3. The artist explained that he made at least 250 drawings for the opera scenes that were then shown during the performance using eight simultaneous projectors. Interview with the artist.

4. Interview with the artist.

5. When discussing the idea of ambient space, the artist explained that, "each public project has its own needs, its own *ma*" with *ma* meaning spirit – a Shinto idea that applies to the spaces around and in between sculptures. See: Michael Kimmelman, "Giants of the Heartland", The New York Times. [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/14/arts/design/14kimm.html?\\_r=2&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/14/arts/design/14kimm.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&pagewanted=print).

6. Interview with the artist.

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*View of the Exhibition Showing Untitled, Painting, 2009 and Untitled, Dango, 2008. Photo by Nancy M Servis.*

