



CREATIVE HEARTBEAT

Jun Kaneko and six decades in the arts.

by JORIE JACOBI / *Photography by* ATTILIO D'AGOSTINO

To make one of his signature five-ton “dango” sculptures, renowned Omaha-based artist and ceramic sculptor Jun Kaneko works with thick slabs of clay that have previously been worked by hand to remove any air bubbles, melding them together using any number of techniques: it could be digging his fingers into the sides and moving them back and forth to create grooves that will be seamlessly sewn together in all of the materials’ pliable splendor; it could be smoothing the clay over with a number of tools, or just his palms. “I’m not sure if I like working with my hands or not. Clay is a very challenging material—that’s what I like,” he says.

Completing the thing is a chaotic feat. Working at a scale this large requires pageantry: several studio assistants, rolling wooden platforms with wheels, levers, a massive kiln—and time. It can take up to three weeks alone for the base of each piece to become dry enough to support the additional slabs of clay that come next. The finished piece looks like something only a mythical giant could complete, when in fact it was done by an

unassuming artist with wild, wispy graying hair and colorful sweaters. “Creative energy is nothing special. It’s just like a heartbeat. Without it, I’m dead. I need art to survive,” he says. “If you’re a practical thinker, you shouldn’t do art. You don’t think practically about how to make your heart beat. It’s a just necessity. Art is the necessity of your being.”

Originally from Nagoya, Japan, Jun has been living in Omaha since 1986, and his prolific career spans over six decades. “What do I like about Omaha? Nobody bothers me,” he says.

“I shouldn’t complain. But I don’t like the chaos of the art world. I want a quiet environment. Omaha is a great place for that.”

Clay crusts and dries over his fingers and hands as he squishes it back and forth with strong, playful resolve. It makes his hands look like they’ve actually become part of the sculpture themselves. At once wistful and bizarre, Jun has said before that’s actually one of his greatest desires: to become the medium. “Then there are no technical problems, because I’d know everything,” he says in a documentary by Emmy Award-winning director Joel Geyer, who has been following the artist for over two decades.

Jun was born in Nagoya, Japan, in 1942, at the height of World War II. Nagoya, an industrial city, produced a large portion of Japan’s combat aircrafts and was targeted by the U.S. Air Force. The city was bombed several times between 1942 and 1945, and when Jun was a toddler his home was destroyed in one of the attacks. His parents sent him to live with his grandparents in the mountains, where walking to school took 45 minutes.

In interviews, Jun frequently discusses his disdain for school. The fact that each student was required to do as were told by the teacher, the same assignment, the same way, bred skepticism in him beginning at a young age. As a teenager, he eventually refused to

attend traditional school and began painting and drawing during the day instead. His mother, a successful dentist who was one of only a few female dentists in Japan at the time, was also an artist and had long desired to become a painter herself. At the behest of her own parents, she never did. “They said, ‘No. You won’t make any money and survive. Women aren’t painters in this country,’” says artist and longtime arts innovator Ree Kaneko, who is also Jun’s wife.

Growing up, Jun continued voraciously drawing and painting, and his mother showed his work to friends of hers that were artists. With their reassurance, she found him a painting teacher who grounded him with the technical tools that would begin a career as a professional artist spanning decades. He completed school at night while painting during the day and developing a deep desire to move to the U.S. His painting teacher happened to know sculptor and ceramicist Jerry Rothman, a member of a group of ceramic sculptors in Los Angeles who were pushing the medium far beyond the utilitarianism of practical pieces.

Jun, who had never been away from his family for a significant time, had never been to the U.S. and spoke no English, came to the U.S. for the first time in August of 1953, at age 21. Through sheer luck, he became connected to Los Angeles-based collectors and patrons Fred and Mary Marer, who invited him to stay at their home and helped acquaint him with American culture. “They made sure Jun had food for about the first nine years he was living in the U.S.,” says Ree. They showed him the lay of the land, taking him to movies, museums and restaurants. Their home was also filled to the brim with ceramic sculptures.

Language and cultural barriers were a struggle at first—and, particularly as an immigrant, he does not attempt to sugarcoat his opinion of the current U.S. political landscape. “It’s a disaster. We are losing respect for each other. There’s no respect among the people living in the world. And, unfortunately, our president doesn’t demonstrate how important that









respect is,” he says. At first, he had to call home to figure out how to complete simple tasks, especially when all the directions were written in English. Ree narrates a story Jun told her about his attempt to demystify an American laundromat for the first time, which still makes her laugh. “He had no clean clothes, so he went to the laundromat and watched how people used it, trying to figure it out. He bought 10 boxes of soap and loaded up clothes in 10 of the washing machines. Then he went to go get a coffee, and when he came back there was soap and water all over the floor, and the laundromat owner was so upset with him. Then he finally got all of his clothes in the dryers and ended up shrinking everything,” she says. “I can just picture him doing this. It was the same at the grocery store. Think about it: cat food often has a picture of chicken or fish on it. He had to ask people about those things. The language disconnect was a real issue.”

Jun also witnessed the destructive racial tensions that plague America firsthand. He was in Los Angeles during the summer of 1965 when the Watts riots broke out, set in motion by L.A.P.D. police brutality against Black citizens. “I have experienced both subtle and overt racism in the U.S.” he says. In the ‘70s he attended an artist’s residency at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in rural Montana at an old brick factory, not knowing that Montana is also home to many coal mines employing Chinese workers, who have faced a long history of racial discrimination. Driving up to the brick factory in a Volkswagen, with a giant sculpture in the back he’d been working on, he couldn’t figure out why people would throw rocks at his truck. He also tried to rent a nearby apartment marked “vacant,” and the landlord told him it had been rented. The next day, the apartment was still marked “vacant.” It happened several more times until program director David Shaner made a call, and Jun was finally able to rent an apartment.

Amidst many layers of struggle, Jun became indoctrinated into a movement of artists who were doing radical things with ceramic sculpture—artists like Peter Voulkos, Paul Soldner, John Mason and Henry Takemoto. “At that time in Southern California, there was a huge contemporary ceramic movement. I got shuttled into that movement without knowing it. I saw I lot of interesting things and thought I’d give it a try,” says Jun. His first ceramic piece was a small raku vase, created with an

ancient Japanese technique of working with clay.

Staying in the U.S. was not a hard and fast choice; Jun did move back to Japan for a time before deciding to return to the U.S. “I’m obviously from Japan, but I left there when I was so young that I didn’t really know anything about it. People thought I knew a lot about Japanese ceramics, but I didn’t, because I started working with ceramics in the U.S. Every time someone would ask me about Japanese ceramics, it made me sick. I didn’t know the answers.” He went back, opened up a studio and worked on some exhibitions before deciding that where he’d grown up was not where he ultimately wanted to settle. “I knew it was not the place for me. The U.S. is much freer as far as exchanging ideas and working together. There’s also so much space here, which there isn’t in Japan, and it’s so expensive. That really limits art activity. In my mind, I couldn’t survive without a large studio space.”

In an an ironic clash with his long-held disdain of formal education, Jun has taken a number of prestigious teaching positions throughout the years at art schools like the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence and Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. He accepted a tenure-track position at the University of New Hampshire before resigning after one year. “It’s always exciting to work with younger people, but Jun never really wanted to be a professor full time,” says Ree. “He wanted to see if he could survive as an independent artist. And, I think he made the right decision.”

Ree first met Jun back in the 1980s. She had been working on a residency program that placed artists in discarded industrial worksites, which Jun attended. They later married. “We share a deep desire to help other artists. Though much of her time has been spent running several arts organizations for decades, she still does play around with clay from time to time. “Jun says I’m rusty. I’ll be in the studio with him and he says, ‘You can work in that corner.’ And then he says I’m taking up too much space,” she says, laughing.

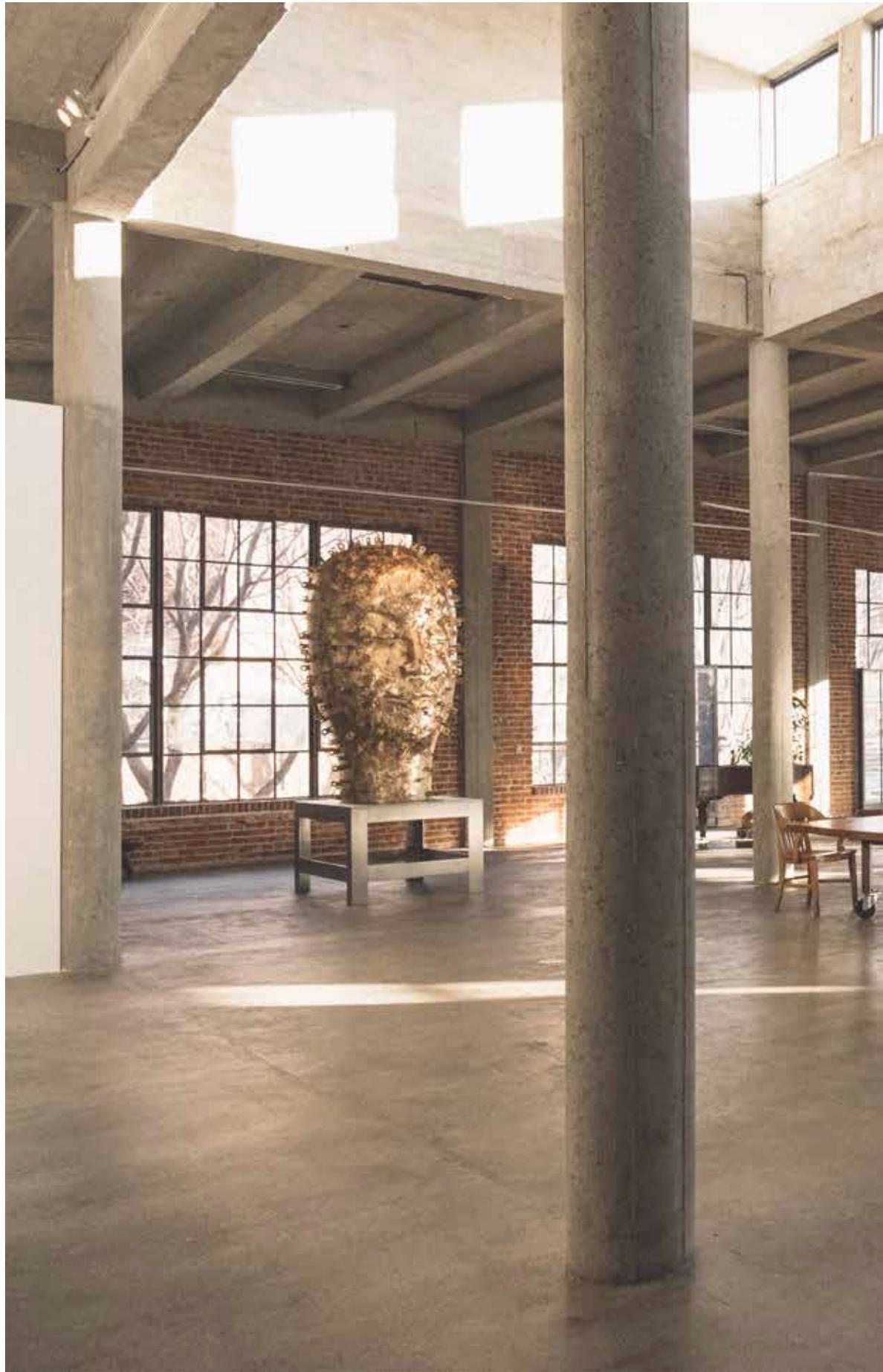
After completing college in Omaha, she remembers being told she needed to “get out of the Midwest,” which led her to New York City and then the West Coast. “But I wasn’t finding what I needed. I couldn’t find those ‘inside things’ that are more quiet—that fertile underbelly where things are really hap-



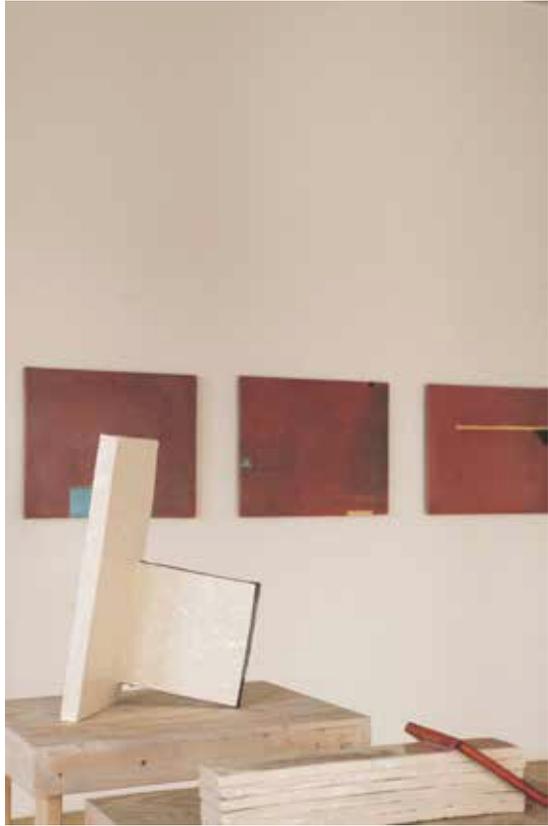












pening,” says Ree. “I figured there was a lot to do in my own community.” She moved back to Omaha, set up a studio and began working with local artists. When she originally invited Jun to partake in the Alternative Workspace program, she assumed it would be a long shot that he’d actually come, as he was already a well-established artist at the time. “I thought, ‘He’s probably inundated with requests and likely doesn’t pay attention to his mail,’” she says.

They serendipitously met again at the Los Angeles International Airport, where Ree was picking up her children, who had been visiting their father. “I turned around, and Jun was behind me. I told him, ‘You should come work at the brickyard in Omaha.’”

Jun came to Omaha for the first time, where Ree had somehow managed to secure a massive kiln that was 40-feet across and 20-feet high. It made it possible for Jun to continue engaging his fascination with large, heavy pieces.

His very first public commission came in 1984, in Detroit, while he was teaching at the Cranbrook Academy Of Art. He was commissioned to create a piece for a transit station in the Detroit People Mover, the city’s public train system. The first three times he was asked, he said no. With much prodding, he eventually ended up taking on the project, which turned into a giant wall of colorful, glazed ceramics. Dozens of commissions followed, including large sculptural installations in Japan, the University of Connecticut in 1997, Honolulu Museum of Art in 2000, three giant head sculptures on Park Avenue in New York City in 2008, and a sculpture installation in Chicago’s Millennium Park in 2013.

One of Jun’s most recent pieces is a giant glass sculpture in front of the Buffett Cancer Center in Omaha, a colorful display of fractionated light and glass measuring 82-feet high that lights up at night.

It was crafted out of 1,800 square feet of glass and more than 20 tons of steel. “They just came to me. I didn’t apply for it, and I didn’t know what it was. They wanted to have some kind of gateway to this whole medical school campus, which is huge,” says Jun. He spent almost a year and half driving around it, ideating and talking about it. “It’s not just the object itself—the environment is half of it. That really influences the way it looks. Next to a large building, a 20-foot piece looks small. Next to a one-story building, it looks huge. So, it’s not just about the object itself. All of that becomes part of the design process.” A doctor from the facility saw Jun’s design for the piece and remarked on how similarly it resembled chromosomes patterns from DNA. He worked with a fabricator in Germany to develop the exact shade, type and dimensions of glass that would be laid into the piece to create a physical shape from the design. “There are important relationships to the creator and material and knowledge. If all of that doesn’t work, the piece doesn’t happen. I do larger pieces to get to know new possibilities to go beyond what I’m doing.”

Ree and Jun have worked on a number of projects together, including the Kaneko, an arts nonprofit space for exhibitions and creative exploration. They’ve dubbed it “an open space for your mind,” as a creative community-engagement center where the Kaneko’s hope to instill a creative spark in Omaha’s artists of the future. “The only thing I know is being creative,” says Jun. “Kaneko is about, ‘How can we make something that inspires people to be creative?’”

The bright, open space was developed in three rehabbed turn-of-the-century warehouses in the Old Market district of Omaha. “The bones of these buildings are so strong, so good,” says Ree.

“Everyone has curiosity,” says Jun. “If you wonder, you have creative energy. That’s why I say everybody must have it. That’s my guess.”



