

Jun Kaneko @ Rena Bransten

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Untitled Heads, 2016, hand glazed cast raku ceramics, 69 x 25 x 20" ea.

by David M. Roth

Jun Kaneko, creator of monumental ceramic sculptures, has commandeered the Rena Bransten Gallery with an eye-grabbing installation that brings together key components of his multifaceted oeuvre. There are big ceramic heads mounted on polished steel pedestals; large, minimalist-inflected stripe paintings on canvas; action paintings baked onto *raku* slabs; and, in a separate room, spare tabletop forms. Together, they chart a good bit of the territory Kaneko's covered since 1963

when he emigrated to the U.S. from Japan and fell in with a group of Southern California innovators that included, among others, Peter Voulkos and Paul Soldner.

More recently, he's established himself as a designer of opera sets and costumes, including those now on view in the [SF Opera's production of Madame Butterfly](#). Kaneko's also become something of an empresario. He heads a nonprofit performing arts center in Omaha, Nebraska



Untitled Painting (P-10-1), 2010, acrylic on canvas, 52 x 40"

that carries his name, and oversees, with his wife, Ree, a complex of industrial buildings that serve as production headquarters for an enterprise that has, over the years, produced significant works of public art here and in Japan. That nation remains the true locus of his art, which, despite the early influence of Abstract Expressionism, remains as tethered to pre-modernist traditions (e.g. textiles, Edo-period kettles, woodcuts and thread balls, etc.) as to Modernism itself.

This show, *Paintings and Sculpture*, is the first that the gallery has devoted to a single artist since moving to the Minnesota

Street Project last spring. It shows Kaneko deploying his signature colors, shapes, patterns and lines in several formats. If you walked in and knew nothing about him, you could easily think the exhibition is the work of three different artists. Kaneko's harmonization of these seemingly contradictory elements is big part of what makes the show a success.

The heads, for example, exude a profound sense of physical and psychic duress. Two pairs stand face-to-face, some without eyes, ears and noses. Others, with and without facial features, stand alone; they're wrapped in cylindrical bands and finger-like tendrils that suggest harsh restraint. Even the pair fired in bright, contrasting colors with polka dots seems locked in mute opposition.

The canvases counterbalance that. They're comprised of vertical bands, painted in either neutral tones (i.e. gray- or black-on-white) with blue accents or in candy-stripe/tropical colors.

At a distance, they portend to give off Op-ish vibrations, but don't actually do so. The stripes only *seem* hard-edged; up close their quavering irregularities become focal points. To look is to feel as if you've been let in on a Zen joke. The paintings are *only* about what you see, not portals to someplace else. Consequently, the experience of them rests with the contemplation of tightly modulated gestures tempered by an exquisite sense of balance. Both impulses are governed by what the artist calls *Ma* – a Shinto term that, roughly translated, means a keen awareness of form and negative space.



Untitled Raku Head (15-08-05 IN), 2015, glazed raku ceramics, stainless steel, 69 x 24 x 20"

In a book about his contributions to productions of the *Magic Flute* Kaneko explains: “In my studio work I am always aware that nothing exists by itself. Pattern and composition are born out of the relationships among different elements of the artwork and emerge from conversations I have with myself, the materials and my mark making. Much of my studio work applies itself to issues of scale and the perspectives of the moving viewer with relation to the piece...I try to change the space so a binding relationship unites the concepts of the artwork with the surrounding nature, architecture and the viewer’s experience.”



Untitled Raku Wall Slab (15-08-23), 2015 glazed raku ceramics, 19 1/2 x 17 x 1 1/2"

In the corridor that connects the gallery’s two main exhibition spaces, Kaneko does exactly that with seven raku slab paintings, ranging in size from 19 x 17 to 30 x 24 inches. They’re filled with Twombly-esque scrawls, watery droplets, and in one notable instance, a bloody splotch through which the artist punched a nail-sized hole, creating a black void into which you can peer. All but two of these works carry geometric “notches” — painted squares or rectangles, situated either at the edges or at the center. Each delivers a concentrated blast of energy.

Where the show falters is in the smaller of the two galleries, where small objects (boxes, rectangles, balls, angled ramps and fulcrums) populate a long table. Though they display Kaneko’s usual tropes, they feel like studies for something much larger. None of which will likely diminish the pleasures that can be taken from the main event.