

# Ceramics

## Art + Perception

2019

# #114

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AUD	\$27
GBP	£15



# Jun Kaneko

Written by **Garth Clark**

**S**erendipity. It is defined as the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way. The key is *by chance*. It cannot be summoned. It requires sensitivity and awareness to recognize and capture the moment. A perfect example was going into the garden of Gerald Peters Projects in Santa Fe, New Mexico during Jun Kaneko's exhibition. This garden oasis is lush green with a koi pond and even a waterfall.

The large *Dango's* (Kaneko's signature form, *Dango* means 'dumpling' or 'closed form' in Japanese) placed in the garden were grounded in white with circles of cobalt-based indigo glaze. From inky-blue circles and other shapes, washes of a misty lighter blue drifted down. This is seductive by itself, but then it began to rain lightly. The gentle flow of water down the surface sharpened the blues, brightened the white; the glaze wash seemed to become one, streaming down the form. It was a rare and remarkable moment.

These works were part of what is the best exhibition of Kaneko's ceramics I have seen. And I have seen plenty. Kaneko is one of the field's most prolific exhibitors. He can maintain this pace because of a team of assistants and his giant studio in Omaha, Nebraska.

However before moving onto the exhibition itself, let's look at Kaneko's early history in the United States. He was born in Nagoya, Japan in 1942, studying painting in high school. In 1963 he came to continue painting studies at the Chouinard Art Institute but found himself more drawn to ceramics. (The department was then headed by Ralph Bacerra.) The timing was perfect. The school was shifting from Otto and Vivika Heino's Asian traditionalism to Postmodernism, celebrating polychrome glazes. Its graduates included Adrian Saxe, Elsa Rady and Peter Shire.

Kaneko had arrived with an induction to artist Jerry Rothman, gruff but generous and welcoming. Rothman was the entry point for many artists from abroad. He introduced Kaneko to Fred Marer, a mathematics professor, rigorously analytical and a fierce debater (he seemed to know the artist's work better than they did). He had begun his collection from day one at the ceramic lab at the Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, founded in 1954. Lead by Pete Voukos, its collaborators included Rothman, Ken Price, John Mason, Paul Solder, Henry Takamoto and others.

**Untitled, Dango**, 2019, hand built and glazed ceramics, 57.5 x 30 x 18 in (146 x 76 x 45.5 cm). Image credit: Colin Conces.

**In this show I noticed something for the first time...**





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*Opposite:*  
**Untitled, Dango**, 2019, hand glazed raku ceramics, 35.5 x 36.5 x 14 in (90 x 93 x 35.5 cm). Image credit: Colin Conces.

*Following page left:*  
**Untitled, Dango**, 2019, hand glazed raku ceramics, 37 x 30.25 x 15.5 in (94 x 77 x 39.5 cm). Image credit: Colin Conces.

*Following page right:*  
**Untitled, Dango**, 2019, hand built and glazed ceramics, 35 x 36 x 12 in (88 x 91.5 x 30.5 cm). Image credit: Colin Conces.

I was fortunate to have the same duo as my champions when I first arrived in the US in 1977. I was shocked by the housing of Marer's invaluable collection in two garages on flimsy shelves. Every time an earthquake rattled through; a score of pots met their end. Today the collection is safely housed at Scripps College, Claremont.

Marer introduced Kaneko to Voulkos who was now teaching at the University of California, Berkeley. Recognizing his potential, Voulkos accepted him as an assistant at the University's ceramic and sculpture department. Voulkos' influence was more a matter of a fiery spirit than visual. Kaneko never took on the Abstract Expressionist style, instead producing some vaguely anthropomorphic sculptures standing on legs and painted with dripping glaze. Soon the roots of the aesthetic we know today began to emerge.

Kaneko did not have an undergraduate degree, yet alone the graduate degree which that was needed to teach. Teaching was a key source of income at a time when there were few collectors. Paul Soldner admitted him to Scripps College's graduate program where, in 1971, he earned an MFA.

Kaneko was now launched, with the privilege of friends, from the most progressive and influential movement in ceramics.

His resume from then on is too complex and massive to be summarized here, teaching at several venues including becoming the ceramic master at the Cranbrook Art Academy, Bloomfield Hills, in Michigan, and exhibiting internationally.

We will jump to 1982 when a part-time residency at Ree Schonlau's' Alternative Worksite in Omaha, Nebraska (now the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts) gave him access to the enormous beehive kilns at the Omaha Brickworks allowing a radical jump in scale. Omaha has been his home ever since and is where he installed what is arguably the largest and, best-equipped studio in America.

Back to the Gerald Peters show; kudos go to gallery Director Evan Feldman who with an intuitive eye chose the works. She featured two groups, his glazed *Dango's* alongside a new development, raku fired forms. I am not usually a fan of this technique, but this work, not resembling traditional raku, and fired in Mexico, baffled me, producing orbs of radiant color with deep blacks and gold highlights and just a hint of crackle.

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What is so impressive in Feldman's selection is that works from different periods find a bonding logic, as if linked by connective tissue. The indoor work was shown in the gallery's giant high-ceilinged Cathedral Gallery. This allowed for a spacious installation giving each of the monumental forms enough space to breathe – which was noted and praised by the steady attendance visiting Kaneko's exhibition.

In this show I noticed something for the first time. Those forms that I call Kaneko Tartan, such as *Untitled* (see opposite page), used the flat-sides of the forms more as canvas. These surfaces weave lines of multiple colors, both vertical and horizontal dominated. However, there was another style of painting that was arguably more related to Color Field painting. I refer to *Untitled* (opposite page). Blocks of color, divided by lines, short strips of contrasting color, or white space that cut everything into two, producing a push-pull effect.

This changes the surface relationship; color and form take on an equal partnership. I began to note how the form pushed inward to protect its boundaries. The painting did the opposite, forcing the *Dango* outward, and giving an illusion of the form's sideways expansion.

Few ceramists have enjoyed Kaneko's success and, none have been as prodigious. He is adored by the ceramic world and his studio functions as a temple of expansive optimism. Hundreds, maybe thousands of students, artists and writers are welcomed to his studio. It has become a Mecca. Makers leave awed by his operation with *Dango*'s up to fifteen feet in height and giant kilns to accommodate them. They leave with little desire to mimic his style but inspired by the ambition, scale and exceptional color of his palette. ■

#### About the Author

Garth Clark is the Editor-in-Chief for CFile's publishing projects, journal and news magazine. Irving Blum, the pioneering contemporary art dealer who launched Andy Warhol, Ken Price and Andrew Lord's careers calls Clark "ceramics' great clarifier." The Mather Award jury of the College Art Association (Clark was the 2005 award winner) wrote that his writings "have shaped thought about the field of ceramics and indeed the field itself." A hydra-headed force in the field, Clark has received many honors; Fellow of the Royal College of Art, London, several honorary doctorates and lifetime achievement awards, the "Art Book of the Year" award from Art Libraries Society of North America, medals from the Independent Publishers Association and others. He is author of over sixty books and several hundred reviews and essays.

With Mark Del Vecchio in 1981 he founded Garth Clark Gallery in New York, Los Angeles and briefly London and Kansas City. He founded the Ceramic Arts Foundation in 1979 and was its Director until 2005. An active speaker, Clark has spoken on five continents in thirty countries at over 100 major venues from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London to the Sorbonne University, Paris. He has just completed two books, *Mind Mud: The Conceptual Ceramics of Ai Weiwei* and *Lucio Fontana Ceramic*.

Above:  
Exhibition view.

Opposite:  
**Untitled**, 2006,  
glazed ceramics,  
85 x 30 x 16 in  
(216 x 76 x 40.5 cm).

**Further info**  
Jun Kaneko: An  
Abundance of Presence  
August 23 – October  
26, 2019.  
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