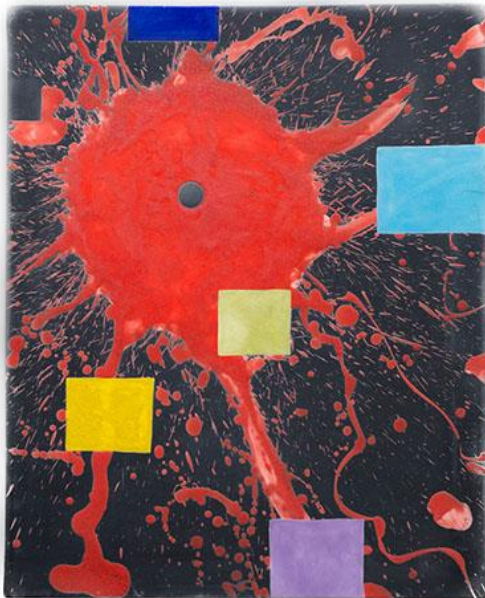




For the past three decades Jun Kaneko has occupied the top rung of ceramic sculpture. His breakthrough came with the development of an oblong, columnar shape known as the *dango*, made with a process he invented that allows monumental clay forms to withstand firing. He's ridden it to fame and created, en route, equally audacious public works and dazzling multimedia stage designs, the latest of which can be seen in the San Francisco Opera's production of [The Magic Flute](#), Oct. 20 to Nov. 20.

For his second solo show at Rena Bransten, the 68-year-old, Omaha-based artist (and co-founder of Beamis Center for Contemporary Arts) presents 2- and 3-D works that are somewhat smaller than what we're used to seeing from him. This doesn't represent a retreat, only a willingness to work within the bounds of a storefront space that's serving as temporary quarters for the gallery until it relocates to the [Minnesota Street Project next year](#). It may well be the best-looking exhibit the gallery's mounted in this room.



Untitled, Wall Slab 2014, glazed raku ceramics,
30 x 24 1/2 x 1 1/2"

The centerpiece is a series of seven *Tanukis*, so named for the "[raccoon-dog](#)," an animal that figures prominently in Japanese folklore. Kaneko turns the creatures into big-eared, long-snouted, cross-eyed caricatures whose facial expressions and slouchy body language bring to mind the "What, me worry?" visage of [Alfred E. Neuman](#), *Mad* magazine's mascot. The Buddha-bellied figures stand like dopey sentries in the gallery's bay window and on the floor nearby: upright and on two feet, half human, half animal, each about three feet tall. It's tempting to call them oversized Pop tchotchkes — they're certainly that. But the motifs that decorate them pull in other, more profound directions. Intersecting black lines reminiscent Ellsworth Kelly; wraparound metallic glazes that give off a reflective, coppery sheen; and multi-colored polka dots, suggestive of both Yayoi Kusama and hip attire, point to art movements of the past century: Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, various strains of Post-Painterly Abstraction and to Minimalism and Pop. Or at least that's the way it appears to Western eyes. The truth is that Kaneko, who emigrated to the U.S. from Japan in 1963, remains far more influenced by ethnic, ceremonial and decorative forms native to Asia than to any that

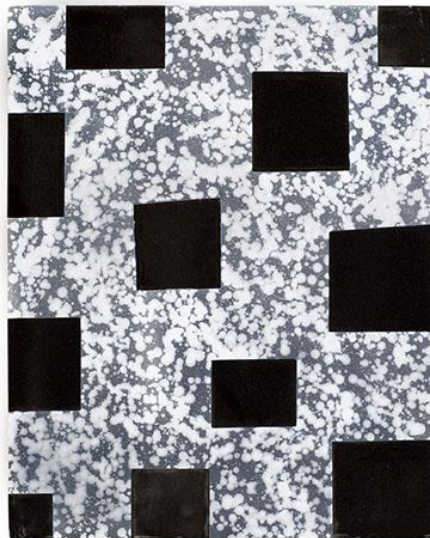
arose in Europe or the Americas. For proof, look at kimonos, textiles, woodcuts and the geometric patterns on the Japanese thread balls known as [Temari](#). As for polka dots, a ubiquitous feature in Kaneko's art, they can be found on [Edo-period kettles](#), objects whose design was modeled on the distended bellies of...the *tanuki*.

These forms cycle through an oeuvre that, in addition to ceramics and theatre design, includes glass, bronze, textiles, installation, drawing and painting. Superb examples of the latter can be found in seven wall-mounted, raku slabs, which, like the *tanukis*, go untitled. In a volcanic-looking, red-on-black splatter painting, an overlay of square and rectangular color swatches creates a Gutai-meets-Mondrian effect. Inside it, there's a small

black circle, which Kaneko, in another work, brings to the fore by placing it in a sea of bright yellow and circling the "aperture" with a slender band of red. The feel is of a surveillance camera embedded in a Minimalist painting. In another work, Kaneko places geometric shapes of varying widths and colors atop a brushy white ground, evoking hexagrams of the I Ching.

The painting that held my gaze longest is composed of black squares and parallelograms. They're set against a ground of what looks like raw granite seen at extreme magnification. The contrast between the ground and the chunky, off-kilter blocks, makes it appear as if the forms are spinning counterclockwise, albeit slowly. Call it Stone Age Op.

One might argue that Kaneko has been leaning on these ideas for too long. Here, a music analog provides a useful defense: Strike the keys of a piano however you like and they sound the same notes. But, when connected to form melodies and set against chords and rhythms, the notes become unique compositions. So it is with Kaneko. His bag of tricks may appear finite, but when deployed across multiple media and allowed to cross-pollinate, the permutations seem as endless as the plains of his home state, Nebraska.



Untitled, Wall Slab, 2015, glazed raku ceramics,
30" x 24 1/2" x 1 1/2"

—DAVID M. ROTH

Jun Kaneko @ [Rena Bransten Projects](#) through October 31, 2015

The Magic Flute @ [San Francisco Opera](#), October 20 to November 20, 2015.