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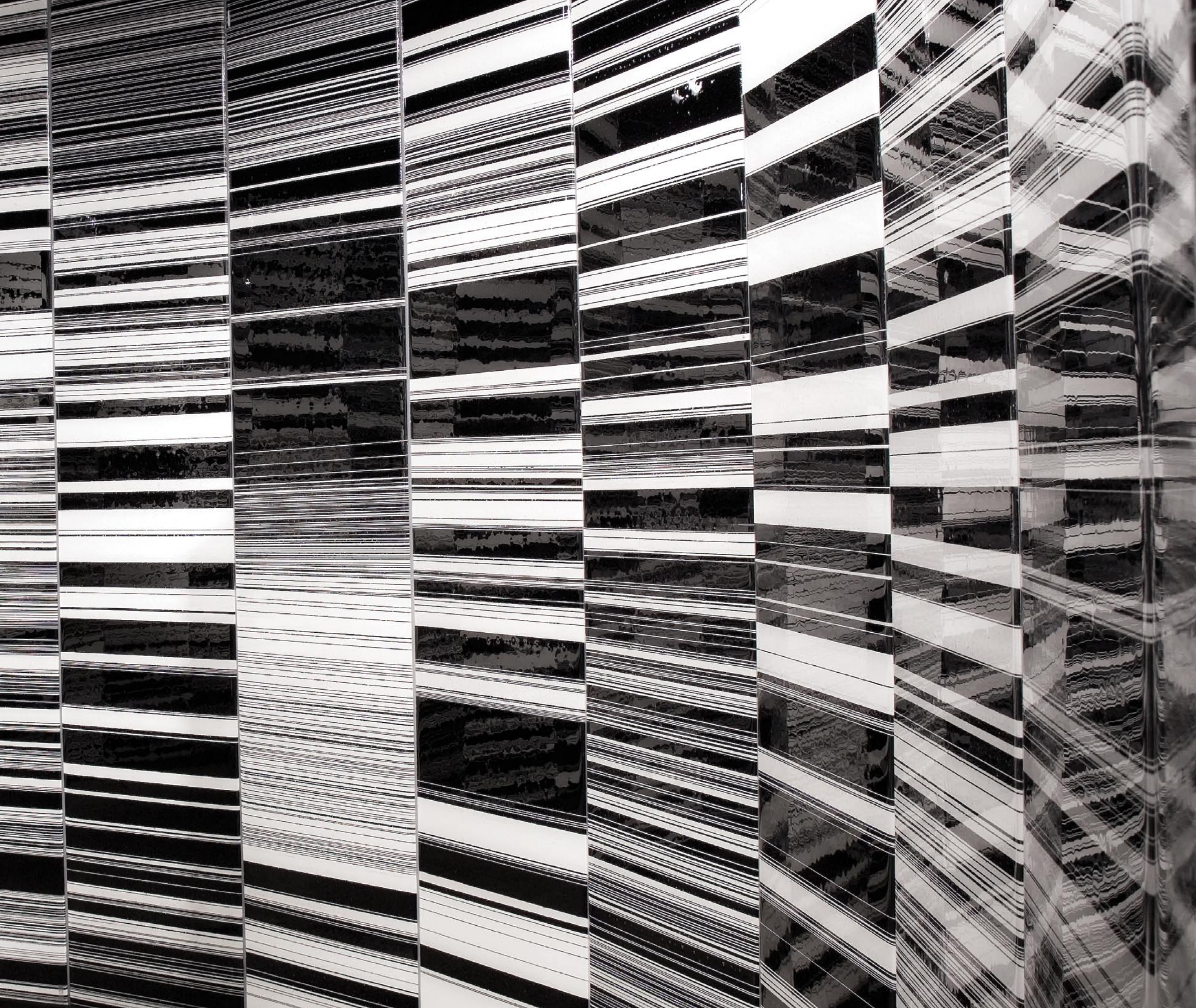
Class

The UrbanGlass
Art Quarterly

William Morris
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In an Exclusive Interview,
the Artist Discusses His
Decision to Retire

Jun Kaneko:
Maximal
Minimalist

NUMBER 107 : SUMMER 2007



THE
MAXIMAL
MINIMALIST

IN GLASS, AS IN CERAMICS,

JUN KANEKO

EXPLORES DISCRETE IDEAS

ON AN INDISCREET SCALE.

BY RICHARD SPEER



OPPOSITE
Tropical Shower, 2006.
Installation: Kilnformed glass.
H 84, W 16 ¾, D 8 ½ in.
PHOTO: RYAN WATSON.
COURTESY: BULLSEYE GALLERY

OPENING SPREAD
Mythology, 2006. Kilnformed glass.
H 74, W 251, D 178 in.
PHOTO: RYAN WATSON.
COURTESY: BULLSEYE GALLERY

“I BELIEVE IN COMMUNICATING SIMPLE IDEAS,”

says Jun Kaneko, an artist whose monumental ceramic sculptures have redefined the scale possible in fired clay. Though Kaneko has also been developing significant works in glass over the past decade, it is his ceramic works that have garnered attention for their inventiveness of pattern, painterly application of glazes, and sheer physical presence. Kaneko is best known for his “Dangos” series—hulking forms that stand six feet tall and weigh five-and-a-half tons each—named for the word “dumplings” in Japanese.

The “Dangos” sculptures offer the key to Kaneko’s modus operandi: The artist is interested in communicating small, discrete bits of information by way of large, indiscreet works. Conceptually a minimalist, Kaneko is materially a maximalist. His work in the very different material of glass bears this out. The forms Kaneko employs in the exhibition “New Glass,” now on view at the Bullseye Connection Gallery in Portland, Oregon, are a kind of ellipsis: insinuating, poetic, open-ended. While Kaneko’s works in glass, which are pristine and geometric, look nothing like the lumpy, intuitive ceramic forms that brought him wide acclaim, they convey a similar sensibility, an intrinsic interest in the unanswered—or unanswerable—question.

Work for his current show began in 2003, with the artist visiting Bullseye’s affiliated Portland factory and studio five times over the next four years, for as little as three days at a time or for as much as three weeks. Phone consultations and digital images shared over the Internet augmented his in-person inspection. During this process, the Bullseye staff made prototypes of several pieces, and Kaneko requested refinements. “It’s a great advantage,” he observes, “not to know what’s possible. I saw the test pieces and said, ‘Can you replicate that on a bigger scale?’ They said, ‘There’s no way.’ But eventually they found a way.”

The duet between happy accident and steadfast ambition has been with Kaneko since the beginning. Born in 1942 in Japan, he began painting in his teenage years. He shifted his focus to ceramics after he moved to Los Angeles in the summer of 1963. On his first day in the United States, he met the ceramics collectors Fred and Mary Marer, and spent several months at their home while the couple took an extended vacation. Surrounded by work by some of the most important ceramic artists, Kaneko became fascinated by the medium. Over the ensuing decades he developed and diversified his artistry in a generally conceptual direction, using ceramics to explore Op-influenced patterns and his own predilection for biomorphic forms.

Kaneko made his first batch of monolithic “Dangos” sculptures in 1983 in Omaha, Nebraska. Ten years later he added the equally enormous “Heads” series to his repertoire, inscrutable visages that are often compared to the great stone monoliths on Easter Island.

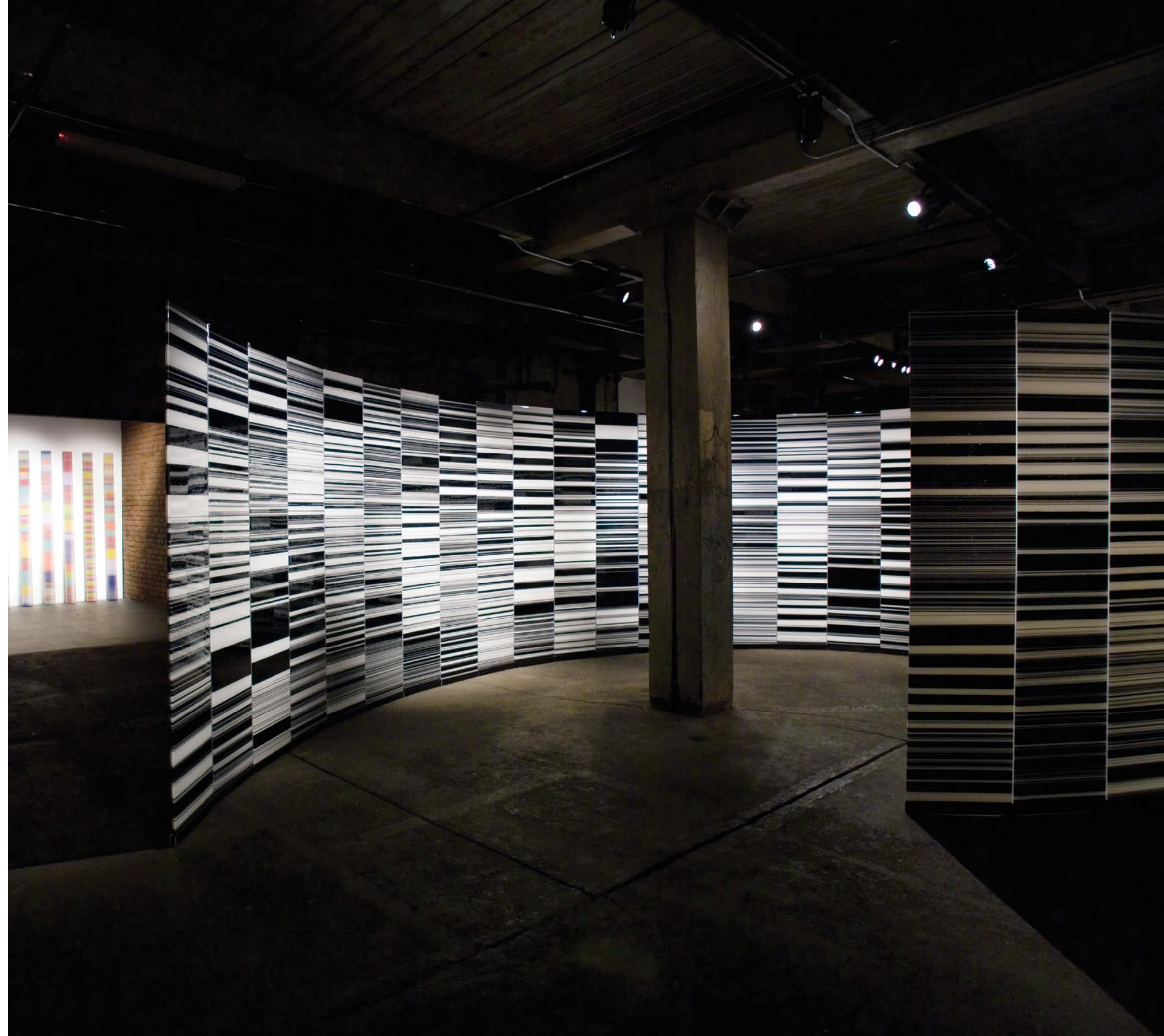
From his earliest experiments with glass, Kaneko set out to find the essence of the material and how it could best express his ideas. In his previous two outings at Bullseye, he built architectonic towers from kilnformed glass sticks that he stacked on top of each other like Lincoln Logs. These towers recalled his *Parallel Sound* installation (1981) at Gallery Takagi in Nagoya, Japan. In his early forays into the terra incognita of glass, he opted to return to a familiar form. For his second show at Bullseye Gallery, Kaneko suspended triangular panels from the ceiling, the threaded glass panels juxtaposing horizontal lines with jaunty diagonals. What he was doing, he said at the time, was “developing a complex visual language within the simple placement of stringers on flat glass.”

Mythology, 2006. Kilnformed glass. H 74, W 251, D 178 in.
PHOTO: RYAN WATSON
COURTESY: BULLSEYE GALLERY

THE DUET BETWEEN HAPPY ACCIDENT AND STEADFAST AMBITION HAS BEEN WITH KANEKO SINCE THE BEGINNING.

As he has done in his ceramic work, Kaneko has decided against developing this multifaceted visual language further, but rather has set out to simplify it, to abandon the pretext of ceramics-to-glass transliteration and instead devote himself to the deconstruction of visual language itself. "I am becoming more elemental visually," he says today. "To deduct complexity is difficult. To take something out, you have to know both sides of it." The result of this reductivism is paradoxically more like his work in ceramics—if not formally, then thematically—in that it is similarly preoccupied with enigma, scale, and the dialectic between opposites: pattern/solid, regularity/irregularity, and geometry/organicism.

The "New Glass" exhibition unfolds in Bullseye's special exhibitions gallery, a dark, dramatically lit space that takes up the bulk of the gallery's second floor. With its gritty brick walls, exposed pipes, and rough wooden columns, it lends itself well to Kaneko's mysterious *études*, which share the industrial look of the space. The show's leitmotif—a theme and variations on dichotomy and integration—is established immediately by the four glass planks inside the gallery entranceway. The pieces are concerned with verticality: *Blue Current* (2006) via regularly spaced vertical dashes in a lively blue; *Water Dream* (2006) by way of blue dashes irregularly spaced; *Tropical Shower* (2006) with pastel-colored lines that slash downward like raindrops; and *Tropical Shower 2* (2006) with its integration of blue dashes and more fanciful hues. It is as if Kaneko, as pictorial linguist, were saying: "Here is a conceptual kernel: verticality. It can be expressed with uniform or varied components; it can be chromatically similar or dissimilar; but in no instance can it be horizontal. For an explanation of horizontality, see Exhibit B."



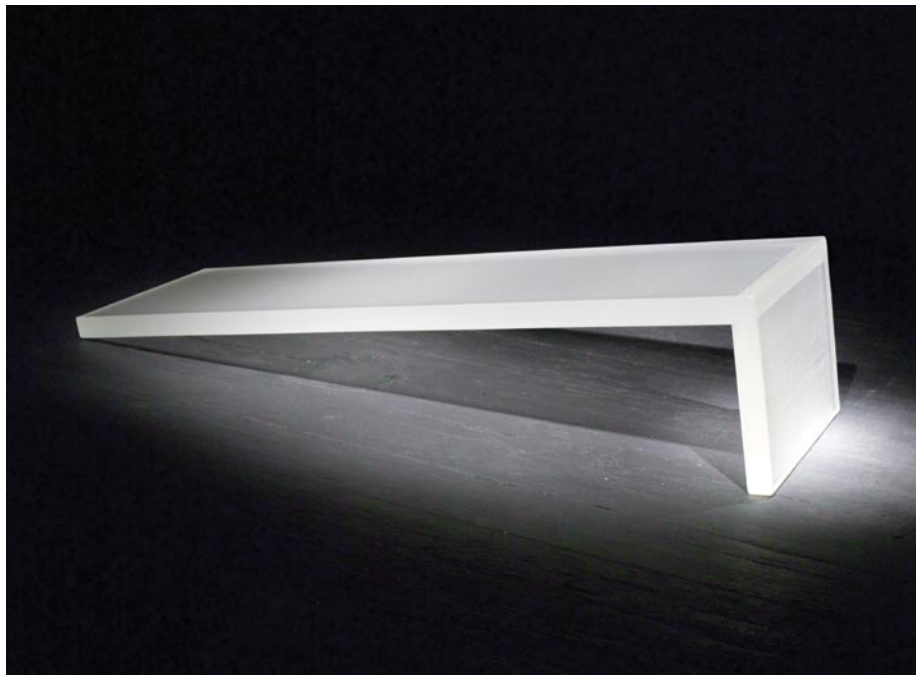
Colorbox 6-15, 2006.
Kilnformed glass. Installation:
H 84, W 106 ½, D 8 ½ in.
PHOTO: RYAN WATSON
COURTESY: BULLSEYE GALLERY



In this case, Exhibit B turns out to be *Mythology* (2006), a curved, 42-foot-long wall of 30 panels made from glass thread. The piece is an unfolding peripatetic adventure for the viewer, a journey of discovery whose central tenet is the spacing of black-and-white horizontal threads. On first glance, the piece appears to be a broad circle, like an exercise pen for some exceedingly lucky dog. As one walks around its perimeter, the matte surface of the panels is transformed by pinpoints of halogen light that appear like twinkling champagne bubbles. The black-and-white threads seem to be infinitely varied: some in thin strips, others conglomered in fat chunks, some predominantly white, others more black. “The orchestration of spaces between the black and white stringers,” Kaneko says, “is almost like composing music... Lots of my pieces are about space. I make marks to create the space in between.” Ultimately, the piece curves around to reveal itself not as a perfect circle but as an outwardly spiraling chambered nautilus shape, glossily finished on its open interior as a contrast to the matte exterior. “There is black and there is white,” the piece seems to say. “These colors may be spaced however the artist wants, but under no circumstances will color enter into the equation. For a primer on color, see Exhibit C.”

Exhibit C turns out to be the piece immediately behind *Mythology* on the gallery’s far wall: *African Reflection* (2006). Comprised of 18 slabs lined up in a row, with six-slab groupings of blue, red, and yellow, these pieces could not be visually further from Kaneko’s Dangos—or conceptually closer to them. They are perfect rectangles compared to the Dangos’ lumpy organicism; they are brightly colored to the Dangos’ drab or grayscale palette; and they glisten and play in the light, while the ceramic sculptures dryly deflect it. But these primary-colored glass slabs, seven feet tall, exert a primal, humbling effect on the viewer every bit as elemental and fearsome as the Dangos.

“LOTS OF MY PIECES ARE ABOUT SPACE,” SAYS KANEKO. “I MAKE MARKS TO CREATE THE SPACE IN BETWEEN.”



THIS PAGE
Translucent Angle, 2007.
 Kilformed glass. H 19 ½,
 W 85 ½, D 24 in.

PHOTO: RYAN WATSON
 COURTESY: BULLSEYE GALLERY

OPPOSITE PAGE
African Reflection (yellow,
 red, blue), 2006. Kilformed
 glass. Each color installation:
 H 84, W 69, D 8 ¼ in

PHOTO: RYAN WATSON
 COURTESY: BULLSEYE GALLERY

FROM HIS EARLIEST EXPERIMENTS WITH GLASS, KANEKO SET OUT TO FIND THE ESSENCE OF THE MATERIAL...

In their sheer, archetypal primacy, they evoke science fiction and science fact: Arthur C. Clarke's monoliths, the mathematical sequences in Carl Sagan's *Contact*, the five-note melody in Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, or NASA's *Pioneer* and *Voyager* spacecrafts, with their schematic plaques intended to communicate the rudiments of life on Earth to potential extraterrestrial interceptors. This is Kaneko's tact: to deconstruct the components of visual experience into axioms so basic, they could be decoded and understood by anyone possessing a modicum of intelligence and the faculty of sight. It is worth pointing out that the process of vocabulary building was of special importance to Kaneko as a young man when he arrived in the U.S. speaking no English whatsoever. This is a man who knows what it means to build a vocabulary and learn a language. In his 2001 and 2002 shows, he interspersed triangles with rectangles, diagonals with horizontals, as if to create a new semantics for glass. In 2007, with his diagonal-less verticals and horizontals, he seems to be breaking semantics down into phonetics.

The smaller pieces along the walls near *African Reflection* and in the side rooms lining the gallery seem to be making impish commentary about their imposing neighbor. The three elegant slabs in *Liquid Velocity 3* (2007) are so spare in their lines and parabolas of color, they make the larger piece appear vulgar by comparison. *Liquid Velocity 2* (2007), with its three slabs segmented by blue parabolic flow bars, has one pillar facing glossily forwards, the other two modestly toward the wall. The ten thin glass sticks in *Colorbox 6-15* (2006) are shot through with a riot of cross-sectional planes in Day-Glo colors. *Liquid Velocity 1* (2007) has groovy 1960s stripes à la Bridget Riley, in marked contrast to *African Reflection's* somber primaries. The give-and-take between these pieces is not accidental; it is a dialogue Kaneko has built in. "All of these pieces speak of themselves," he says, "but also speak to one another."

Translucent Angle (2007), a milky slab propped up on a shorter glass foot, like an inverted "L," provides the only diagonal in the show. Says Kaneko: "I went back and forth: Should I add a diagonal? Just adding a diagonal changes so many elemental issues. It's actually a very aggressive act." The piece's appearance changes with the angle of approach, matte finish from one side, shimmering and limpid from the other, the foot hidden at certain angles, making the entire 500-pound piece appear to float unsupported. "I'm interested in the translucence of glass," the artist says. "You can't get translucence in ceramics except on a very thin glaze. If I made these exact shapes in ceramics, it wouldn't be the same. In glass, it's possible to see inside the shape."

In his dialectic deconstruction, Kaneko allows the viewer not only to see inside the shape, but also to see inside the artist's creative process. The work assembled for the "New Glass" exhibition is uniquely successful in the virtuosity it shows in the whittling down of concepts into smaller and smaller kernels—even if the pieces that concretize these ideas are anything but small. ■

A contributing critic to ARTnews and Art, Ltd., RICHARD SPEER is the author of *Matt Lamb: The Art of Success* (John Wiley & Sons) and is visual arts critic at Willamette Week in Portland, Oregon. His articles have appeared in Newsweek, Salon, The Los Angeles Times, and Opera News.

