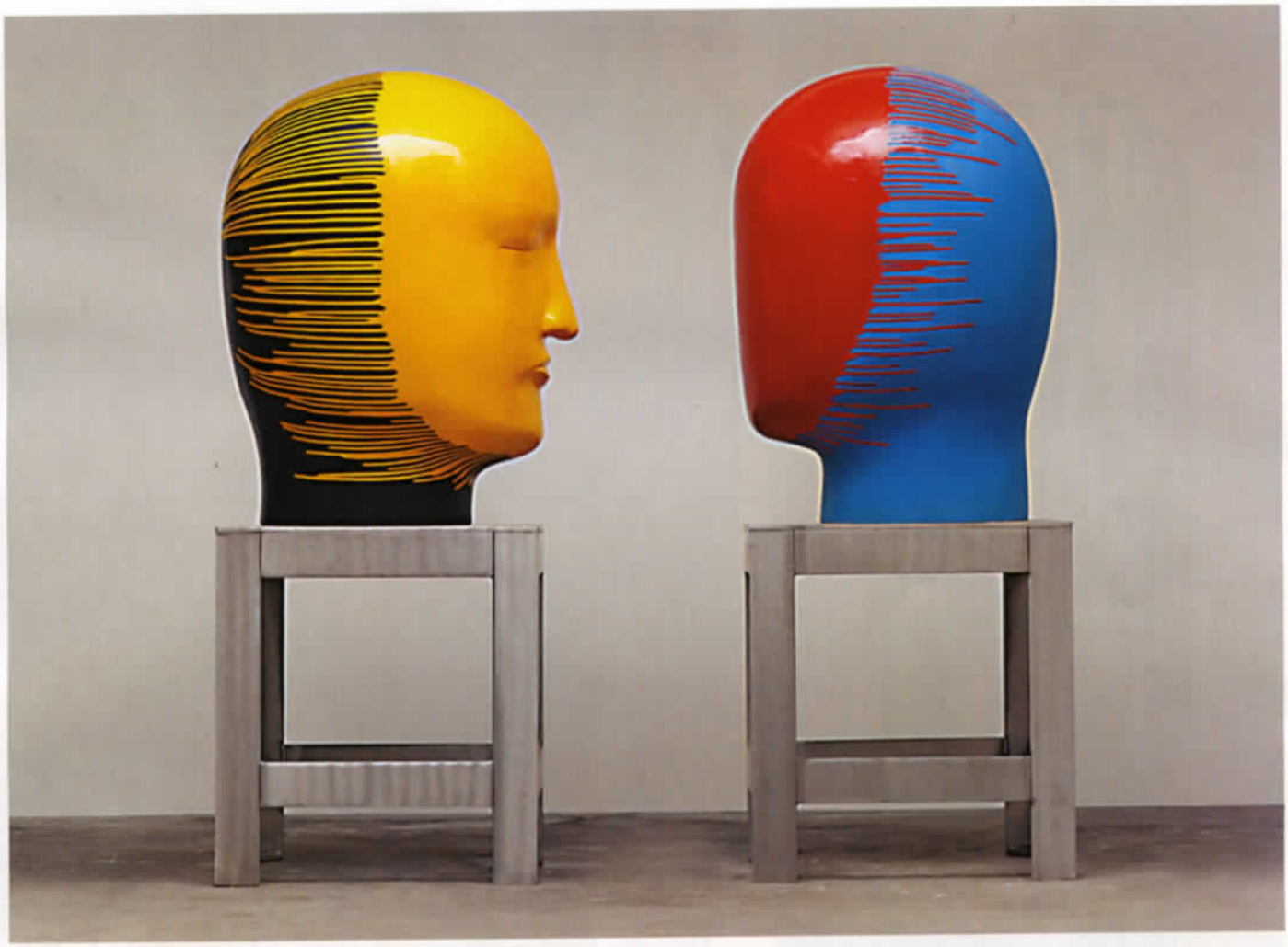
The Space Between

JUN KANEKO'S WORKS, IN CERAMICS AND OTHER MEDIA, ARE OFTEN MONUMENTAL BUT ALWAYS SUBTLE. BY JOHN DORFMAN



"I STARTED AS A painter when I was 17 and continued doing that almost full time until I was 21. But then I moved to California in 1963, not really knowing anything about what was going on, and at the time American contemporary ceramics had just started," recalls Jun Kaneko, an artist who now, at 71, is considered one of the key figures in the American contemporary ceramics movement. "I was young and I got excited. I thought, maybe this is what I should do—I should at least try ceramics. I immediately got sucked into it, and after that I was spending most of my time with clay."

Kaneko had moved from his native Japan when his painting teacher, Satoshi Ogawa, sent him to study with his friend the noted ceramicist Jerry Rothman in Los Angeles. Upon his arrival Rothman immediately introduced Kaneko to ceramics collector Fred Marer (Marer, who was a math teacher, had nearly 900 pieces squeezed into his two-bedroom apartment), who in turn took the young artist around to the studios of ceramists such as Peter Voulkos, John Mason, Mike Frimkess, Henry Takemoto, and Kenny Price before he was even able to successfully converse with them in English. Shortly afterward, Kaneko began attending the Chouinard Institute, which was then in downtown L.A., studying with Voulkos, Rothman and Paul Sodner.

Opposite: Jun Kaneko next to his *Untitled, Dango,* 2013, hand built glazed ceramics, 108.5 x 47 x 27 inches. This page, from top: *Untitled, Heads,* 2011, cast bronze and steel, 74 x 33.25 x 29 inches; *Untitled,* 2012, glazed ceramics, 39.5 x 46 x 34.5 inches.

From left: *Untitled, Dango,* 2006, hand built glazed ceramics, 89 x 29 x 17 inches; *Untitled, Dango,* 2013, glazed ceramics, 80 x 76 x 26 inches

These days, Kaneko works primarily from a studio space in Omaha, Neb., where he is also one of the founders of the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, considered the largest urban artists' colony. He has pieces in over 40 museum collections, including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Museum of Nebraska, and Hawaii State Art Museum, and has been commissioned to create over 25 public art pieces. He is known primarily for working on a monumental scale, with go-to forms such as large, bald phrenology-friendly heads, walls of ceramic tiles covered with abstract forms and lines, and oval vase-like structures he calls *dangos*, meaning "dumpling" or "closed form" in Japanese.

"It's such a technical challenge to make a big piece, and not that many people are doing it," says the artist, "My hope is in terms of scale, that if it's big in relation

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Clockwise from top left: *Untitled, Head,* 2007, cast bronze and steel with patina, 104 x 62 x 54 inches; *Untitled, Dango,* 2010, glazed ceramic, 32 x 21.5 x 14 inches; *Untitled Wall Slab,* 2013, 30 x 24.5 x 2.5 inches

to body size, you start feeling different things—like being next to a mountain or a tree, something different from looking at a small flower on the side of the road." Kaneko admits that working on a smaller scale simply isn't as appealing to him. "A really powerful small-scale piece is much harder to make up," he says, "with a larger size there's automatically a pretty aggressive impact."

Kaneko, who wasn't raised Shinto but admits that "in Japan you can't avoid it," is inspired in his work by the Shinto concept of *ma*. "*Ma* is not the object but the space or consciousness in between," says Kaneko. The artist notes that the surrounding in which a piece is placed has a huge influence on the piece, exceeding the nature of the piece itself. "As a sculptor you focus on making your form or shape, but suddenly you realize that the shape you are making is getting so much influence from the environment and the space around it," he says. "When I go and see the same piece in different environments for different exhibitions, it has a completely different impact. Nothing exists by itself in this world."

As an artist, Kaneko has been recently moving into some new environments. Since the mid-2000s, he has been designing sets for opera productions. He was first approached in 2003 by Opera Omaha to design the set

This page, clockwise from top left: Jun Kaneko at work in his studio; *Untitled, Oval,* 2010, glazed ceramic 26.5 x 22 x 3.25 inches; *Untitled, Dango,* 2004, glazed ceramic, 20.25 x 12 x 9.5 inches; *Untitled, Dango,* 2002, hand built glazed ceramics, 85 x 33 x 15.5 inches. Opposite: *Untitled Painting,* 2009, acrylic on canvas, 9.5 x 7.5 feet.

for a production of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly.* Kaneko was initially shocked at even being asked, since he had never done any production design and was completely unfamiliar with opera. However, after careful consideration he decided that if he immersed himself in the world and music of opera, he would be able to develop a unique design strategy. "I spent about three months listening to the music at least twice a day," he says. "I listened to the music about 150 times before I started to have some ideas and images that naturally came up from me. Then I did random drawings of the ideas, then after a while I looked at a bunch of drawings and could see if there was some conceptual direction. In this contemporary time, why should I do real traditional design for it?" The production premiered in 2006 with Kaneko's bold yet minimalist designs as backdrop. Afterward, Kaneko went on to design a production of *Fidelio* for the Opera Company of Philadelphia, before again partnering with Opera Omaha, along with the San Francisco Opera and the Washington National Opera, for Mozart's *The Magic Flute.*

Yet before he made his foray into production design, Kaneko had begun to show paintings and drawings—not as preliminary works, but as works in their own right. "When I'm making a form," he says, "I do a lot of drawings and paintings that aren't shown too much. In the late '80s my wife said, why don't you show your drawings and paintings? I decided it's part

of me, anyway, so I started to show it. That's why some people still don't know my paintings and drawings too much."

However, to any follower of his work, the look of Kaneko's drawings and paintings should not seem unfamiliar. His drawings, which he created primarily in series, flirt at times with abstraction, with a playful, more deconstructed spirit than some of his other works. Yet they maintain the same palette of bold blues, oranges, pinks, and black that color his ceramics. His paintings also use a bold palette, though some are monochromatic, and his typically large scale—at times reaching upwards of nine feet. Kaneko's intricate overlapping of lines and geometric forms suggest what Agnes Martin's paintings might look like in party colors, or what the fibers of a knit sweater might look like under a microscope.

Kaneko, whose facility with such a vast variety of media (he works with glass, bronze, and textiles, as well) seems uncanny, notes that the idea is the essential aspect of any work, and then the ability to manipulate material in its service. He says, "My interest is in the creative spark. That's the idea, the energy, and each idea has a perfect match of material to work with. It can't always be clay or paint. I'm open to the opportunity of finding the medium to fit the idea." Still he insists, "craftsmanship is the hardest thing. You have to have the ability to make that material change into what you were thinking. That's the craftsmanship, and nobody has fantastic technical ability from the beginning."