



Scale
and
TOPOGRAPHY

JUN
KANEKO

BY RIC COLLIER



Untitled, 1996. Hand-built, glazed ceramics and polished and flame-treated granite, 6 x 28 x 25 ft. Project for Aichi Prefecture, government building, Nagoya, Japan.

Imagine looking northwest, through the polarized glass expanse of the entryway of the Phillip Johnson-designed Art Museum of South Texas into the gray light of a winter morning in early 1985. There, at the end of a 10,000-square-foot sidewalk separating the entrance stairs of the museum from the park road, three huge, weighty objects, adorned with varied patterns of blues, yellows, reds, and blacks and standing as tall as a professional basketball player, interrupt the vast flatness of the immediate horizon of the coastal plain around Corpus Christi. These imposing 5.5-ton ceramic *dangos* (looking like massive loaves of bread) are strapped neatly and securely to the bed of a 45-foot air-ride, low-boy trailer pulled by a black Ace Trucking Company tractor. And there, standing on the sidewalk, halfway between the trailer and the white museum building, dwarfed by the truck, which is in turn dwarfed by the *dangos*, is a man. Dressed in loose black pants and a loose black jacket striped sparingly with bright colors, with flowing black hair, Japanese sandals on his feet, and a hand-printed black and white canvas bag in his hand is the artist Jun Kaneko. These *dangos*, each taller than either of us, are his work.

In preparation for this first project with Kaneko, I had familiarized myself with his work by reviewing slides and photographs, reading articles about this unique work, and discussing directly with the artist the size of the individual pieces in order to arrange for their transportation and installation. But I was not adequately prepared. I had no actual sense of the size or a true understanding of the relative scale of the *dangos* (Japanese for “rounded form”) and corresponding mattress-size slabs until I stood next to them neatly situated on the trailer in front of me. This was my introduction to the scale of Kaneko’s work.

Scale has always been an essential concern for Kaneko. While in a residency program in the Netherlands in 1996, he wrote in his journal, “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.”

Kaneko once described to me the evolution to making work of an even larger size and scale. I call this his philosophy of “comfort-driven scale.” He explained, “In the 1960s, when I was first introduced to clay, I began by making objects that I could comfortably hold in my hand. Time passed and I had adjusted to those objects so I made another object, this time larger, that I could hold in two hands with comfort. My next adjustment came when I made an object that I could hold in my arms. And so on.” To me, Kaneko is always probing the vulnerable underbelly of comfort. Like the koi fish that will grow proportionally to fit the size of his pond, Kaneko’s ambition and subsequent work has grown in scale and size as his comfort with his ideas, his abilities, his understanding of the material, and his environment have grown.

For Kaneko, issues of size, comfort, and scale have grown incrementally with time. Likewise his dialogue with clay and other materials continues to evolve, so that the objects, the installations, the drawings and paintings keep growing and are more expansive, their scale more extensive. And the facilities required to execute these ambitious projects have become proportionally larger, their locations more exotic and the challenges riskier. For example, in the early 1980s, at the Omaha Brick Works facility in Nebraska, Kaneko found a site with a kiln large enough to match his immense and growing needs. The result was the completion, at that time, of the world’s largest hand-built, high-fired ceramic objects—the three *dangos* and three slabs that I first encountered in front of the Art Museum of South Texas. Kaneko’s work now includes everything from 14-by-18-inch rectangular tiles to ceramic heads the size of a small car.

To intensify the relationships of scale, he chooses to overlay the topography of an object with the intricacy of pattern, delighting in the incongruity between the two. For example, when he paints a checkerboard pattern on a head, he doesn’t necessarily follow the head’s natural contours; instead, he considers that object’s topography and intuitively decides the placement of the pattern on the surface. Whether in an 11,000-square-foot sidewalk,



a basement floor, a six-foot-tall head, a tile-covered wall, or a tea cup, this “dance” between surface and pattern presents an awkward relationship for most artists, but it is one that Kaneko orchestrates with great success. Metaphorically, I think that Kaneko recognizes his forms and the patterns he applies as separate characters. The melding of the two in his thoughts and then through his hands creates a third character formed as a result of an often long and deliberate conversation among the three in the privacy of the studio.

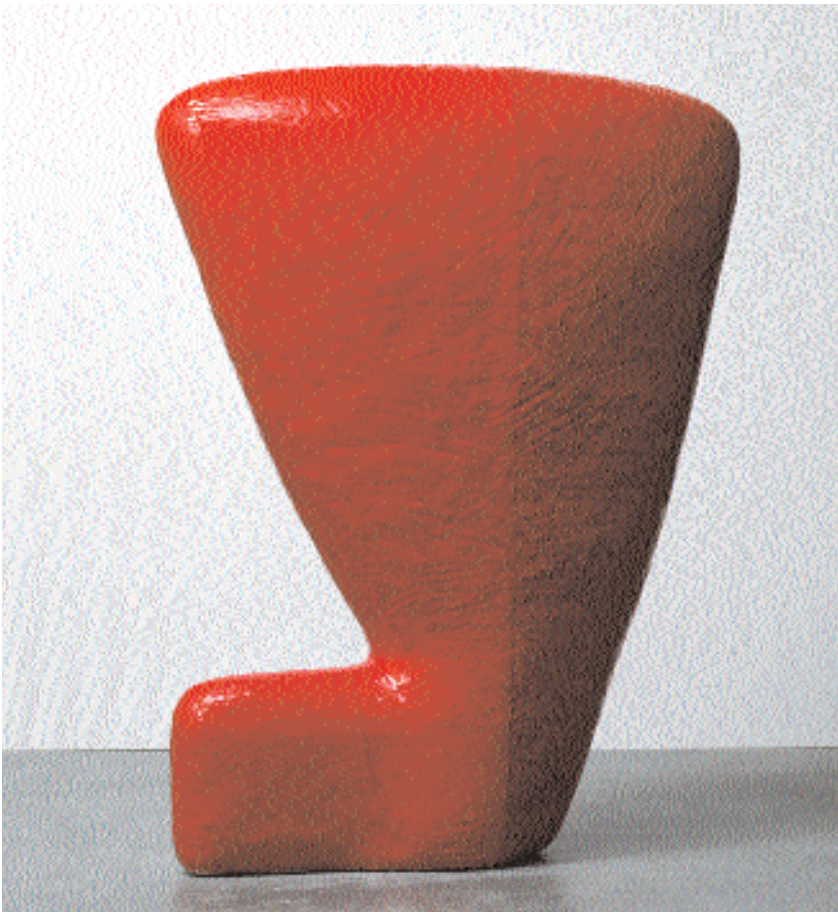
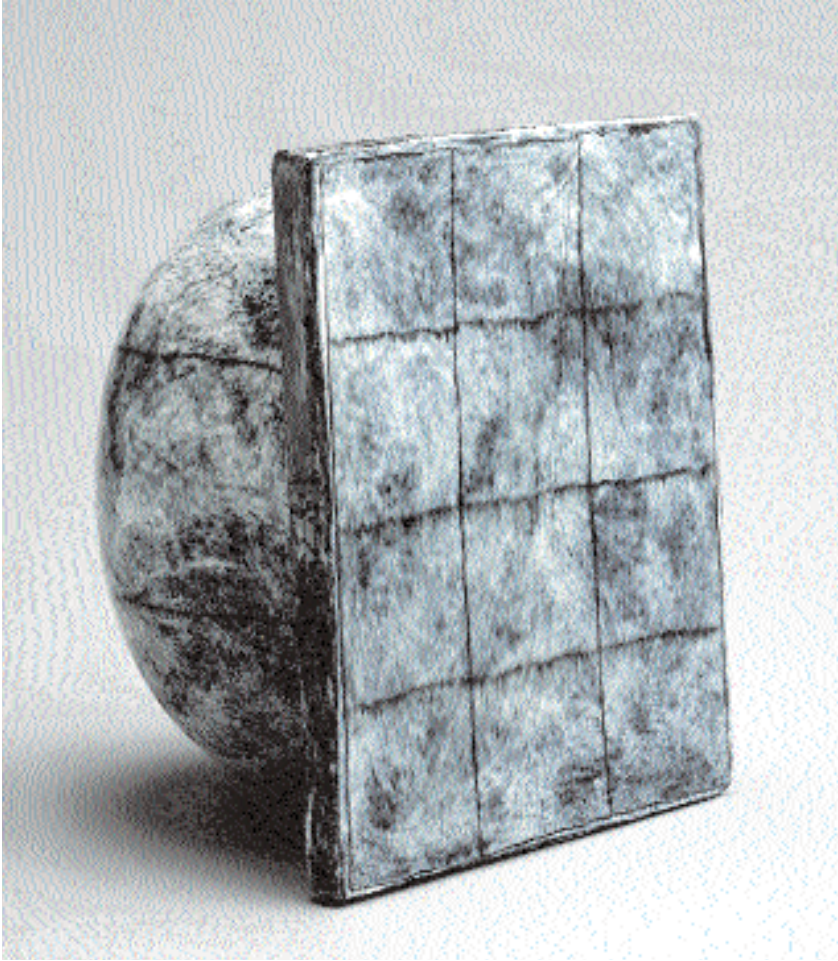
The basis of Kaneko’s experiments in scale is his insistence on challenging himself and his materials. He has said, “Having my own fixed philosophical point of view makes me wonder if I can keep my mind flexible and my attitude fresh.” He is able, with clarity and exuberance, to cast a head in bronze and glass, work on site-specific installations or commissioned public art projects, and even design an opera set and costumes, in addition to his annual sojourns into painting and drawing. Nimbleness of thought and facility with materials allow him to return to his original material, clay, with freshness and excitement and always push him beyond previous limits.

Kaneko has served as engineer, chemist, architect, and sometimes alchemist in order to accomplish such dramatic results as a solid slab of high-fired clay measuring eight inches high by six feet wide by four feet deep and weighing 3,000 pounds. He has had to invent his structures, systems, and procedures, design work areas, adapt large industrial beehive kilns, retrofit warehouses into studios, and develop his own formulas for a variety of media.

Although he eventually earned a graduate degree in ceramics from Claremont College, Kaneko never followed a strict academic path to further his education in ceramics. Instead, he chose individuals like Jerry Rothman, Peter Voulkos, Paul Soldner, and John Mason to work with, to observe, and to question. But he always maintained his own identity, relying on his



Top: View of installation at Gallery Takagi, Nagoya, Japan, 1991. **Bottom:** *Untitled (Head)*, 2004. Hand-built, glazed ceramics, 78 x 63 x 70 in.



intuition as an artist to form and articulate a personal vision. Kaneko explains, "Voulkos never gave me critiques, never said anything most of the time. And then he would say something like, 'I'm doing casting tonight, if you want you could come and watch.' I was really lucky, usually there were no students around his studio. He had lots of friends around, but never any students. He always invited me because he knew I was there to watch how he did things...but no, no critiques." Remaining outside the formal structure of academe, Kaneko never had to acknowledge or work within preconceived boundaries; therefore, he continued (in his own way) to challenge the inherent limitations of clay, glass, bronze, and paint and to learn from experimentation.

From those early days in Southern California through his newest projects, Kaneko's work has shown an intriguing balance between East and West. Voulkos once wrote, "On an aesthetic level, Kaneko is an incredibly balanced artist. He has combined his Eastern heritage with Western art history into a personal and unique statement. He has become a true visionary, combining Eastern and Western thought, propelling the medium toward a universal language." Possibly because Kaneko came to the United States without speaking a word of English, he maintained a non-verbal communication, a highly intuitive and essentially spiritual connection with clay and his work. He wrote in his journal, "Recently, I've started to think if it is possible to become the material itself. Then the space between the maker and the material would not exist." Kaneko's work is at once complex and very meditative, reflecting a fascinating blend of Japanese and American sensibilities. His regard for scale and for materials, along with his patience and perseverance, seems more Japanese, while the size of his projects feels more American.

Once a young painter newly arrived in a foreign country, Kaneko is now among

Top: *Agreement*, 1996. Hand-built and low-fired glazed ceramics, 17 x 13 x 13 in. Bottom: *Splitting Red*, 1996. Hand-built and low-fired glazed ceramics, 60 x 46.75 x 13.5 in.

a vanguard of artists pushing the limits of materials—ceramics, glass, and bronze, in particular—in the contemporary art world. His work can be found in the collections of more than 40 museums, including the De Young Museum in San Francisco; the European Ceramic Work Centre in 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands; Detroit Art

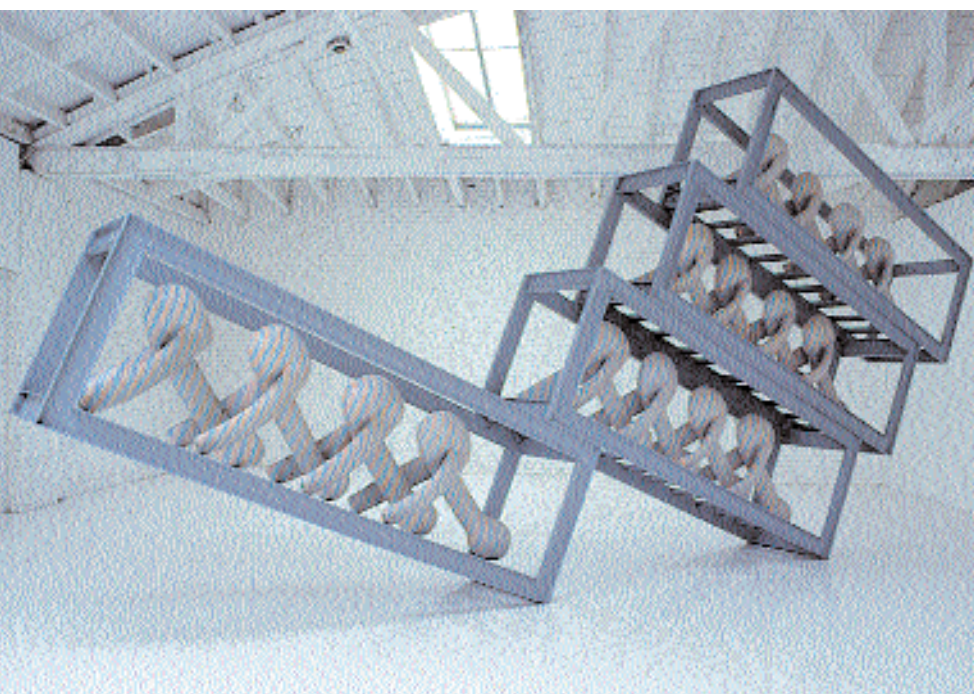
Institute; Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha; Contemporary Museum in Honolulu; Queensland Art Gallery, South Brisbane, Queensland, Australia; Museum of Modern Art in Wakayama, Japan; Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, Nebraska; Japan Foundation, Tokyo; Nagoya City Museum, Nagoya, Japan; Nelson-Atkins Museum of

Art, Kansas City Missouri; Olympic Museum of Ceramic Sculpture, Athens, Greece; Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia; and the Smithsonian National Museum of American Art, Renwick Gallery, Washington, DC.

Kaneko's public commissions can be found at the San Jose Repertory Theatre Plaza in San Jose, California; the Salt Palace Convention Center in Salt Lake City; San Francisco International Airport; Grand Hyatt Hotel, Rippongi Tower, Tokyo; Aquarium Station, Massachusetts Transportation Bureau, Boston; University of Connecticut, Biology and Physics Building, Storrs, Connecticut; and the Detroit People Mover, Detroit, Michigan. He was recently approved for his largest public art commission to date at the expanded and renovated Convention Center in Kansas City, Missouri.

A new undertaking for the artist is KANEKO, a nonprofit institute in Omaha that will provide a public forum for research and exploration of creativity in the arts, sciences, and philosophy through its programs, events, and exhibitions. KANEKO is further committed to the study, interpretation, and dissemination of scholarly research through publications, seminars, lectures, and special exhibitions designed for the professional community. Kaneko envisions this new organization as a gift to society, committed to engaging and challenging public creativity.

KANEKO will operate in three connected buildings that were once a dairy plant. Architect Mark Mack's design joins new and restored buildings into one unified space: a steel and glass curtain wall will wrap the front of the buildings to unite the preserved historical structures and act as an atrium lobby. A new wing will embrace sculpture gardens and house a permanent installation. The 65,000-square-foot facility, covering three-fourths of a city block, will include seven exhibition spaces, sculpture gardens, a research center, a library, and



This page, top: *Untitled (Sanbon Ashi Series)*, 1970. Glazed ceramic, 18 x 49 x 22 in. each. Bottom: *Untitled (Sanbon Ashi Series)*, 1971. Glazed ceramic and steel, 16 x 21 x 3 ft. Opposite, top: *Wave Wall*, 2001. Fused glass, 78 x 101 x 150 in. Opposite, bottom: *Sticks*, 2001. Kiln-formed glass, installation view.



an experimental studio area. A \$15 million capital campaign has begun, led by Robert and Karen Duncan and Gail Yanney. KANEKO is planning to open to the public in the fall of 2008.

It is clear that the dynamics of scale, balance, space, and material continue to intrigue and challenge Kaneko, just as his work continues to intrigue and challenge the viewer.

Ric Collier is Director of the Salt Lake Art Center.

Current exhibitions of Kaneko's recent work: "Jun Kaneko: Madama Butterfly" will be on view at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha through May 7, 2006; and "Jun Kaneko: Beyond Butterfly" remains on view through May 28, 2006 at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha.

Jun Kaneko on his Designs for *Madama Butterfly*

Kaneko designed the sets, costumes, properties, and video projections for the Opera Omaha production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, which debuted in March 2006. In a December 2005 essay, he describes the process of developing the designs:

One of the most difficult aspects of opera, for a person more familiar with sculpture and painting, which do not traditionally move around during an exhibition, is that nothing stays the same: the constant movement of the music, singers' positions on the stage, and vivid lighting variations. All of these elements have to make great sense together in each moment of the performance.

Shortly after I started to develop the costumes, I realized that working on the stage and costumes simultaneously would make better sense for the total artistic vision; keeping my focus on their unity with the music, the singer's voice, lighting design, and the direction of the Artistic and Stage Directors. This complex collaboration with everyone involved in the production is the total opposite of my familiar experiences as an individual studio artist. It is a new challenge in making an artistic statement for me, full of unknowns.

*Several months into the process, I began to have a good understanding of telling *Madama Butterfly's* story and the director's concept for the singers' movement on stage. This was a great turning point for me and afterwards everything started to fall into position. The design's conceptual complexity was completed by the final addition of video projections; images moving and fading in and out gave me the opportunity to orchestrate the element of time visually on stage...This was one of the most difficult challenges and one of the most exciting creative experiences I have had in my life. Maybe I was lucky that I did not have any prior knowledge of opera production. If you have no idea, you have no fear.*