

# JUN KANEKO

THE SURFACE FIGURES; THE FIGURE SURFACES

by Glen R. Brown

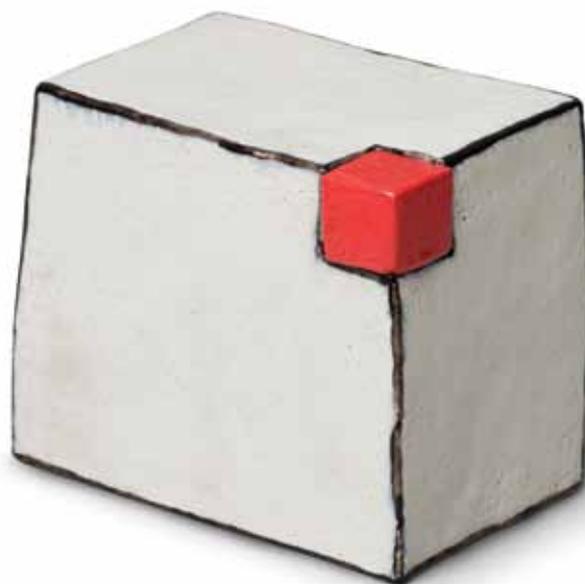


An artist's acumen is often measurable by the degree to which his or her work is apparently straightforward, even elementary, yet impossible to imitate without invoking that artist's presence. Who could paint a composition of three vivid, nested squares without instantly referencing Josef Albers or a trio of stratified rectangles of feathered color without simultaneously conjuring Mark Rothko? And who could create anything approaching a *Dango*, reductive as it may appear, without immediately calling to mind Jun Kaneko? Uniting the vertical grandeur of an ancient stele, the mysterious polished purity of a Shiva lingam, and the flat, bold, and patterned compositions of Color Field painting, Kaneko's *Dangos* are, despite their affinities for minimalism, among the most immediately recognizable of contemporary ceramic sculptures—indeed sculptures in any medium. Such monopolizing of otherwise unremarkable form takes a certain genius. Like the late paintings of Matisse, the *Dangos* are deceptively simple, but there is simply nothing else like them.

To describe Kaneko as a master ceramic artist might seem to belabor the obvious, but in fact it obscures to the point of misrepresentation the complex sensibility that accounts for his work. If his glazed surfaces offer occasional allusions to the decorative schemes of historical pottery they are inseparable from the innovative current of non-objective painting that swept from late Modernism not only the remains of representation but also the last vestiges of intimacy of scale. If his monumental *Dangos* can be compared to oversized vessels, albeit ones in which function falls to an autonomy of form, they are engineering feats more typical of architecture than of pottery. If his sculptures are physically composed of clay, they are constituted conceptually as much in the immateriality of space as in the physicality of three-dimensional form. Kaneko is—like Isamu Noguchi, the great Modernist murmurer of poetry in stone and void—as attuned to the tremulous energy of landscape, literal or figurative, as to the ponderous stillness of the monolith that stands within it. His art transcends any particular medium to embrace the deepest sources of effectiveness in all media, whether he is working in clay and glaze, glass, paint, or even stage-set design.

#### Artistic Breadth

Kaneko's early biography has been well picked over in the quest to expose his aesthetic roots, but it is worth returning to if for no other reason than to emphasize the degree to which clay has been only one vehicle for and not the indispensable terra magna of his art. Born in Japan in the throes of the Second World War, Kaneko grew up with a rebellious streak that turned him away from the conformity necessary for success in academics but sparked an interest in his mother's pastime of painting. Displaying an aptitude for drawing while still in his teens, Kaneko bargained with his parents for daytime lessons with the contemporary painter Satoshi Ogawa in exchange for his diligent completion of high school through evening classes. Ogawa, who recognized Kaneko's talent, saw an opportunity for the burgeoning artist to develop through studying abroad. Drawing on his acquaintance with American ceramics professor Jerry Rothman, who had completed



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1 Installation of *Tanuki* at Millennium Park in Chicago, Illinois, each up to 8 ft. 9 in. (2.6 m) in height, handbuilt glazed ceramic, 2013.  
 2 *Construction*, 8½ in. (22 cm) in length, glazed ceramic, 2014.  
 3 *Dango*, 7 ft. (2.1 m) in height, glazed ceramic, 2013. 2, 3 Photos: Colin Conces.



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a project in Japan in the 1950s, Ogawa arranged for Kaneko to travel to Los Angeles, California, in 1963.

### Finding Clay Through Serendipity

Although this was the time and place of the so-called West-Coast revolution in clay, Kaneko had come to the US to study painting. Only serendipity would divert him from that path and into a career that wed his aptitude for expression in two dimensions to a new interest in three-dimensional form. Immediately after meeting Kaneko at the airport, Rothman deposited him at the home of mathematics professor Fred Marer and his wife Mary, enthusiasts of contemporary ceramics whose extensive collection would later become a mainstay of the Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery at Scripps College. Three weeks spent as a house-sitter among extraordinary works by such avant-garde California ceramic artists as Rothman, Paul Soldner, Peter Voulkos, Ken Price, Michael Frimkess, and Henry Takemoto was sufficient to enamor Kaneko of objects in clay and inspire him to take up the medium in his own work.

In 1966, Marer introduced Kaneko to Voulkos, who accepted him as an assistant in his studio at the University of California, Berkeley. Incited more by the general fire of Voulkos' creativity than by its specific manifestation in Abstract Expressionism, Kaneko produced some vaguely anthropomorphic sculptures painted with broad swatches of thin and dripping glaze but soon began to exhibit the rudiments of his own style in quieter monumental forms embellished with areas of opaque color and vivid patterns. Despite Kaneko's lack of an undergraduate degree, his obvious talent would secure him admission to the graduate program at Scripps College, where he earned an MFA under the tutelage of Soldner in 1971.

That Kaneko could interact regularly with two such dynamic personalities as Soldner and Voulkos and still emerge from his studies without owing a crippling aesthetic debt to either is surely a testament to the clarity of his vision even at this early stage of his evolution as an artist.

That vision, concentrated on simple masses and well-defined areas of unmodulated color, was reified in a series of sculptures begun in the early 70s while Kaneko was serving as a faculty member at the Rhode Island School of Design. Known variously as *Chunks*, *Stones*, or *Potatoes*, these relatively small and aesthetically terse solid ceramic objects were glazed in bright colors and bold patterns. Although conceived for the pedestal, they represented a significant step toward the later *Dangos* and slabs in terms of their aesthetic economy. In this phase of his career Kaneko was still coming to terms with simplicity, recognizing that the same range of expression that encompassed agitation equally embraced serenity and that any fraction of this range was open to the artist's exploitation as a means of touching something fundamentally human in the viewer. The uncomplicated



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4 Installation of Mission Clay Pittsburg Project *Dangos* at Millenium Park in Chicago, Illinois, up to 8 ft. 9 in. (2.6 m) in height, handbuilt glazed ceramic, 2013. Copyright Jun Kaneko Studio LLC. Photo: Takashi Hatakeyama. 5 *Dango*, 10 ft. 2½ in. (3.1 m) in height, handbuilt and glazed ceramic, 2013. 6 *Dango*, 9 ft. ½ in. (2.7 m) in height, handbuilt and glazed ceramic, 2013. 7 *Heads*, up to 8 ft. 8 in. (2.6 m) in height, handbuilt and glazed ceramic, galvanized steel, 2013. 8 Kaneko pictured with one of the *Tanukis* from his public commission at the Henry Doorly Zoo, Omaha, Nebraska, 2014. 9 *Construction*, 18 in. (46 cm) in length, handbuilt and glazed ceramic, 2014. 5–7, 9 Photos: Colin Conces.

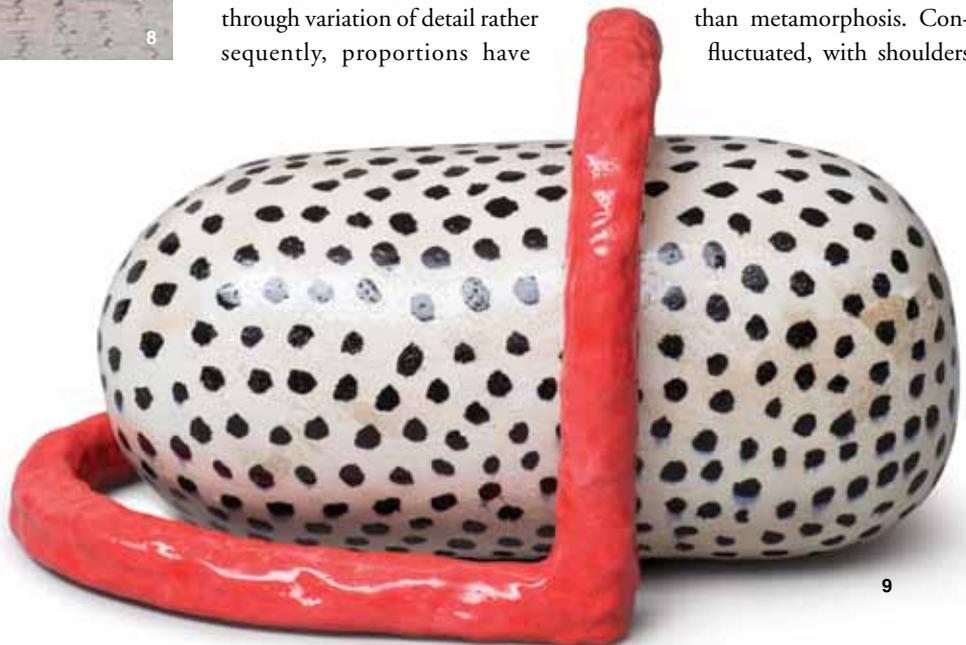
givenness of the resulting sculptures, which stood only at a slight remove from the shape and size of wedged clay, proved a perfect pendant to the quiescent mind.

While achieving this kind of resonance with the viewer through such understated means can be extraordinarily difficult, Kaneko's true genius revealed itself as he began to exceed the intimate scale of his sculptures—in fact, augment that scale to the point of monumentality—without sacrificing the calming serenity of his forms. After accepting a position as artist-in-residence at the Cranbrook Academy of art in 1979, he embarked on the project of setting his sculptures free from the pedestal and providing them with the size to hold their own in the infinitely more complicated space of the world at large. The result was the first of the *Dangos*, rounded like the earlier *Potatoes*, but asserting a more obvious material presence. Their name, however, gave implicit assurance that, regardless of the physical heights that they might reach, their benign nature would not alter. A *dango*, after all, is a ball-shaped Japanese pastry of sweetened rice flour often colored with the cheerful hues of red bean paste or green tea.

### Experimenting with Scale

A 1982 part-time residency at the Alternative Worksite (now the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts) in Omaha, Nebraska, and the concurrent opportunity to use one of the enormous beehive kilns at the Omaha Brickworks provided the means to experiment with a radical jump in scale. The pioneering Omaha Project consisted of four *Dangos*, 6 feet tall and 7 feet wide, and four gigantic *Slabs*, each weighing about 3000 pounds. The opportunity to pursue an even more ambitious project arose ten years later when Kaneko was granted access to some out-of-service beehive kilns at Mission Clay Products in Fremont, California. Accompanied by three assistants, Kaneko brought the necessary equipment from Omaha and proceeded to mix a ton of clay every other day for nearly three months. Consisting of 24 *Dangos* ranging in height from 5 to 11½ feet, the project saw technical advances that included a shift from a single firing to one involving two cycles.

The *Dangos* of the Omaha and Fremont Projects established what might be described as the tentative grounding of an archetype in matter. Like the motifs of Willem de Kooning's *Woman* series or Robert Motherwell's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* the *Dango* is a primal form to be explored through variation of detail rather than metamorphosis. Consequently, proportions have fluctuated, with shoulders



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Wall Slab, 30½ in. (77 cm) in height, cast raku clay, glazes, 2014. Photo: Colin Conces.

sometimes parallel to bases in lozenge-like symmetry and sometimes broadening to form wedges, but the feeling of the *Dango*, the impression it conveys as a touchstone for something intuited but ineffable has remained constant. Its bulk, which might have moved the viewer to apprehension—especially in the case of examples more than 11 feet in height—has always constituted its primary link to the corporeal and the instinctive. Its patterns, whether linear or planar, are its ties to the cerebral and the rational. In the unity of physical form and surface pattern, the *Dango* is like a Pyrenean boulder incised with ancient petroglyphs: a harmony of the eternal and the ephemeral, of geological epochs and biological lifetimes, of the persistence of inanimate matter and the fleeting, nebulous nature of the living.

The *Dangos*, though universally regarded as Kaneko's signature works, define only one front of what has been a concerted advance into largely unprecedented scale for ceramic art. While still at Cranbrook, Kaneko, like Voukos, took up the platter form, negating its utility through cumbersome size and a vertical orientation of display. Evolved from the equivalent of large test tiles, the *Ovals* became occasions for cultivating synergy between painted designs and concave, elliptically delimited surfaces. The *Wall Slabs*—decadents of examples first made at Cranbrook as well as tiles produced for a mural in 1986 during a three-month residency at the renowned Arabia Factory in Helsinki—are the most obvious indicators that Kaneko's early experiences as a painter in oils on canvas have never ceased to inform his relationship with clay. In these works pictorial depth is shallow, with motion emphasized primarily through vertical, and sometimes horizontal, line. Bearing flat pattern, the surfaces are effectively both figure and ground.

## JUN KANEKO

Archie Bray Foundation Fellowship.  
1967

Studied at University of California, Berkeley with Peter Voukos.  
1966

Studied at Chouinard Art Institute, and California Institute of Art, Los Angeles. Studied ceramics at Jerry Rothman's Studio, Paramount, California.  
1964

Traveled from his home in Nagoya, Japan, to Los Angeles, California, to pursue studies in art, stayed at home of collectors Fred and Mary Marer, and was introduced to contemporary California ceramics.  
1963

Taught at Cranbrook Academy of Art.  
1979–86

National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship.  
1979, 85

Taught at Rhode Island School of Design.  
1973–75

Taught at Scripps College.  
1974

Taught at University of New Hampshire.  
1972–73

Studied at Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California with Paul Soldner.  
1971



Cofounds Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, (renamed and expanded from earlier Alternative Worksite) in the newly renovated Bemis Bag Warehouse in Omaha's Old Market district.  
1985

1970  
Early ceramic sculpture.



1981  
1981 Piece from the *Ceramic Constructions* series.



1982  
1982 Residency at Alternative Worksite/ Bemis Center.

1981  
Along with Tony Hepburn, Lorne Falk and Ree Schonlau, Kaneko established an artist-in-industry program called Alternative Worksite in Omaha, Nebraska (later the Bemis Center).

### The Figure Surfaces

The figure in a more literal sense surfaced in Kaneko's work—unexpectedly at the time though, in retrospect, as a logical scion of his investigations of matter and energy—in 1993 in the first of a series of gigantic paired *Heads*. Given the scale of these sculptures—like that of the marble portrait of Constantine on the Capitoline Hill or the heads of the Great Buddhas at Nara and Kamakura—comparison with the *Dangos* is perhaps inevitable. Like the *Dangos*, the *Heads* seem enveloped by an invisible field, not emptiness but rather the strange, immaterial fullness of the void. In a state of supreme serenity, they face one another in suggestion of a mute conversation that holds them, as if bound by gravitational attraction, to a symmetry of form, presence, and energy.

Aberrations from a previously non-objective art, the colossal *Heads* might have acquired an unfortunate explanatory status with respect to Kaneko's *Dangos*—might, in fact, have come to serve, like the revelation at the end of a B-grade mystery, to deflate an allure of the inexplicable that would have been better left alone. Kaneko, however, would not be pinned down or, worse still, inflict that fate on his art. In apparent antithesis of the timeless, detached, and profoundly cerebral *Heads*, he recently introduced a series of figural sculptures based on the Tanuki, the raccoon dog that is both an actual mam-

mal native to Japan and, like Coyote in Native American folklore, a mythical trickster. Originating in the multitude of ceramic tourist trinkets made and sold at Shigaraki, Kaneko's rendition of the Tanuki seems a fugitive from Japanese *anime*, a sprightly embodiment of the contemporary that jolts the universal and eternal gravitas of his earlier work. Gathered in brightly colored and boldly patterned packs in public spaces, perhaps most appropriately Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo, the *Tanukis* seem to express the playful, spontaneous, childlike counterpart of the reserved and disciplined rationality of the mind. That the *Dangos*, somewhere beneath their serene exteriors, harbor both the wellspring of the *Tanukis* and the origin of the colossal paired *Heads* clearly speaks for an aesthetic complexity to Kaneko's art that runs far deeper than relations of surface and form.

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Learn more about Kaneko's career in his article "On Being an Artist" from the June/July/August 1988 issue available to subscribers at <http://ceramicartsdaily.org/ceramics-monthly/subscriber-extras>.



Installation at Gallery Takagi, Japan. 1991



Public Commission, Waikiki Aquarium, Honolulu, Hawaii. 1998



Wall Slabs. 2005

Public Commission, five *Dangos*, Principal River Walk, Des Moines, Iowa, Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation. 2012

2012

Public commission, Henry Doorly Zoo, Omaha. 2014

2014

Residency at Arabia Factory, Helsinki, Finland. 1986

1986

1989 Piece from the *Chunk* series.

1989



1996 Ceramic Tile Walls created at European Ceramic Work Center.

1996

2000 Founded KANEKO: Open Space for Your Mind, Omaha, Nebraska.

2000



2004 *Dango*.

2009 Public Commission Philadelphia City Hall, Pennsylvania.

2009

