



Four Heads in Kiln. 2007. Ceramic. 10 ft/h.

Jun Kaneko

Pure Form and the Industry of Collaboration

Article by S. Portico Bowman

JUN KANEKO IS A MAGICAL MAN WHO SAYS LITTLE. HE leads an exemplary focused life that connects him directly into prodigious and profound art making. From the space within this focus and silence Kaneko is probably making the largest hand-built movable ceramic art forms on Earth. He is creating these pure powerful forms with apparent grace and ease through a unique collaboration with industry. Kaneko and his wife Ree have forged an intellectual and creative introduction into the industrial environment so that he can harness a creative force that allies itself with the cooperative interests of artists, engineers, chemists and industrial machinists. This

is alchemy of the highest order wrought through the commitment of Kaneko's dialogue with the clay that he loves.

According to art critic Arthur C. Danto, who wrote the introduction for Susan Peterson's book, *Jun Kaneko*:

There is a principle that can be said to govern all the artistic decisions Kaneko's works display – a principle Kaneko says of which he has grown increasingly aware over the years until it became plain to him that it defines his entire practice as a painter, sculptor, designer and ceramist. The Japanese name for the prin-



Above: *Jun Walking*. On site at Mission Clay, Pittsburg, Kansas.

Below: *Jun Outside Kiln Where the 13 ft/h Dangos were Fired*. Mission Clay.

Jun Working with Fabrication Tables. Mission Clay.

ciple is *ma* – a term that derives from what one might call the metaphysics of Shinto. In its original usage *ma* meant 'spirit'. Each thing has or is a 'spirit'... Kaneko's insight is that not only do what we think of as things have spirits – the space between things has *ma* as well. It is not nothingness. Or if you like, nothing itself is a kind of something.¹

Said another way, contemporary philosopher, musician and artist Tom Yeshe writes:

Anything is many things*.

Each and every thing – everything – is something else, so nothing is anything exclusively.

Including everything is the Thing of Everything.

* The scope of 'things' is all-inclusive, including all words and all meanings, all thoughts and all theories, from philosophy to physics, from politics to spirituality.²

I believe one of the most profound places for *ma* to assert its regenerative and creative principle is in the unique relationships that grow between people. The enthusiasm for Kaneko's creative vision emerges from within a committed body of people who are energized by the opportunity to do what has not been

done before. The solutions required at each stage of this unique collaboration emerged from the scope of expertise within each person's perspective as artist, designer, industrialist, chemist and studio assistant. The force of this vision is proven true by the vast creative output of ceramics, sculpture and painting that emerges from Kaneko's studio.

Mission Clay Products is an industrial sewer pipe company with plants located in Fremont, California; Pittsburg, Kansas and Phoenix, Arizona. It is through the support, interest and vision of Mission Clay and Bryan Vansell, the company's manager, that the conduit for the realization of Kaneko's artistic vision has appeared. In September 2007 after two committed years working six days per week from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm in Pittsburg, Kaneko and his assistants Conrad Snider, Richard Chung, Jess Benjamin, John Cohorst and John Bruggeman stood in the presence of the 36 – 9.5 foot *Dangos*, four 10 foot *Heads* and four 13 foot *Dangos* that they had made by hand within the industrial advantages of Mission Clay. The largest pieces were completely built inside kilns 40 feet in diameter with 19 foot high ceilings and 12 foot doors. The six-foot heads weigh approximately 1200 pounds and the 10 *Heads* weigh about 4000 pounds. The preparation time varies for each piece but typically a *dango* moves up about one foot per day. Flat 'pages' of thick two and



Jun with Dango in Progress. 2006–2007. Ceramic.

a half inch slabs of clay are lifted onto the available rim of the developing *dango* or *head* and are then paddled into the wall of the emerging form. Kaneko reaches into the space of the form and from there he pulls, presses, paddles and guides the *dango* or *head* into the new form in which it will soon take its place on the planet. Kaneko and his assistants began work in Pittsburg during the summer of 2005. The pieces dried in their respective facilities under computerized humidity and temperature control for a full year. The *dangos* and *heads* were bisque fired across a six-week span in the fall of 2006 while Kaneko prepared for the glazing process that took seven months before the final firing, which lasted an additional six weeks. Kaneko's 2007 Mission Clay project expanded in scope and scale what he had achieved at the Mission Clay Fremont plant in 1992–1994. Kaneko and Conrad Snider, Kaneko's first assistant and now owner of Soldner Mixers, along with three other assistants produced six 11 foot high *Dangos* and 18 - 8 foot high *Dangos*. Snider continues to assist Kaneko, is often called in to problem solve with major assignments and is an instrumental key assistant to both the Fremont and the Pittsburg project.

Originally, back in 1991 Vansell invited Kaneko to participate in the Pipe Sculpture Symposium Forum in Fremont California. The other invited artists were Don Reitz, Christine Federighi, Ron Nagle, Stephen DeStaebler, Judy Moonelis, Deborah Horrell, John



Top: Jun on Scaffolding. 2006–2007. With studio assistant building Dangos. Pittsburg, Kansas.

Above: Richard Chung, Jun Kaneko and Conrad Snider working. 2006–2007.

Toki, Tony Hepburn, Al Johnson, John Roloff and many others. Vansell's intention was to bring exceptional ceramic talent into a ceramic clay facility and give these artists clay but in a form that would present unusual conceptual and technical challenges. Enormous six-foot clay pipe encouraged the artists to grapple with scale, density, volume, surface, weight and forklifts. Vansell invited Kaneko to join this event but he politely declined, stating that he was working on his next 'big' project. Curious about what this 'big' project was, Vansell asked Kaneko for more information and as Vansell said in our recent interview, "the rest you can say is history".

The large kilns and industrial convenience of massive work spaces beckoned to Kaneko and Vansell's appreciation for art and the artistic process caused him to call Kaneko. From this intersection between the love and appreciation for the ceramic medium and artistic process the collaboration between Kaneko, Vansell and Mission Clay has proven to be monumental. It is monumental not only for the works that have been created, but for the project's testimony to the power of collaboration. Vansell speaks of Kaneko's genius not only as a ceramic artist, but also in regards to Kaneko's entire approach to art and creativity. Vansell's admiration and respect for Kaneko is clearly evident as he commented on Kaneko's ability to work with scale, composition, and technical issues



Dangos in Omaha, 2007. Ceramic. 9.5 ft/h.

not to mention the incredible work ethic that Kaneko brings to the studio each day. And as Vansell said this is done on behalf of Kaneko's sincere effort to "better the world around him and give anywhere he can to promote, support, embellish and celebrate the arts".

Tom Harter, the Plant Manager in Pittsburg and a professional chemist, noted that beyond the enthusiasm that the Kaneko studio brought into the plant generally, what he appreciated most from Kaneko's presence was watching how the edges of ceramic manipulation were being pushed around and through the procedures he and others in the industry were familiar with but only from an industrial perspective. At the same time Harter could enter into stages of the Kaneko studio process and make suggestions based upon his knowledge. The magic of this type of collaboration is that when one of the individuals does not have the words to explain what needs to be done, the other might have the pictures, or someone else might have the experience and a new set of plans. All of the individuals collected together to create the *dangos* and giant heads became like an activated kaleidoscope moving through variations and variables of "what if" and "how do we," into a successful unveiling of the forty-four new works this past year. Vansell told me that the employees who had the opportunity to watch this incredible feat unfold still talk about it. Another contemporary philosopher, Ken Wilber, writes:

A flock of geese communicate with each other by, among other things, quacking at the same pitch. If a goose is quacking at a completely different register not understood by others, then they won't be able to hear or interpret correctly. That goose, for all its adventurous

individuality would be left behind the flock or at any rate, would not be able to fly in V-formation very well because it is not communicating with its fellows.³

Kaneko's recent work could not have come forth without the committed and formidable force found within the environment and opportunity of Mission Clay and in return many of Mission Clay's employees became invested with a new vision for the material they typically transform into industrial products.

For a very long time humankind has been learning to understand the language of clay. The basic material has never changed, nor has the way to work with it and fire it but the societies and cultures that touch clay continue to change. Seeing the fingerprint of Kaneko on the clay in our age is remarkable and profound because not only does it demonstrate what clay will do, but it also demonstrates what the vision of one person can do when that vision is received and responded to by others. Beyond the stories to be found in the individual pieces there is the grander story of the man who had the vision to bring the monumental pieces into existence. Kaneko is clear that he is not working in such an extreme scale as an end in itself but as he says:

Whether I am making a large or small piece, in the end I hope it will make sense to have that particular scale and form together and that it will give off enough visual energy to shake the air around it. I believe each form has one right scale. Sometimes I feel it worked, sometimes I missed it.

A piece has to have a sense of completion no matter what scale it is. I like to have the idea



Jun with Heads in Progress. 2006–2007. Ceramic.

of spiritual power in the scale so it will overcome conventional scale. If I am pulled into the piece, I will forget about scale and that is a really strong spiritual kind of power.⁴

Umberto Eco writes “the controlling function of narrative and the reason people tell stories and have told stories from the beginning of time has always been the paramount function of myth to find a shape, a form in the turmoil of human experience.” If it is true that we are looking for evidence of truth and beauty within the chaos of our lives and in the art that is produced – and I think that is true – it seems that much of what the artist does is to rearrange patterns or construct new ones by finding in the same pound of clay or piece of paper a camel, a cactus or an abstraction of both. Ellen Dissanayake writes in her book *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, “The ability to shape and thereby exert some control over the untidy material of everyday life is a well-known benefit of the arts.”⁵ She goes on to quote Robert Frost who said, “When in doubt there is always form for us to go on with. Anyone who has achieved the least form to be sure of it, is lost to the larger excruciations.” In this way the process of art making demonstrates that touching the unknown, the lump of clay, the quiet piano or the empty page can be a playful and positive experience. The art proc-

ess allows the artist, if only for a moment or for hours and days, to voluntarily enter into the unknown of the creative journey and emerge with a more open awareness and confidence in an ability to appreciate the unknown in all aspects of life. Pierre Lazlo writes in “Science as Play” for the *American Scientist* online that “Play in scientific research is seldom discussed in print”. Lazlo goes on to say that “in charting this little-explored territory, I found that the extreme thesis – that science equals play – is untenable”.

Tender awareness accompanies Kaneko’s touch as he moves the clay up and up and up. Here at the rim, where the clay edge lies open and exposed – where something meets nothing – I can see the actual point where the unknown coexists with the known. As Kaneko arrives with the next section of clay that he places with the gathered focus of his whole being onto the waiting form, I see the tender beauty and rhythm of exchange between the known form that I can touch and the unknown form that is about to appear. Here at this point of intersection between the known and the unknown, Kaneko’s hands and heart guide the clay into a mysterious new identity as a *dango* or *head*. *Dango* is a word that in Japanese means a kind of steamed dumpling. Danto comments on how the word dumpling belongs to the vocabulary of fondness. This gesture of fondness is clearly evident in



Jun Checking the Dango's Drying Progress. 2006–2007. Ceramic.

Kaneko's relationship to clay as he creates his work to calm as he coaxes the clay into its new form.

Kaneko has said:

"I don't limit myself by material. Every idea has material that best suits its execution but I don't dwell on that. Lots of ideas I have don't work in ceramics so I don't do them. Some people have a good concept and then try to force the material onto the idea; it suffers due to twisting the material's best characteristic.

"I'm interested in investigating my own ideas and finding the best material for my work. I don't want to force any material, to make it obey my concept. It's a two-way deal. Artists have to use some kind of material to make the visual statement but I want to understand the material in depth. Then I acquire a deeper way of projecting my idea, two- or three-dimensionally."⁶

Everything and anything is available to an artist like Kaneko in the purity of an original moment of time unfolding when his focus is on the moment and the material before him. The voice or the arm or the eye lends itself to singing or drawing, while the mind of the artist must open, relax and expand. Minutes are like small wheels turning forward until they disappear into the past but at the cusp of each forward turn

there is a reflective moment where now exists and it sparkles like a diamond with beauty and infinite value. This reflective inspired moment is where we live and from this reflective space comes inspired art. Kaneko's work is complete when the viewer moves close enough to not only absorb the light reflected from the glazed surface but also to hear the rhythmic beating of Kaneko's process that has moved over, inside and through the pure clay form.

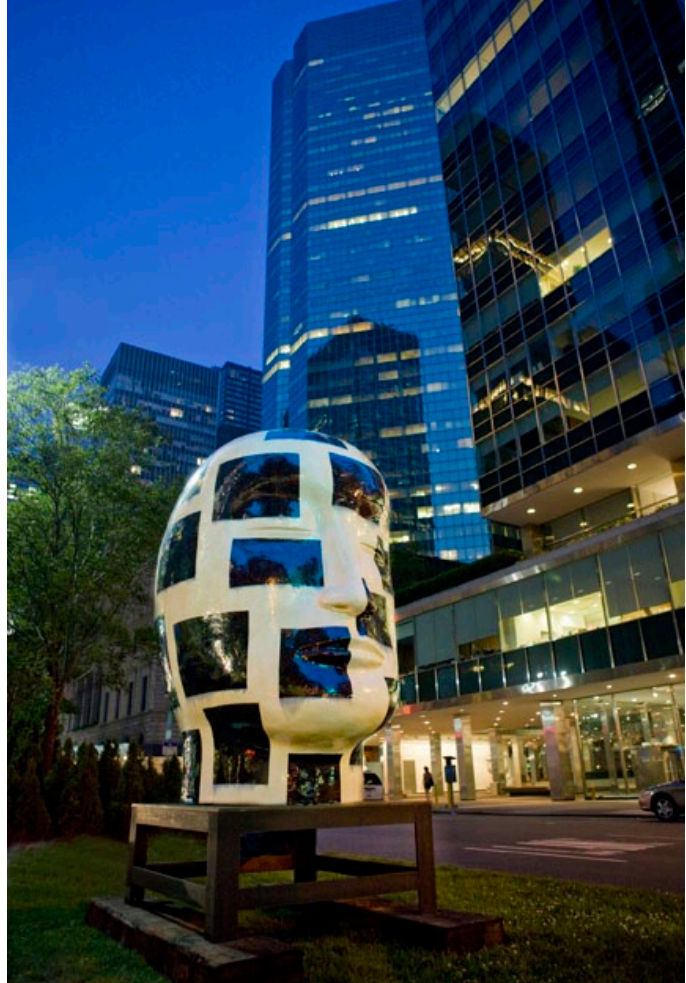
Rationally we understand that the colourful surfaces have been immobilized into a glaze. However, the intuitive compulsion is strong to imagine that we can pick up a paintbrush and move the colour more. This is the magic of glaze. Glaze is inert in its final state, but it retains the organic quality of a leaf turning into autumn that seems capable of green, red and orange on the single atom of surface we are observing.

The *dangos* and *heads* are beautiful examples of Kaneko's ability to shape and shift the language of design into dance. It is not surprising that while these words were being written, Kaneko is in Philadelphia preparing for the opening of the opera *Fidelio* because he has been intimately involved with the creation of sets and costumes for the production. Kaneko's ability to transplant the staple elements of design such as line and shape into surfaces that breath rather than decorate is another layer of his artistic power that



Jun Kaneko Glazing Heads. 2007. Ceramic. 10 ft/h.

transcends a rational understanding of what to put where but instead grows from a deep understanding of the individual nature of each *dango*, or *head* and how it must be realized. Sometimes that means the surface will divide into hard edges that suddenly escape into a gentle bleed or sometimes the edges stand to attention and do not move. In part the bleed will happen because the subtle nature of glaze is that it can never entirely be controlled and Kaneko respects this mysterious quality, while he can also tease the glaze into a performance according to his role as the conductor. At other times, Kaneko will command the form to be a solid explosion of pure color. In *Untitled dangos*, lines trace the form and remind us of their original identity as a ceramic sculpture. However, at the same time our visual relationship to the object is stimulated by the active and demonstrative power of pure line. Here there are lines embracing the forms that can only be felt and sensed by Kaneko. It is this sensitivity to the nuances that tremor over and inside every form that coalesces with Kaneko's brave and bold relationship with glaze that in the end vibrates into the space of the viewer. It is here during the glazing of each work that Kaneko has the luxury of folding back into the moment where his only collaborators are the silence and the stroke of the brush. He can hear the brilliant



Heads Installed on Park Avenue, New York. 2008. Ceramic. 10 ft/h.

variety of voices available in every mark be that this line or that line, this dot or that dot.

Kaneko's masterful exploration of clay, glazes, color and line play with our response to what the identity of these objects should be and the joyful game of enjoying each piece begins in earnest. The paradox inherent in Kaneko's work is that although the pieces could only be created within the context of laborious attention and control, in the end the sheer scale of the forms dominate an adult body and we are turned back into a child where everything is big and new and waiting to be explored. We are grateful to Kaneko's liberation because he solves the paradox his work creates: He demonstrates that the power of will and commitment guided within a group of like minded individuals can accomplish the heroic task of bringing order to the chaos of mixing earth water and fire and in struggling to accomplish this feat, the unexpected gift of feeling the wonder and freedom of childhood while standing under the towering form of a *dango* is manifest by everyone who encounters the work and especially by the artist himself.

The *Heads* that emerged from the kiln floor that went on to travel to New York City's Park Avenue did so with the same phenomenal origination as a bird's body demonstrates the wonder of defying gravity



Dangos in Omaha. 2007. Ceramic. 9.5 ft/h.

with nothing other than feathers, air and an inborn ability take off into the blue. Clay and colour emerge from Kaneko in a scale and vibrancy equal to the appearing of a new species of life dramatizing once more the visual delight of awe and surprise in invention, reminding us that “all creative acts are forms of play and are the starting place of creativity in the human growth cycle and one of the great primal life functions”,⁷ Joan M. Erickson writes in *Wisdom and the Senses: The Way of Creativity*:

The cooperation of the senses in the doing and making of art activities establishes the fabric, which holds together the individual (like threads in a weaving). Possibly this even spreads into the social realm so that the creative process and the arts play their roles in holding together the larger social fabric itself...The arts are honoured and acclaimed as a universal, perhaps the only universal language, each true form representing the highest and deepest expression of one of the senses in cooperation with the others.⁸

Jun Kaneko’s pure forms are timeless. His work will inspire and play with the visual and spiritual dimensions of imaginations that are not yet born, while delighting those of us who are. This delight and

wonder is the permanence and power of his art.

FOOTNOTES

1. Susan Peterson, *Jun Kaneko*, (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2001) 11.
2. Tom Yeshe, <http://t4om.gaia.com/>
3. Ken Wilber, *Integral Spirituality*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2006), 151.
4. Peterson 112.
5. Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, (New York: The Free Press, 1992) 79.
6. Peterson 145.
7. Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1990) 42.
8. Joan M. Erikson, *Wisdom and the Senses: The Way of Creativity*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988) 157.

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