

JUN KANEKO

GERALD PETERS GALLERY
1011 PASEO DE PERALTA, SANTA FE

"I CALL IT THE SPIRITUAL SCALE. I AM TRYING TO...PULL THE VIEWER INTO IT.

Then the physical scale is not the issue. You become one with it." It is understandable if viewers are confused to find that this comment by artist Jun Kaneko and the accompanying ceramics and glass works, on view last month at Gerald Peters Gallery, hail from Omaha, Nebraska. Born in Nagoya, Japan in 1942, Kaneko was sent at age seventeen to Los Angeles by his painting teacher to study with ceramicist Jerry Rothman. He never turned back. Schooled at the Chouinard Art Institute, at UC Berkeley under Peter Voulkos, and at Claremont Graduate School under Paul Soldner, Kaneko pursues his long and prolific career from a vast studio space in Omaha, NE, where he also serves as co-founder of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art.

If the core of Kaneko's ceramic work—the large and very large tuberous, closed forms which he calls *dangos* ("dumpling" in Japanese) seem out of place in Nebraska, they seem oddly at home in the Southwest, where the *dangos* evoke both the columnar and the cushion-shaped barrel cactus of the high desert, and where by now they merit a place within a region rich in a heritage and living history of Pueblo pottery. Kaneko is most widely known for some two dozen public art commissions where he employs a literally monumental scale with which, as an August 2013 CBS *Sunday Morning* feature put it, "the Japanese-born artist has been re-writing the rules on the size and shape of ceramic art."

Glimpses of his public art could be seen in the recent exhibition at Gerald Peters Gallery here in Santa Fe, with the futuristic pair of monumental bronze, enamel and stainless steel heads facing each other in mutual self-absorption—ambassadors of the much larger outdoor versions of his public projects weighing more than half a ton. These metal versions of his "head" pieces here convey an ominous sci-fi feel akin to the giant, art deco idols of Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*, an effect that is absent in Kaneko's colossal heads whose beautiful monochrome or patterned glazed surfaces and placid features—highly individual or thoroughly abstracted—neither infer a dystopian future nor recall some ancient Olmec past.

In the gallery's garden are several examples of one of the more recent additions to Kaneko's monumental repertory, his larger-than-life *tanuki*, based upon the badger-like East Asian raccoon dog that has become a beloved character in Japanese folklore. Each ceramic *tanuki*, requiring a year to make, stands seven feet high and has a color scheme of a piñata. Winnie the Pooh it's not, but the *tanuki* is a magnet for children who respond to its wide-eyed innocence and delight in petting its rich polka-dot and polychrome shape.

The exhibition includes his tall, pensive, kiln-formed glass plinths that lean against the wall like 1960's Minimalist artist John McCracken's planks of fiberglass and pigmented polyester resin. But here there is an ethereal gravitas in the glass that is decidedly lacking in McCracken's surfboard steles. There are also several examples of the glazed raku ceramic wall slabs from the last few years. These easel-size wall panels with parallel vertical strips of intense contrasting hues explore a modernist tradition of juxtaposing geometric shapes of pure saturated colors that runs from Piet Mondrian to Ellsworth Kelly. What Kaneko adds to such inquiry is the sheer visual beauty of the objects that pervades the earlier experiments with the kiln-formed glass.

As visually and mentally engaging as the more recent work comes across in the show, the viewer never fails to be drawn to the disarming simplicity and luminous colors of the drago forms. These hand built, glazed forms employ the ancient raku technique—modernized by ceramicist Paul Soldner and Kaneko—to yield unique, unexpected effects, such as the spider-web, crackled glazed surfaces and black unglazed clay surfaces.

Viewers leave the show with a deeper appreciation, not only for Kaneko's works, but for all ceramic forms. "Universal" is often a hallmark of enduring art, and here is no exception. But in the case of Kaneko's closed-form ceramics and glass works on view here in Santa Fe, while they are evidently at home anywhere, clearly they belong *here*.

—RICHARD TOBIN

Jun Kaneko, *Untitled*, glazed raku ceramic, 24 1/2" x 15 1/2" x 10", 2010

