

Legends, Myths and Truths: Jun Kaneko

Jun Kaneko is known for pioneering the field of monumental ceramic sculpture. Throughout his artistic practice, Kaneko has played with scale and proportion. In 1996 he wrote, “If everything in the world was the same size, we probably would not need an idea of scale. Nothing exists by itself. Everything is influenced by the other things next to it or close by or the environment which the object is in.” Over time, these elements of context and scale have become ever more present in his work. Kaneko’s use of form and application of patterns, such as polka dots and checks, allow viewers to become more aware of their own surroundings via their relation to the artwork.

Hybrid extensions of the artist’s Eastern and Western identities, Kaneko’s works balance elements of both American and Japanese aesthetics. His figures, as well as the meditative and reflective qualities of his pieces, are rooted in Japanese culture and mythology, but the monumental, public scale of his work descends from the American modern tradition. The works resulting from this transcultural heritage create a unique artistic statement that functions as a universal language for all viewing audiences.

The installation Kaneko has created for Millennium Park’s Boeing Galleries is representative of his past and present artistic practices. Works presented in the South Boeing Galleries feature Kaneko’s signature *Dangos* (meaning “rounded form” or “dumpling” in Japanese). These ceramic *steles*, covered in a variety of vibrant shapes and patterns, allow viewers to examine their environment and focus on a sense of scale and place. Standing next to these monolithic structures, one can feel the tension between size, material, location and aesthetics. The glazed patterns appear to be draped like fabric, in a manner that is specially attuned to the surface of each individual sculpture. The *Dango* form links Kaneko’s work to minimalist sculptors who played with simple and large forms, while at the same time, the pattern overlays show formal concerns – in repeating geometric shapes – similar to those of minimalist painters. Kaneko sees his work as both painting and sculpture, with the key geometric patterns acting as rhythm and tone.

The North Boeing Gallery features a new body of work by Kaneko, drawing upon the myths and legends of the *Tanuki* figure. From ancient times, the Japanese have expressed the *Tanuki* in a variety of ways, for it is said to be a mischievous shape-shifter able to take many forms. In our modern era, however, the figure is most commonly portrayed as a large, stout badger. The *Tanuki* is not only a creature found in mythology, but a small, nocturnal mammal native to East Asia. The *Tanuki*, or “raccoon dog,” is a type of canidae that bears resemblance to a

North American raccoon. Similarly, it can live in close proximity to humans and ecologically walks a line between civilization and nature.

The *Tanuki* is considered to be a trickster who causes trouble and mayhem in both the human and supernatural worlds. In many tales, he takes on a variety of manifestations, and has the power to reshape landscapes. He is a symbol of fertility and in present day Japanese consumer culture, often represents prosperity and economic growth. The *Tanuki* has been present in Japanese art for centuries, specifically in the city of Shigaraki, Japan, where the “sake-buying errand boy” is currently the most famous incarnation of the *Tanuki*, upon which Kaneko has based his own *Tanuki* figures. The legendary *Tanuki* features special traits that are believed to bring good fortune, including big eyes to perceive the environment and help make good decisions, a big belly that symbolizes bold and calm decisiveness, and a friendly smile.

Artist Bio:

Jun Kaneko was born in Nagoya, Japan in 1942. He came to the United States in 1963 to study at Chouinard Institute of Art, in Los Angeles, California. He was attracted to the world of ceramics and became a part of what later came to be known as the Contemporary Ceramics Movement. His technical skills and tendency for pushing artistic boundaries have led him to extraordinary accomplishments in public art, set design and architectural projects. He has taught at universities all over the United States, and his work is featured in more than 70 museum collections. He has designed three operas since 2003 – including Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* and Beethoven’s sole opera, *Fidelio* – which have been part of an artistic rethinking of classic operas. Jun Kaneko has resided and worked in Omaha, Nebraska with his wife, Ree Kaneko, since 1986.