TANUKI
Jun Kaneko

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LEGENDS, MYTHS AND TRUTHS: JUN KANEKO

Lucas Antony Cowan
Senior Curator of Exhibits, Millennium Park Foundation
2013

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.

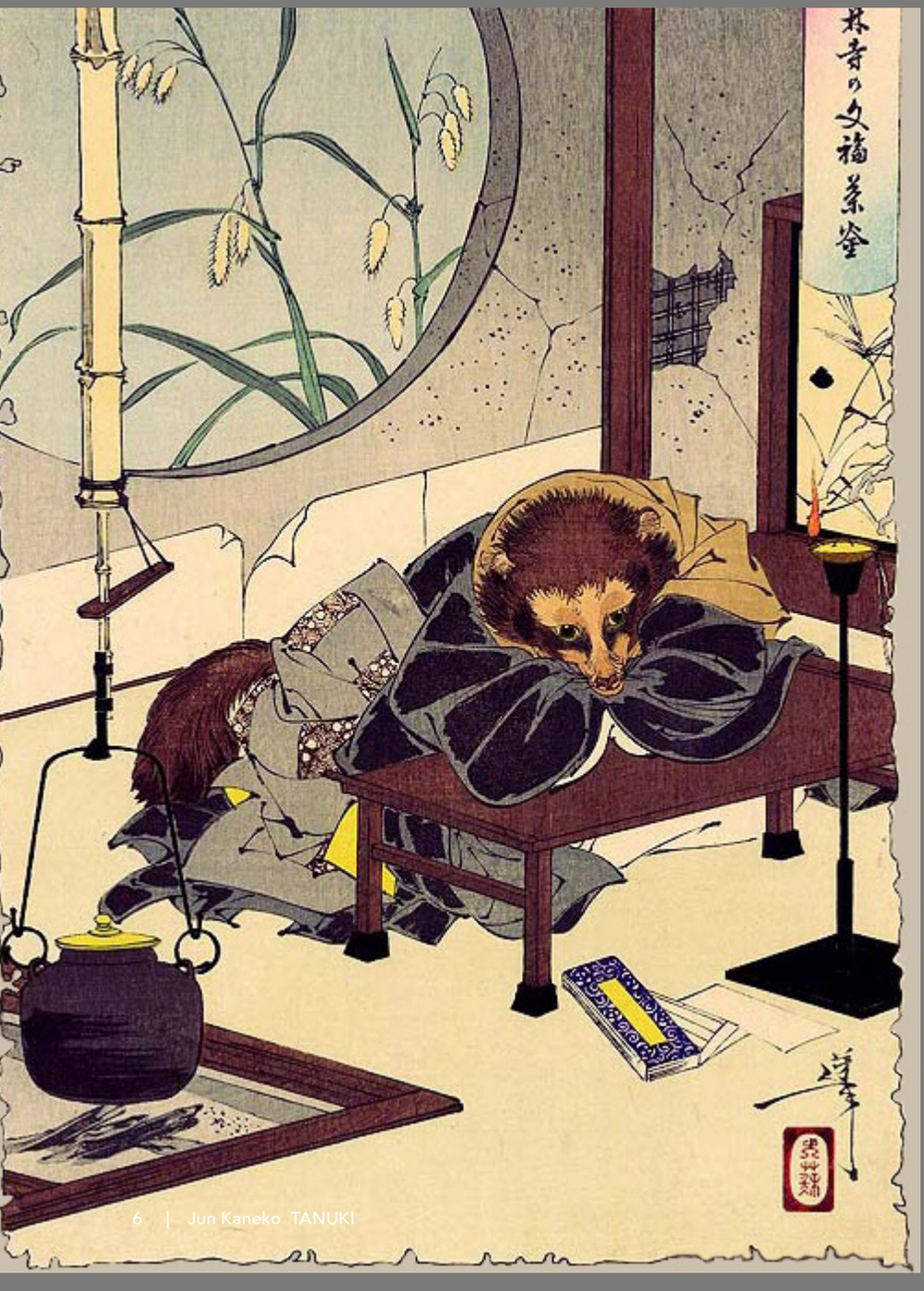
The new body of work by Kaneko featured in the prestigious North Boeing Gallery, located at Millennium Park in Chicago, Illinois, draws upon the myths and legends of the Tanuki figure. From ancient times, the Japanese have expressed the Tanuki in a variety of ways, for it is said to be a mischievous 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 a creature found only 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.

In studying these figurative forms and examining their glaze patterns, drips and crystallizations, you become lost in their monumental size, even though they are "life-size" in nature. Much in the same way of Kaneko's signature Dango shape, the Tanuki' s bulbous alien forms, seem to breathe, inhaling and exhaling, invoking a startling feeling of fear and curiosity that from the outward appearance they just might be real and alive.

Facing page: Banko ware tanuki figurine, 19th century, ceramic. Private collection.



茶香の文福茶釜

HISTORY OF TANUKI

Alexandra Cardon

In his book, Popular Narrative Art of the Grotesque, Sasaki Miyoko traces the contemporary tales of the tanuki to the Rakugo traditions of Japan. These spoken comedic tales evolved over centuries. In the Rakugo tales, animals have supernatural powers. The legendary tanuki is a mischievous shapeshifter. Tanukis turn into beautiful women to lure unsuspecting travelers off the path, or transform leaves in to money to cheat gullible humans.[1] The tanuki can also be generous, and repays kindness. In one story, "Bunbuku Chagama," a poor man saved a tanuki from a trap. To thank him for his kindness, the tanuki transformed himself into a teapot and told the man to sell him. In one version of the tale, the teapot was sold to a priest who set the pot on the fire. Unable to take the heat, the tanuki-teapot sprouted legs and ran back to the poor man. Together, they set up a road side attraction and made a fortune from the tight rope acrobatics of the tanuki-teapot. Legend also has it that tanukis will gather together on moonlight nights to sing and dance. Some puff up their stomach and drum on them all night long. If the tanuki overhears someone playing a musical instrument, he will join in, drumming ceaselessly on his stomach until the players stop.

The Rakugo tanuki tales are illustrated in numerous paintings, the tanuki-teapot story being a preferred subject. During the Edo period, the depictions of the tanuki multiplied. He was depicted both realistically and as a fantastical beast of epic strength and cunning. Delicate sumi ink paintings show the little animals in nature under the full moon. These paintings are part of a long tradition of secular Japanese painting, the hallmarks of which are monochrome landscapes with a focus on nature and the presence of animal life. These paintings are a form of poetry; we sense the softness of the tanuki's fur thanks to feathery brushstrokes, which contrasts with the sharp solid lines of branches. The tanuki's function in these paintings is purely aesthetic; his role is to provoke an emotional response though contemplation.

By the mid-1840s, Kuniyoshi Utagawa's wood block prints transform the sweet animal into a fantastically endowed beast who accomplishes great feats with his brothers but is also prone to ribald behavior. The Rakugo tales in this period begin to associate the tanuki with good fortune and the multiplying of gold.[2]

In the 1930s, the potter Tetsuzo Fujiwara blended these traditions. His cheerful tanuki gained acclaim after the Emperor Hirohito's visit to the Shiga province. For this momentous visit, the prefecture created a row of flag-waving tanuki sculptures. The charmed emperor penned a poem about the tanukis, which contributed to the popularization of the sculptures across Japan.

Jun Kaneko's sculptures reinvent the tanuki once again. His colorful and multi-patterned pieces move away from previous representations, and yet his Tanukis are still pranksters. During Kaneko's 2013 Millennium Park Tanuki installation in Chicago, visitors ran giddily from one piece to the next, picking a favorite and changing their minds as soon as they set eyes on the next one. Children drummed on the Tanukis' bellies, laughing and dancing. Returning visitors came dressed as their favorites, posing with the sculpture as they would with a dear family member. Kaneko's whimsical humor shines through with these pieces, a wonderful glimpse into the complex mind that has simultaneously built peaceful ceramic monoliths, designed dramatic sets for Madame Butterfly, and playful costumes for Mozart's Magic Flute.

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[1] Katherine M. Ball, Animal Motifs in Asian Art. An Illustrated Guide to their Meaning and Aesthetics, Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2004, 141. Ball's chapter "The Badger and the Bear" relates a number of tales in which the tanuki is in turn a thief, a hero, a shape-shifter and more.

[2] Alice Gordenker wrote a lengthy article for Japan times on the tanuki in 2008 that addresses at the Utagawa prints

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Facing page: Top left: Katsushika Hokusai, *Illustration of a Tanuki from the Manga, Vol. 14*, 1815, woodblock print, ink on paper. USC Pacific Asia Musem Collection. Top center: Ogata Gekko, *Tanuki Playing the Belly-drum under a Full Moon*, late 19th/early 20th century, color lithograph, ink on card stock. Leonard A. Lauder Collection of Japanese Postcards. Top Right: Koun Takamura, *Houshi Tanuki*, late 19th/early 20th century, wood sculpture. Kiyomizu Sannenzaka Museum. Bottom left: Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, *The Lucky Tea Kettle of Morin Temple from The 36 Ghosts and Strange Apparitions*,1892, woodblock print; ink on paper. Art Gallery of New South Wales. Bottom right: Katsuhika Hokusai, Bunbuku Chagama 1794-1804, ink on paper. Sumida Hokusai Museum.

ADDRESSING A JAPANESE ICON

Renowned for its long pottery traditions, the Japanese town of Shigaraki has a special affection for the mythological tanuki figure. The version favored here is the one popularized by Tetsuzo Fujiwara in the 1930s; it grins cheerfully, with a stout, grey-brown body, round belly, chubby cheeks, and a jug of sake hanging from one arm.

Shigaraki is overrun with ceramic tanukis, which have become a prominent mascot for the area. Statuettes of the creature peep out from gardens, while human-sized versions stand smiling next to the entrances of shops and restaurants. The largest tanuki statues can be found towering over visitors to the Shigaraki Tanuki Village, a pottery museum featuring tens of thousands of ceramic tanuki sculptures.

Having travelled to the region several times to work with local ceramic institutions, Jun Kaneko drew inspiration from Shigaraki's tanuki statues to create his own version of the beloved shapeshifter. His Tanukis stand over 6 feet tall, their forms covered with the artist's vibrant colors and patterns. Kaneko envisioned an army of Tanukis for the North Boeing Gallery of Millennium Park for his 2013 exhibition. Each would be a unique celebration of a treasured Japanese icon.

Below: Kaneko's preliminary drawings for Millenium Park Tanukis.
Bottom: Unfired 6-foot Tanuki forms at Omaha studio.
Pages 12-13: Building, firing, and glazing 6.5-foot Tanukis.

12 | Jun Kaneko TANUKI | Millennium Park, Chicago, IL

TANUKI
MILLENNIUM PARK
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
2013

Visitors to the Millenium Park Exhibition posing and interacting with Tanukis

Tanuki, 2012
79"H x 33.5"W x 27.5"D

Tanuki, 2013
72.5”H x 32.5”W x 28.5”D

Tanuki, 2013
74″H x 33.5″W x 28.5″D

Tanuki, 2013
77"H x 35"W x 28"D

Tanuki, 2012
73.5”H x 34.5”W x 27.5”D

Tanuki, 2013
76″H x 33″W x 27.5″D

Tanuki, 2012
77"H x 34.5"W x 27.5"D

Tanuki, 2012
72″H x 32″W x 27.5D

Tanuki, 2013
75”H x 34.5”W x 27.5”D

Tanuki, 2012
76″H x 32″W x 27.5″D

26 | Jun Kaneko TANUKI | Millennium Park, Chicago, IL

28 | Jun Kaneko TANUKI | Millennium Park, Chicago, IL

TANUKI

JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER
FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS,
HALL OF NATIONS
WASHINGTON, DC
2 0 1 4

Tanuki, 2013
72″H x 32.7″W x 28″D

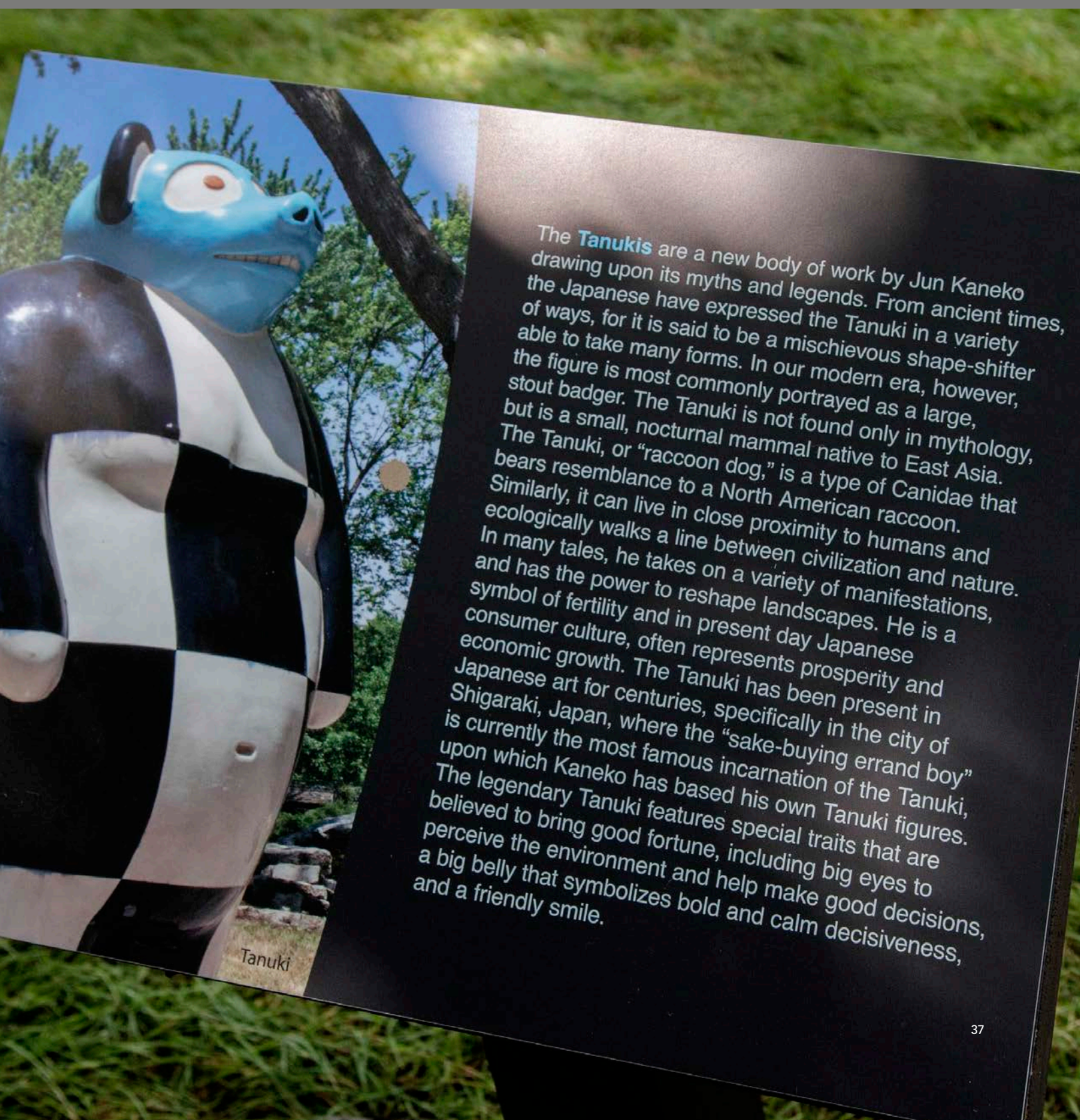

JUN KANEKO
THE KENNEDY CENTER
SCULPTURE EXHIBITION
April 9 – May 19, 2014
See more Kaneko designs in The Magic Flute,
May 3–18, 2014 in the Opera House.
The Jun Kaneko Exhibition is funded by
the Japan Foundation.

34 | Jun Kaneko TANUKI | Kennedy Center, Washington, DC


Jun Kaneko
Garden of Tanuki, 2014

TANUKI GARDEN

HENRY DOORLY ZOO
OMAHA, NEBRASKA
2014



40 | Jun Kaneko TANUKI | Henry Doorly Zoo, Omaha, NE

Tanuki, 2013
77"H x 33.5"W x 27.5"D

Tanuki, 2012
76″H x 32″W x 27.5″D

48 | Jun Kaneko TANUKI | Private Installation, Council Bluffs, IA

TANUKI

PRIVATE INSTALLATION
COUNCIL BLUFFS, IOWA
2014

50 | Jun Kaneko TANUKI | Private Installation, Council Bluffs, IA

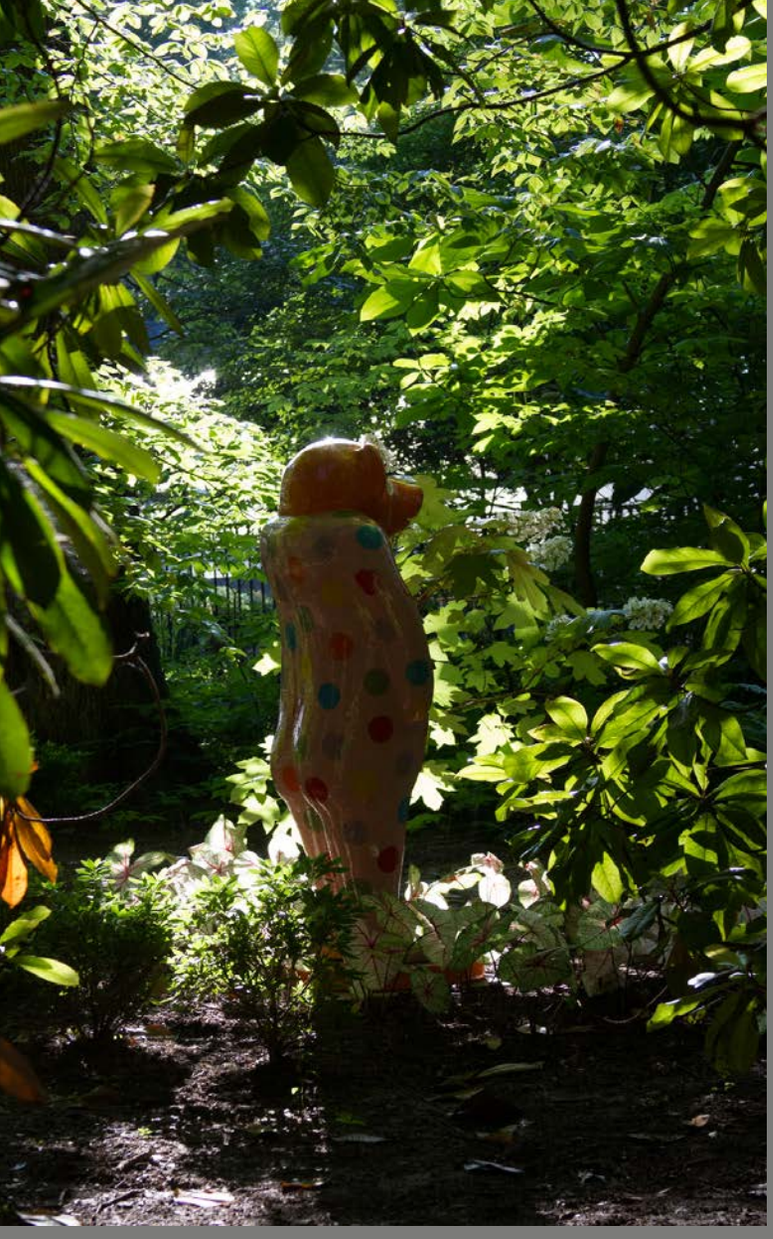

US CARGO CONTROL
WLL 3325LBS 1515KG
US CARGO CONTROL
US CARGO CONTROL

52 | Jun Kaneko: TANUKI | Private Installation, Council Bluffs, IA

Tanuki, 2013
73″H x 33.5″W x 27″D

54 | Jun Kaneko TANUKI | Dixon Gardens, Memphis, TN

TANUKI DIXON GALLERY & GARDENS
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE
2 0 1 5



Tanuki, 2012
74″H x 31″W x 27.5″D

Tanuki, 2012
72″H x 32″W x 27.5′′D

Tanuki, 2014
74″H x 34″W x 27.5″D

TANUKI

NIHONDAIRA ZOO
SHIZUOKA, JAPAN
2 0 1 5

Tanuki, 2014
76"H x 34"W x 28"D

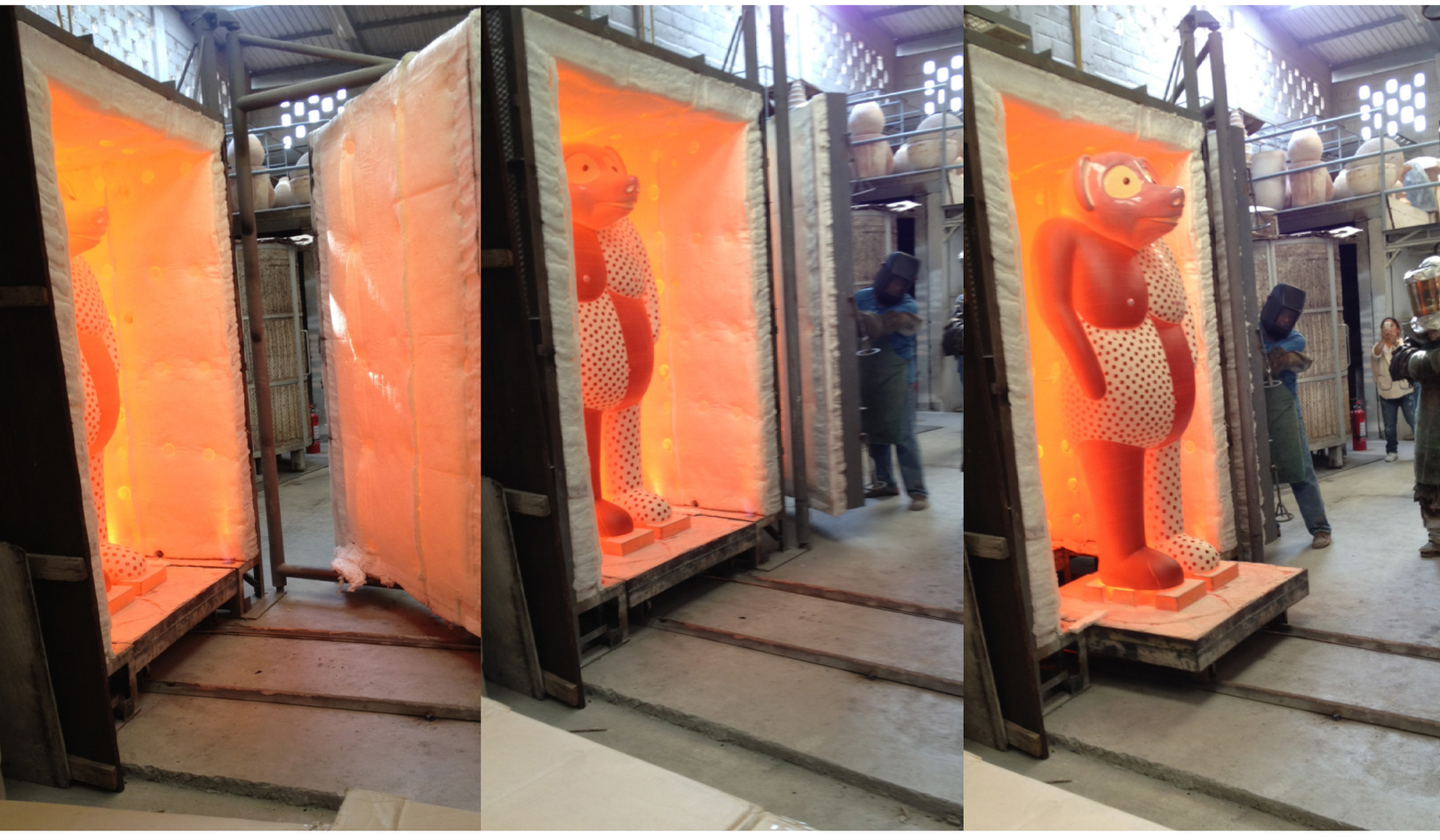
In 2015, delegates from Omaha, NE travelled to the Nihondaira Zoo in Shizuoka, Japan to present one of Kaneko's Tanukis as a gift honoring the 50th anniversary of the Sister Cities relationship. Shizuoka gifted a Sumpu Jaya structure to the Japanese Park & Garden area of Omaha's Lauritzen Gardens to mark the anniversary. Many gift and cultural exchanges have been made between the two cities over the years.

From left to right: George Behringer, Honorary Consul General of Japan, Mary Kane, President and CEO of Sister Cities International, Pete Festersen, Member of Omaha City Council, Nobuhiro Tanabe, Mayor of the City of Shizuoka, Kazumi Shigeta, Chairperson, Shizuoka City Council, Masahiro Unno, General Manager of the Nihondaira Zoo

Richard Barea, an Omaha tribal elder, giving a blessing as part of the ceremonies

TANUKI
RAKU WORKS

JUAN DE DIOS SANCHEZ ARCE
ARTE KUAN STUDIO
CUERNAVACA, MEXICO



RAKU TANUKIS

Raku ware originated in the Momoyama period in Japan during the mid-sixteenth century. Traditional Japanese raku ware consisted of “red” or “black” variations, referring to the color of slips and glazes applied to the surface of the pottery. Both varieties were fired quickly and at a relatively low temperature - no more than 1,200 degrees Celsius - before being cooled outside the kiln in open air.

The Western contemporary use of the word “raku” is a loose appropriation of the term to refer to low-fired pottery inspired by Japanese raku ware. American ceramist Paul Soldner sought to mimic traditional raku firing processes in the 1960’s. Unsatisfied with the results of his early attempts, he experimented with adding combustibles to the cooling process. After removing the red-hot pieces from the kiln, rather than letting them cool according to tradition, he rolled the heated pots in pepper tree leaves. Soldner was delighted with the resulting transformation of the glaze and surface texture. He began using a variety of combustibles, such as eucalyptus leaves, sawdust, and newspapers. Modern raku ceramicists continued in this innovative direction, using a variety of techniques and materials to produce unpredictable and beautiful surfaces on ceramic ware and sculpture.

A glowing hot Tanuki exiting the kiln and being enclosed in a chamber lined with combustible materials

Jun Kaneko studied with Soldner at the Claremont Graduate School in California for two years (1969-1970), where he experimented briefly with raku firing. As his practice was increasingly focused on large scale ceramics, he found the small kilns used for raku were limiting the execution of his ideas. Kaneko abandoned raku firing until 2012 when he met Juan de Dios Sanchez Arce in Mexico. Sanchez operated a raku studio in Cuernavaca, which specialized in the firing of large scale vessels. His passion for raku and for pushing the technical limits of ceramics caught Kaneko's interest, and they began to collaborate on Kaneko's 6-foot Tanuki sculptures.

The theatrics of raku proved even more impressive with scale. The glazed pieces were wheeled out of the firing kiln, glowing red, and locked into a box of combustibles. Flames surged out of the box, turning into thick smoke as the oxygen burned out. The resulting surfaces featured rich, smoky blacks, crackled glazes, and lustrous metallics. Paired with the large scale of Kaneko's forms, the raku technique produced especially dramatic, unique works.

Raku Tanukis, 2013
73"H x 34"W x 29"D

Front cover: Tanuki, 2012, 77″H x 33″W x 27.5″D

Much appreciation to:

Alexandra Cardon, Troia Schonlau, Susan Schonlau, Pam Fanelli, and the entire Jun Kaneko Studio staff.

With gratitude to our collaborators:

Lucas Cowan and the Millennium Park executive board and staff
Dennis Pate and The Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium
Michael Mael and The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
Kevin Sharp and the Dixon Gallery & Gardens
George Behringer and the Omaha Sister Cities Association
Juan de Dios Sanchez Arce and the Arte Kuan Studio staff

Many thanks to all the Studio Assistants who have worked on these Tanukis since 2011:

Conrad Snider
John Balistreri
Jason Hovey
Garet Reynek
Nicholas Jacobsen
Heron Bassett
Davey Gilles
Trevor Lare
Mike Hurley

Special thanks to Tadayasu Sasayama, an internationally recognized ceramic artist who maintains an active studio in Shigaraki. Kaneko's idea was to create all the Tanuki sculptures in Shigaraki, the origin place of this lovable good luck character. Sasayama was significant in researching the ability of craftsmen in Shigaraki to see if all the Tanuki forms could be created there where their folklore flourished. After months of research and talking with the numerous artisans there who specialize in the Tanuki idol, it was determined that they could not technically make the Tanuki sculpture as Kaneko envisioned it. We sincerely thank Sasayama for his efforts.

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Published in North America by
Jun Kaneko Studio
1120 Jones Street
Omaha, NE, 68102
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