

"Pinnacle: 2018 American Craft Council Awards." *American Craft* 78, no. 05 (October/November 2018): 36-41.

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2018 American Craft Council Awards

PINNACLE

WE LIVE IN A DISTRACTED AGE. AT ANY moment, our attention can scatter in a thousand sparkly directions. Staying on task to achieve something meaningful requires dogged, committed action. Focus is difficult – and essential.

The 11 winners of the American Craft Council Awards profiled on the following pages are a testament to this kind of single-minded devotion. Nominated by other College of Fellows members, these artists – along with philanthropists and leaders – have dedicated themselves to craft for more than 25 years. They have reached a pinnacle few people attain because, whatever challenges and distractions they’ve encountered, they’ve kept going, one foot in front of the other.

Gold Medalist Jun Kaneko is a prime example. His manner is low-key, his drive fierce. At age 76, he lives to be in the studio every day, planning, making, pushing ahead. Jewelry maker Thomas Gentile

chose his art form in large part because he knew there’d be no end to the challenges. “I decided this was for me because it was fighting me back,” he says. “There’s always another question about jewelry.”

To stay focused, fiber artist Consuelo Jimenez Underwood sets clear goals every 10 years. In 2019, she turns 70, and she’s not slowing down; “I want to weave as much as I can,” she says. Every day, Janet McCall, executive director of Contemporary Craft in Pittsburgh, asks herself, “What difference can Contemporary Craft make?” That simple question has driven groundbreaking exhibitions that have galvanized her community.

These achievers prove that, with patient persistence, the possibilities are infinite. We hope their words and work inspire you. For more inspiration, please join us at the Minneapolis Institute of Art on October 6 as we honor them.

~THE EDITORS

Gold Medalist Jun Kaneko in his studio. Like so many accomplished artists, he personifies focus.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Watch each of the 11 award winners discuss their careers, triumphs, and challenges at craftcouncil.org.



THERE IS A SENSE OF SCALE TO everything Jun Kaneko does. At 76, the artist has nearly 250 solo shows on his résumé. His work appears in more than 70 museum collections. He's been commissioned to make more than 60 sweeping public art projects, including last year's 82-foot tower, *Search*, in his adopted hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. He's known primarily as a ceramist, but he also paints and works in glass; he designed the sets and costumes for three major touring operas and co-founded two arts nonprofits. To tour any of his several cavernous studio spaces is to be dwarfed by 13-foot Dango ("dumplings" in Japanese) and clay heads so large they take years to become leather-hard. No doubt, only a man with a plan – and serious ambition – could accomplish what he has.

When you dig deeper, though, you see the role of happenstance in his life. He was 17 when the most violent typhoon in Japanese history struck his native Nagoya at night. His family's concrete house stood firm as the wooden structures around them collapsed. In pitch black, he and his father managed to pull in 36 people from the floodwaters through a second-floor window, saving their lives.

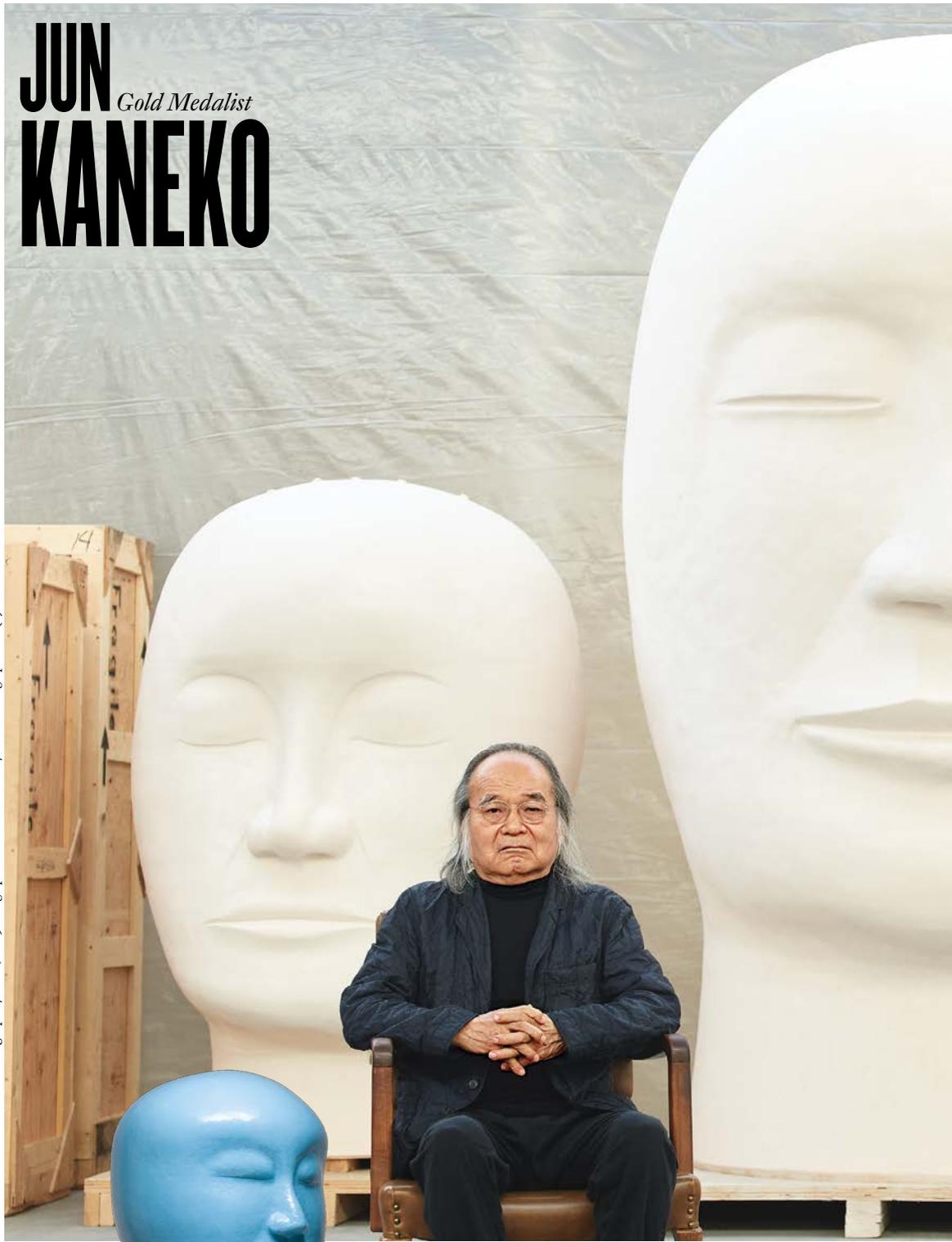
A mere four years later, fleeing an educational system he found stifling, he moved to California, even though he didn't know anybody and didn't speak English. The move didn't seem daunting, he told the *New York Times*; he'd survived a typhoon. "After that, I wasn't afraid of too much."

Kaneko cites not ambition or planning but "pure accident"

Portrait: Laurie & Charles Photographs / Head, 2009 Dango photos: Dirk Bakker / Other Dango photos (2); Colin Conces

JUN KANEKO

Gold Medalist



FAR LEFT:
Head, 1995, ceramic,
8.3 x 4 x 4.25 ft.

LEFT:
Untitled, Dango,
2017, ceramic,
3.2 x 2.2 x 1.4 ft.

Jun Kaneko in his studio in Omaha, Nebraska, where he's lived for more than 30 years. Though he tends to be soft-spoken, his drive and his vision, like his sculptures, speak volumes.



RIGHT:
Untitled, Dango,
2018, ceramic,
7.4 x 2.4 x 1.5 ft.



CENTER:
Untitled, Dango,
2009, ceramic,
6 x 6.7 x 2.3 ft.



LEFT:
Untitled, Dango,
2009, ceramic,
6.8 x 2.5 x 1.5 ft.



for the way much of the rest of his life has taken shape. Landing in Los Angeles in 1963, he ended up house-sitting for Fred and Mary Marer, serious collectors of contemporary American ceramics. He was amazed at their modest home, crowded with hundreds of objects. “It was completely jammed,” he recalls. “Ceramic plates and pieces are all over the floor.” The idea that they were worth collecting was equally amazing. Though handmade teapots and vases were common in Japanese homes, this body of work was different. It was an art form.

“It really did influence and shock me,” he says. “And I said to myself, ‘I should try this.’” Fred Marer introduced him to some of the prime movers of midcentury California ceramics – John Mason, Henry Takekuma, Ken Price, Billy Al Bengston, and Peter Voulkos; Voulkos, along with Paul Soldner, became his teacher. At the time, he didn’t know how remarkable these men were. And he didn’t see it coming, but ceramics became his passion.

Even meeting his devoted wife and partner, Ree, happened serendipitously. In 1982, he was driving with a friend

to Canada. As they neared Pilchuck Glass School in Washington state, Kaneko suggested they stop and say hello to Dale Chihuly. At Pilchuck he met Ree Schonlau, who was taking classes there. She invited him to come to Omaha to join her workshop for artists who wanted to make work in an industrial setting. He’d been teaching at Cranbrook Academy of Art but had been thinking about moving and becoming a full-time artist. Omaha suited him; it was quiet, and there were old warehouses available at reasonable prices. He’s been there for 32 years.

So if Kaneko didn’t set out to take the world by storm with his thousands of exuberant sculptures – many of them massive and years in the making – how did it happen? The man himself provides few clues. While his work looms large, often in a vivid palette, he is small and soft-spoken. Though his impact has been huge – measured by the number of galleries, museums, collectors, and writers captivated by him – he can seem entirely self-contained. External recognition makes no sense to him – including the ACC’s highest honor, the Gold Medal. “I don’t feel like I deserve it,” he says. “I don’t know how to react to these things. I should be more excited about it, but I’m totally confused.”

Kaneko’s portfolio is not the result of striving and calculation, but rather the unfolding of a steady, irresistible impulse he trusts but can’t really explain. His ideas don’t strike like lightning; instead, every idea comes gradually into focus.

“I don’t try to force it,” he says. “Whatever my heart tells me, I will do it, if it’s a strong enough signal to make me do it.” He has one goal: “Doing my best.” And he’ll be the judge. “Sometimes I feel like I’m doing OK,” he says. “Sometimes I feel like I’m not doing that great, and I need to really develop more.”

Kaneko’s manner is gentle, but his drive is clearly relentless – and he counts on that. It’s his heartbeat, keeping him alive. “I’m following my intuition,” he says, “so my biggest worry is to run out of this desire of making pieces. If I lose that, that’s it.” He fears not a typhoon or a tornado but losing his life force. He may not understand the force or control it, but he treasures it: “Every day, you’re excited, and then you can’t wait to go to the studio. If you’ve got that basic thing resolved, then you’ve got it made.” So far, so good. ♣

*“Whatever
my heart tells me,
I will do it,
if it’s a strong
enough signal.”*



LEFT:
Kaneko’s glass *Search* (2017) towers over an Omaha hospital. The artist designed the black-and-white patterns without reference; he realized they resemble human chromosomal diagrams only after a doctor excitedly pointed it out to him.

OPPOSITE ←←
TOP:
A Kaneko Head on New York’s Park Avenue, part of a 2008 public art installation that included several other Heads placed throughout the city.

BOTTOM:
Dozens of Tanukis lined Chicago’s Millennium Park in 2013. The *tanuki*, a kind of wild dog, is viewed in Japanese mythology as a trickster that can wreak havoc but also bring good luck.