

1986

## Rhythmic Clay: A View of Jun Kaneko's Process

Daphne A. Deeds

*Curator at Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska- Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs>



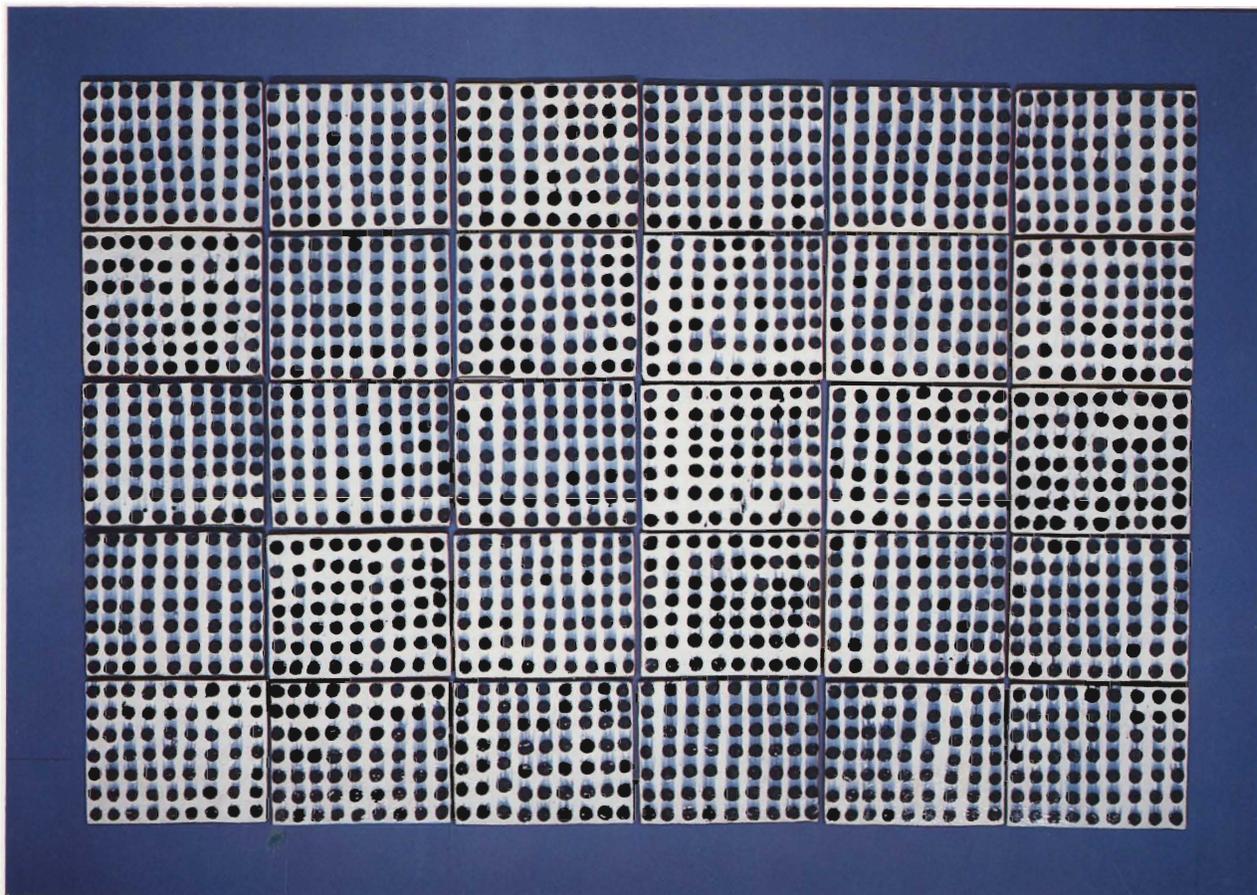
Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

---

Deeds, Daphne A., "Rhythmic Clay: A View of Jun Kaneko's Process" (1986). *Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications*. 61.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs/61>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sheldon Museum of Art at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

RESOURCE/RESERVOIR  
SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY



Untitled, 1986, 30 ceramic tiles, 18½ x 22¾" each, overall 139" x 95" x 34".

---

**RHYTHMIC CLAY:**  
**A View of Jun Kaneko's Process**

"Within a narrow span of duration and space the work of art concentrates a view of the human condition."

—Rudolf Arnheim<sup>1</sup>

In this diverse age of artistic pluralism, retrospection and cynicism, Jun Kaneko's ceramic sculptures prevail as confirmations of essential constancies. The certainties of man's elemental graphic urge, the determinism of archetypal shapes, and the symbiosis of time and space are all revealed in Kaneko's three dimensional abstractions.

Kaneko employs abstraction, not to transcend contemporary complexities, but to reveal the inherent synchrony of the natural world. From a position of acceptance, rather than control, Kaneko is but one participant in a private conversation with his media. And though this internal conversation is not directed at Kaneko's audience, we partake of his direct access to the absolute of form evolving in space.

Kaneko's bi-cultural experience and non-hierarchical sense of reality enable him to interpret the sculptural properties, rather than to predict them. His response to the organic pliability of the raw clay and transparent glazes permits the revelation of the underlying equilibrium of the world in flux.

Thus Kaneko's role is more collaborative than singular. His is a process based on intuitive observation of the interacting materials. It is his reception, rather than his manipulation of the innate sculptural qualities that determines the ultimate resolution of the work. Kaneko's measured orchestration of the interplay of clay and form, surface and pattern, is toward the extraction of a visible harmony. The patterned surfaces and emphatic shapes emerge from a gestalt of eastern and western aesthetics as precise distillations of Kaneko's vision—a vision seen from within nature, ordered by mark-making and time.

Kaneko consciously straddles his Japanese and American influences, posing his sculpture as the manifestation of abstract dichotomies. He was born in Nagoya, Japan, in 1942, during World War II. As a boy, Kaneko's parents promoted his "freedom of being".<sup>2</sup> This unorthodox approach to child-rearing contradicted the Japanese norm predicated by a respect for the past and the sublimation of the individual ego. Such liberalism was indicative of post-war, westernized Japan, and for Kaneko, it established the first of many polarities in his life. Situated between ancient traditions and new possibilities for personal expression,

Kaneko used those extremes to measure his investigation of the Self as revelatory instrument. After studying painting from 1961 to 1963 with Saposhi Ogawa, Kaneko, then 21 years old, moved to Los Angeles. Though he spoke no English, he enrolled at the Chouinard Art Institute, where he met his wife, Fumiyo, and made his first ceramic piece.

The timing of Kaneko's move to America coincided with the inchoate evolution of American post-war ceramics. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, many American painters became ceramists. Their motivations varied, but generally, they sought to escape the monumental pressure of the Abstract Expressionist movement. At that time ceramics were still primarily utilitarian vessel forms, and thus functioned primarily as craft objects. Crafts, in their anthropological context, offered an unencumbered alternative to the mainstream. The hand-wrought object and its associations with nature, offered a more direct route to a spiritually integrated life.

When Kaneko began to work in Los Angeles, his intuitive pursuit of harmony was compatible with the interests of many west coast ceramists. While Kaneko did not join one of the craft—producing Emersonian communes that flourished in the early 1960s, the artistic climate supported Kaneko's initial explorations of his newly adopted medium.

As a Japanese emigré to America, Kaneko immediately recognized the profound differences between Eastern and Western time. This awareness of temporal realities serves to unify the disparities of Kaneko's bi-cultural heritage, and is essential to his work—time as it relates to the artistic process, and time as an aspect of patterning.

In Japan, creativity is a slow, subtle assimilation of the nuances of traditional art forms. The creative act is never rushed, and the artist may require years, perhaps decades, to acquire enough humility to absorb the lessons of the past. The development of the Japanese artist is toward knowledge, not progress. It is based on an emulation of the masters, not a quest for originality. In contrast, western artists are concerned with uniqueness and accelerated time as it relates to the commercial art world and the progression of art history. As a Japanese artist transplanted in California, Kaneko located himself within the polarities of eastern and western concepts of duration, understanding that temporal concepts are culturally relative.



Untitled, 1986, (Cylinder and Box on Slab), 23 $\frac{1}{4}$ "  $\times$  13 $\frac{3}{4}$ "  $\times$  7 $\frac{1}{2}$ "



*Spiral*, 1983, oil stick on paper, 59¾" × 71". University Collection. Gift of Olga N. Sheldon, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery.

The physical effects of time are intrinsic to ceramics. Each step of the ceramist's process is a temporal determination. The initial shaping, the air drying, the glazing, the kiln firing, the cooling down of the fired piece, are all phases aligned to the duration of time. These stages of creation are determined more by the natural elements—temperature, climate, humidity, and gravity, than by the artist. Any interference of this temporal progression by the artist will disrupt the equilibrium, and the sculpture will be lost. While some artists perceive these evolutionary steps as restrictive, Kaneko works within the temporal limitations, allowing the dictates of time to become active factors in the creative process. His respect for the natural pace of time as it effects the clay is an integral component of the integrity of each piece.

When Kaneko arrived in the United States, he began to develop an idiosyncratic technique which he continues to refine today. His technique is precise, but essentially philosophical. Like a Zen master, Kaneko proceeds toward the finished work with the patience born of his position within. He responds to each moment of the process, in a spontaneous way, allowing the needs of the situation to dictate the proper procedure, rather than relying on standardized ceramic formulae.

Kaneko's treatment of surface is also very subjective, and is indicative of his world view. A fundamental property of the eastern sense of time is the idea of negative space, or the field onto which marks are made. In music, as in painting and poetry, the Asian arts accept the relevance and meaning of negative space. As Kaneko has stated:

"People in this country think of sound when it has happened—they don't think about the silence between. In poetry, the narrative silence in between words can change the whole feeling—give a different rhythm. So without silence there is no sound because if there is continuous sound it's not sound anymore. That kind of thing is really important to me."<sup>3</sup>

By seeing the field onto which a mark is made as an active element in a pattern, Kaneko establishes another exchange—between himself, the mark, and the space which receives the mark. Like an abstract composer, Kaneko initiates this conversation with the first mark on the clay surface. That first mark, and his spontaneous response to it will indicate where, and when, the second mark will be, and so on. Similarly, when Kaneko uses stripes he experiences the process, waiting for an indication from one stripe to establish a patterned response to the next stripe. But even as the pattern achieves an overall effect, the spaces between the dots or stripes or spirals maintain their own presence. They are perceived within the same plane as the marks, and not as a receding background.

"If one shape is just there by itself there is no order but the minute I put the next shape there then it has a certain kind of order and then a complicated thing begins to happen ...<sup>4</sup>

So the decorative, stylized appearance of Kaneko's sculpture is deceptive. While the rhythmic patterning of spirals, stripes and dots appeals to the human identification with emotive color, the balanced designs also afford an immediacy which allows the viewer to encounter the extroverted, colorful object as a coherent manifestation of abstract polarities. But the lively surfaces are not merely enticing. They are equally a logical conclusion of the problems Kaneko poses. His work could not be other than rhythmic, patterned and symmetrical because it is derived from his essential absorption of nature's harmony. His dense dangos, heavy oval plates, and turgid geometric floor pieces are emblems of the Self. They are centered precisely within the extremes of the concrete form and the gravity-laden space, between the positive mark and the power of negative space, between the astute eye and uninformed reality.

*Daphne Anderson Deeds,  
Curator*

## Notes

1. Arnheim, Rudolf. *Entropy and Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971, p. 56.
2. Statement by the artist made during an interview with the author in Omaha, Nebraska, December 12, 1986.
3. Houston, Contemporary Arts Museum. *Parallel Sounds*, an interview of Jun Kaneko by Linda Cathcart, 1981.
4. Ibid.

## Biographical Information

### Born

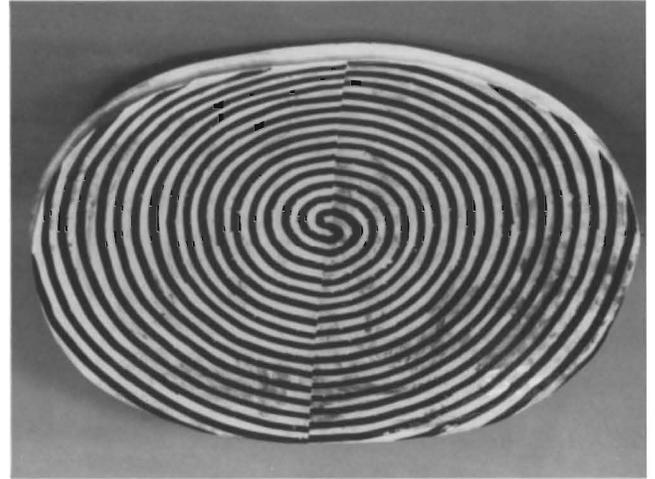
1942 Nagoya, Japan

### Education

- 1964 Chouinard Art Institute, Los Angeles, California  
California Institute of Art, Los Angeles, California  
Studied ceramics at Jerry Rothman's Studio, Paramount, California
- 1966 University of California, Berkeley, Studied with Peter Voulkos
- 1970 Claremont Graduate School, Studied with Paul Soldner

### Teaching Experience

- 1972-73 University of New Hampshire
- 1973-75 Rhode Island School of Design
- 1974 Scripps College Summer School
- 1979-86 Cranbrook Academy of Art
- 1986 Established Jun Kaneko Studio, Omaha, Nebraska



Untitled, 1986, ceramic wall plate, 27" x 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 3".



Jun Kaneko at work.

***Rhythmic Clay***, a selection of Jun Kaneko's ceramic sculpture and drawings, was curated by Daphne Anderson Deeds and exhibited at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, February 3 through March 23, 1987. *Resource/Response* is part of Sheldon's ongoing *Resource Exhibition Series*. *Resource/Response* explores current issues and ideas addressed by contemporary artists. *The Resource Series* is made possible by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.